



25 May 2005

Mr R Brabban
Barr's Hill School and Community College
Radford Road
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Dear Mr Brabban

Inspection Visit to Barr's Hill School and Community College

Thank you for your hospitality during my visit to your school with Mrs C Bolton HMI and Mrs S Kara HMI on 16 and 17 May 2005. This letter is to confirm the findings, which are recorded below.

This return inspection visit was arranged as a follow-up to the visit on 9 and 10 November 2004, which took place in connection with the Leadership Incentive Grant. The main focus of the visit was to assess the progress made in raising the students' attainment and addressing the areas of serious concern identified during the previous visit.

During the visit 33 lessons or parts of lessons, two registration sessions and one assembly were inspected. Meetings were held with the headteacher, the consultant headteacher, all the senior managers, and representatives of the LEA. Informal discussions were held with other members of staff and with students, and samples of work were examined. A range of documents was scrutinised. Using this evidence, inspectors made the following observations to the headteacher, the consultant headteacher, the deputy chair of the governing body and representatives from the LEA.

The school is a small 11-18 school serving an urban area of west Coventry with 545 students on roll. Around 41 per cent of the students are from minority ethnic groups. Twenty nine per cent of the students have home languages other than English and 37 per cent of the students are eligible for free school meals, which is well above the national average. Thirty seven per cent of the students have special educational needs, which is well above the national average, while four per cent have a Statement of Special Educational Need, which is above the national average. The turnover of the teaching staff is low and the school has a full complement of teachers. The students' attainment on entry is well below average.

The school has predicted that standards in the Year 9 tests, and at GCSE in Year 11, will rise sharply in 2005. Likewise, the standards of work in lessons have

generally risen since the previous visit. The standards in mathematics are high in some classes, but remain too low in classes where the teaching lacks challenge and energy. In the best mathematics lessons, the teachers' enthusiasm for their subject is infectious, teachers use a range of strategies to help students develop their mathematical understanding, and students meet the often very high expectations of their teacher. Elsewhere, students are less engaged and they work in a routine way on tasks that are themselves routine. If students do not understand these tasks they are often explained again in the same way, but just more slowly.

Standards in English and literacy are well below national expectations in Key Stages 3 and 4. In lessons, many students spoke confidently and fluently but others were diffident and were content to opt out of whole-class oral work. The teachers' skills in the management of oral work varied; some were very skilled and targeted their questions well to involve all the students and to elicit extended responses, using praise, humour and encouragement to draw the less confident into the discussion. Others accepted answers largely from volunteers and expected brief contributions, often expressed in partial sentences. For the most part, the staff provided good role models in their own use of spoken and written English but this was not entirely consistent across the school.

Students often read with understanding and interest but their ability to analyse and to evaluate texts and to comment on the effects of aspects of style and rhythm were well below expected levels. In Key Stage 3, many students had weak recall of the word and sentence level work integral to the National Literacy Strategy in the later stages of primary phase. The students' ability to plan and paragraph extended pieces of writing and the accuracy of their spelling, punctuation and use of grammar are often weak. The use of marking to improve attainment in word and sentence level work is uneven and in some classes other than in English, there was undue tolerance of low standards of presentation.

Standards in science were in line with age related expectations in nearly all of the classes. The department has effectively integrated literacy into lessons with a strong focus on key words and their appropriate use, and on speaking and listening. A good variety of teaching and learning styles ensured that the lessons were interesting and that the students made progress. Lessons were often well supported by a helpful writing frame or differentiated resources so that students were able to make good progress.

The school has improved its system of communicating target grades to students, and using these as a basis for spurring on progress. Students recall their target grades and what they need to do to achieve them. The new 'traffic light' system for recording emerging and embedded attainment in mathematics is understood by, and popular with, students.

The school has sustained the improvements in students' attitudes and behaviour that were noted during the last visit. The students' attitudes and behaviour were

satisfactory or better in nine out of ten lessons, and good in two out of three. The punctuality with which students arrive at lessons has improved.

The quality of the teaching and learning has improved; it was satisfactory or better in nearly nine out of ten lessons and good or very good in two out of five lessons. Only one very well taught lesson was observed, and that was in English. Good teaching was seen in English, mathematics, science, humanities, drama and music. Unsatisfactory teaching was observed in English, mathematics, design and technology and information and communication technology.

The good teaching was characterised by very good relationships between the teacher and the students. Shared humour was often a feature, and the behaviour management was subtle and based on praise. Classroom conventions were observed so that the students listened to the teacher and each other, and routines were well established so that lessons proceeded smoothly. The teacher used a variety of teaching and learning styles that made the lessons both interesting and fast paced. In these well-taught lessons the learning objectives were specific and identified exactly what the teacher wