

# Bicester Technology Studio

Queens Avenue, Bicester, Oxfordshire OX26 2NS

## Inspection dates

11 to 12 June 2019

Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Requires improvement
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Requires improvement
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Requires improvement
Outcomes for pupils	Requires improvement
16 to 19 study programmes	Requires improvement
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Not previously inspected

## Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

### This is a school that requires improvement

- Past weaknesses in senior leadership and governance meant that standards achieved during the first two years of the school's operation were poor.
- In 2018, pupils' outcomes in their chosen courses at key stages 4 and 5 were too low. Disadvantaged pupils and middle-ability pupils made poor progress across a range of subjects.
- The quality of teaching and assessment is not consistently good across the school.
- While staff are working hard to reduce absence, it is still too high. Too many pupils are persistently absent, particularly disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).
- Although improving, attainment in English, mathematics and science remains too low.
- Teachers do not make sufficient use of assessment to tailor their teaching to meet the needs of the pupils, particularly the most able. As a result, some pupils become distracted and the pace of learning is variable.
- Key stage 4 pupils are not supported to develop their reading, writing and communication skills rapidly enough.
- The sixth form requires improvement because outcomes are not high enough, and standards of enrichment and work-related opportunities are variable.

### The school has the following strengths

- Recognising the underperformance of the school, Activate Learning Education Trust (ALET) took decisive action to significantly restructure senior leadership and governance this year.
- In the short time they have been at the school, the new executive headteacher and head of school have initiated significant advances. They have reinvigorated and broadened the curriculum, enhanced planning and initiated improvements to teaching, attendance and behaviour.
- Staff value the training and support they have received from new leaders and ALET. There is a sense of teamwork and purpose in the school, and morale has improved.
- The proportion of pupils and students progressing to education, employment and training last year was very high.
- The support that staff offer for vulnerable pupils and those who have previously disengaged with education is particularly effective.

## Full report

### What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise standards of leadership and management by:
  - ensuring that high-quality, concise self-evaluation, planning and use of performance information enable the new governing body to hold leaders at all levels to account for continued improvements
  - embedding recent staff training to improve the quality of teaching, and monitoring its impact
  - ensuring that governors, ALET and other local partners refine their monitoring and challenge, thereby supporting new senior leaders to continue to promote rapid and substantial improvement.
- Continue to improve teaching and raise achievement by:
  - ensuring that teachers make effective use of assessment information to pitch work at the right level across the school, particularly for pupils of lower prior attainment and the most able, so that no time is wasted
  - improving teachers' assessment and questioning skills in line with the strongest examples in the school
  - continuing to improve the quality of pupils' literacy in key stage 4
  - improving reasoning and problem-solving in mathematics, particularly for the most able
  - embedding and refining the recently introduced improvements to the curriculum in both key stages.
- Continue to improve pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare by:
  - raising attendance overall and particularly that of disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND
  - continuing to refine and improve provision for personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education, and improve pupils' spiritual and cultural awareness in key stage 4
  - broadening the provision for the wider aspects of the 16 to 19 study programmes.

## Inspection judgements

### Effectiveness of leadership and management

### Requires improvement

- Standards achieved in both key stages in 2018 were too low. Although all pupils progressed to employment, training or higher education, outcomes in A levels, GCSEs and specialist courses were poor. Disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND underperformed. During this time, there had been a period of some staffing changes in English and other subjects, and numbers of pupils and students at the school had dropped.
- Recognising this underperformance, last year ALET restructured and deployed staff from other schools in the trust to offer support for the senior leaders at the time. Plans were put in place to merge the leadership and governance of Bicester Technology Studio with its neighbour The Bicester School, to form the Bicester Learning Campus. Both schools are part of the multi-academy trust. The previous principal left in February 2019 and was replaced by the new executive headteacher and head of school. New senior leaders have swiftly restructured leadership and bought a much-needed improved strategic vision.
- Trustees and senior leaders have recently gained a much more accurate and improving depth of understanding of the strengths and the weaknesses of the school. They have a shared passion to improve standards, and have worked together to reinvigorate staff and improve the number of pupils applying to join the studio school in Year 10 next year. Working with support from ALET, new senior leaders have swiftly identified the school's shortcomings and are systematically reviewing and improving the school's systems.
- Despite recent improvements to the curriculum and behaviour, and emerging improvements to attendance, it is too soon for new senior leaders to have been able to ensure that teaching, learning and assessment, and pupils' outcomes, are consistently good. A comprehensive programme of training and support has enabled some improvements to teaching that has had some, but not yet sufficient, impact across the school. There are also weaknesses in the provision for pupils' personal development, which have only recently been addressed.
- New senior leaders and the trust are working hard to develop the skills of leaders at all levels. Although this work is beginning to bear fruit, leaders throughout the school are not yet making a sufficiently strong contribution to improvement. For example, subject leaders are not being held fully and effectively to account for their impact in driving improvements to teaching, learning and assessment. Recent initiatives to improve pupils' literacy skills, particularly the quality of their reading and communication, are not yet fully established across the school.
- This year, leaders and the trust wasted no time developing and implementing a curriculum which is now much more suited to the school's vision and ethos as a specialist provider of vocational education. A range of new vocational courses has recently been introduced at key stage 4, which better meets pupils' needs and is proving popular. In addition, the A-Level provision in the sixth form has been streamlined to facilitate a greater focus on the vocational pathways.
- Despite these improvements, there are weaknesses in how well the curriculum,

including through tutorial sessions, caters for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Provision for sports has been significantly improved, but there are weaknesses in the provision for PSHE. Leaders have plans for a more suitable programme to meet pupils' needs to be put in place.

- A comprehensive package of support and appropriate actions to improve the school are in place to ensure the next stages of the school's development. However, improvement planning is not fully underpinned by a suitably rigorous process of self-evaluation, and plans for the use of the pupil premium are not sufficiently detailed. This makes it difficult for leaders and the new governing body to assess how well the school is improving.

## **Governance of the school**

- In the past, the impact of governors' challenge has been limited by the quality of the self-evaluation that leaders have provided. It did not provide the insight into the impact of leaders' actions that governors required. Although they oversaw the successful opening of the school, the previous governing body did not offer sufficient challenge to ensure that high enough standards or a sufficiently broad curriculum were on offer during the first two years of the school's operation.
- ALET has ensured that the newly merged governing body for the Bicester Learning Campus builds on the strengths of both organisations. Governors bring a range of experience, knowledge and skills to their work. They are committed to both schools and are keen advocates of the studio school's unique identity and what it can offer to pupils in the local area. They provide useful links between employers, businesses and other supportive organisations, and they are very supportive of the new senior leadership team.
- Governors have ensured that appropriate checks have been made on systems and procedures that school leaders have for keeping pupils safe, and that pupils attend school regularly and on time.

## **Safeguarding**

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Leaders work well with parents, work-placement managers and other stakeholders to ensure an effective culture of safeguarding. All the school's employment checks are in place, in line with statutory requirements.
- All staff and governors receive regular and appropriate up-to-date training and are well informed about safeguarding matters. This means they are able to carry out the school's procedures well, ensuring a culture of vigilance.
- There are effective systems in place to secure the well-being and safety of pupils. Leaders and support staff work diligently to engage external specialist expertise to offer timely support for vulnerable pupils. Detailed records are kept of the regular communications with outside agencies.
- Staff, parents and pupils agree that the school offers a safe, secure and inclusive environment.

## Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

## Requires improvement

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment varies across the school, and is not yet good overall. Teaching is not strong enough in English, mathematics and science to help lower-attaining pupils to catch up, or to challenge the most able to achieve more highly.
- Teachers do not use ongoing assessment sufficiently well to adapt learning activities to meet the needs of different groups of pupils. In lessons, pupils frequently complete the same work at the same time and while using the same resources. This limits the progress that some groups make. Where this happens, the most able pupils are not stretched to deepen their thinking, and some low-attaining pupils are unable to access their learning in ways that allow them to maximise their progress.
- Expectations of pupils' written work are inconsistent across the school. Too many pupils, particularly boys, either do not read and write confidently or lack the skills and resilience to do so. It is too soon to see much impact from leaders' new focus on pupils' reading. In addition, weaknesses in pupils' spelling, punctuation and grammar are not being tackled consistently by staff.
- Nevertheless, as a result of recent training and moderation, the overall quality of teaching, learning and assessment is improving. Staff now have access to better information on the learning needs of disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND. Some use this information to refine their teaching to offer better support, although this is not always the case.
- Some teaching shows strong subject knowledge. This is evident, for example, where staff have worked hard to ensure that pupils have quickly caught up with the new range of vocational courses offered to Year 10 earlier this year.
- As a result of stronger teaching in some subjects, more pupils are working at the standards expected for their age. For example, pupils are making better progress in geography and art because assessment and feedback make an effective contribution to learning in this subject.
- Typically, relationships between staff and pupils are respectful. Some pupils who said they had struggled in their previous schools commented to inspectors how much they appreciate the individual care and support they now receive.

## Personal development, behaviour and welfare

## Requires improvement

### Personal development and welfare

- The quality of pupils' wider education, outside of their core and vocational courses, requires improvement, including in the post-16 provision.
- Pupils have a limited understanding of issues and concerns to do with their social, emotional and personal development. Pupils understand how to keep themselves safe, including when online. However, the promotion of pupils' welfare and well-being through the curriculum, tutorials and the assembly programme is underdeveloped. Their knowledge of contemporary issues, including, for example, of different faiths and

cultures, is limited.

- Recognising these weaknesses, new senior leaders have recently introduced better planning to tackle these shortcomings. However, it is too soon to see the impact of this on pupils' personal development and welfare. This also applies to students in Years 12 and 13.
- Even so, the school provides effective care and support for pupils and keeps a close eye on how well they settle into school. Several pupils and some parents were keen to tell inspectors how much they appreciate the 'fresh start' pupils have at Bicester Technology Studio.
- Careers information, advice and guidance are well planned. Years 10 and 11 are helped to understand a wide range of future options and choices for employment, further study or training, such as apprenticeships. Pupils value the impartial advice and guidance they receive and are developing good employability skills, such as making job applications and undertaking work experience.

## Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils requires improvement.
- The atmosphere around the school is mainly purposeful and orderly. Most pupils are polite and show respect and consideration for others.
- There has been an improvement to behaviour this year and most lessons are orderly and purposeful. However, where teaching is weaker, pupils can become disengaged or passive and limit their involvement, and so the pace of learning slows.
- Pupils' reflections about behaviour in the school are mixed. They recognise that things have improved, particularly in lessons, but some remain concerned about some pupils' conduct. Most staff were keen to praise how behaviour has significantly improved since the head of school has implemented new systems.
- Leaders have taken useful steps to reduce the proportion of pupils whose behaviour results in fixed-term exclusions.
- Leaders have made improvements to the way they deal with poor attendance. Better monitoring and tireless efforts by staff to ensure that pupils attend school regularly are making a difference. Staff work closely with families to tackle persistent absence from school. As a result, rates of persistent absence have reduced. However, overall attendance remains below the national average, and the persistent absence of some groups, although improving, remains too high.

### Outcomes for pupils

### Requires improvement

- Outcomes from the school's first GCSE results in 2018 indicated that pupils significantly underperformed in English, mathematics and science. Disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND made much less progress than their peers in 2018. ALET and senior leaders have delivered a comprehensive package of training for staff and have ensured improved moderation of pupils' work this year. This has resulted in improvements being made in GCSEs and vocational subjects.

- Although pupils' progress is still variable in English, mathematics and science, a higher proportion of pupils are on track to attain at least a grade 4 GCSE in these subjects this year than last. Pupils' work demonstrates that many have made good progress in geography and art this year.
- More targeted support for disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND in Year 10 has ensured that the gaps between them and their peers are closing. However, there remain stubbornly wide gaps between the achievement of these groups and their peers in Year 11. There is variation in how effectively teachers ensure that learning activities address the needs of these pupils.
- Across the school, the most able pupils do not achieve well enough. Too many do not develop the wide knowledge and deep understanding needed to achieve the higher standards. Teachers' expectations of the most able pupils are sometimes too low. Typically, most work is neatly presented. However, frequently the activities given to pupils do not promote a sufficient depth of thinking, for example there is a lack of reasoning and problem-solving in mathematics. In other areas, such as science, pupils are not challenged sufficiently to produce their own written explanations when applying the concepts and methods they have learned.
- Weak literacy skills are preventing pupils from making sufficiently rapid progress. Leaders have rightly started to focus on improving pupils' reading, but this work is in its very early stages and has not yet had sufficient impact to improve pupils' reading and communication skills. Some pupils' poor spelling, punctuation and grammar are not being tackled consistently well by staff.
- Nevertheless, rates of progress for pupils currently in school are improving, including for disadvantaged pupils. Leaders' actions to tackle the weakest teaching, including moderation of work and training for staff, are having a positive impact.
- Pupils told inspectors that they enjoy their learning in the school's specialist subject areas and value the school's work placements. Last year, all pupils progressed on to further education, employment or apprenticeships.

## 16 to 19 study programmes

## Requires improvement

- In the past, the post-16 curriculum was not focused sufficiently on the school's specialist subjects. During the first two years after the school opened, a high proportion of students followed academic A-Levels and/or vocational routes that were not sufficiently well tailored to their needs. In academic courses, outcomes were poor and too few pupils achieved the grades expected of them. Attainment in vocational courses was stronger but still below national comparators.
- In the first two years of operation, the school struggled to recruit and retain sufficient students onto their courses. This year new leaders have revised the post-16 curriculum to provide students with clearer pathways from Year 10 to Year 13. The curriculum has been redesigned to support the school's focus on enterprise and technical work-related courses. A small number of students also follow mathematics A-Level courses.
- As a result of this improved course offer and teachers setting higher aspirations, more students are now on track to complete their courses successfully. This is the case for students following vocational and academic routes. However, assessment and

monitoring systems require refinements in order to track students' progress on their chosen courses more accurately from their starting points.

- Students' work varies linked to the quality of teaching they receive. Where students are challenged, and tutor feedback is strong, then their standard of work is good, information technology is used well, and work is linked to practical activities. However, in some subjects presentation is poor, and weaknesses in handwriting limit the progress that students make. The poor quality of some students' work indicates that they may be on the wrong courses.
- The small size of the sixth form means that students receive bespoke support and guidance from staff. Relationships are positive, and most students are confident, courteous and well behaved. They show respect to staff and each other. Students are aware of risks to their own safety and know how to keep themselves and others safe.
- Leaders do not ensure that each student's individual 16 to 19 study programme fully combines qualifications with other activities tailored to their prior attainment and career goals. Non-qualification activities are available but are not closely monitored for effectiveness. Enrichment opportunities, such as sport, are limited due to small numbers. Students reported that they would like a wider range of opportunities.
- New senior leaders have rightly restructured their plans for the provision of work experience in order to ensure consistently high-quality placements. In the past, several students have progressed to gainful employment as a result of work-experience opportunities at the school. However, there were variations in the quality of monitoring of students during their work experience placements. This led to some students making limited progress and a few not having their placements changed soon enough to more appropriate provision.
- Careers advice and programmes are effective and have a positive effect on students' well-being and future employability. Students benefit from individual guidance to support their next steps. Although attainment was low, all students who left the school in 2018 went on to further education, employment or training. Several took up places at universities.

## School details

Unique reference number	142863
Local authority	Oxfordshire
Inspection number	10058127

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Other secondary
School category	Academy studio school
Age range of pupils	14 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in 16 to 19 study programmes	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	104
Of which, number on roll in 16 to 19 study programmes	39
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chief Executive Officer	Lee Nicholls
Executive Headteacher	Tony Rushworth
Telephone number	01869 203 012
Website	<a href="http://www.bicestertechstudio.org.uk">www.bicestertechstudio.org.uk</a>
Email address	<a href="mailto:office@bicestertechstudio.org.uk">office@bicestertechstudio.org.uk</a>
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected

## Information about this school

- Bicester Technology Studio opened in September 2016 and is much smaller than the average-sized secondary school. It has a specialism in offering vocational enterprise, engineering and work-related courses, and works in partnership with a range of local employers. It is part of Activate Learning Education Trust (ALET) a multi-academy trust based in the south east of England. Pupils typically join the school at the start of Year 10 from other local secondary schools.
- The principal left the school in February 2019 and was replaced by the current executive headteacher and head of school. In consultation with the Department for Education, ALET has merged the senior leadership and governance of The Bicester

School and Bicester Technology Studio School. The two schools retain their separate legal identities, but together they now form the Bicester Learning Campus.

- This year, Bicester Technology Studio has received a high level of support from The Bicester School and ALET to boost teaching, learning and assessment, administration and leadership and management.
- The large majority of pupils are from a White British background.
- The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for pupil premium funding is slightly below the national average.
- The proportion of pupils with SEND is in line with the national average. The proportion of pupils who have a statement of SEND or an education, health and care plan is above the national average.

## Information about this inspection

- Inspectors visited a wide range of lessons in order to contribute to their evaluation of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Many of these observations were conducted jointly with a member of the senior leadership team.
- Inspectors visited tutor time and observed pupils' conduct around the site at breaktime and lunchtime.
- Meetings were held with the executive headteacher, senior leaders, the co-chair and a member of the local governing body, middle leaders, teachers, and the chief executive officer and representatives of ALET.
- Inspectors also talked to pupils and students about their learning and looked at their work across a range of subjects. They met with a group of pupils and a group of sixth formers to gather their views.
- A wide range of school documentation was scrutinised, including that relating to policies, self-evaluation, improvement planning, safeguarding, pupils' achievements, behaviour and attendance.
- Inspectors reviewed the record of leaders' vetting and checks on the suitability of adults to work with pupils, and spoke to staff and governors about safeguarding procedures in the school.
- Inspectors considered the views expressed in 13 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, surveys returned by 26 pupils, and 15 questionnaires returned by staff.

## Inspection team

Matthew Newberry, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Alun Maddocks

Ofsted Inspector

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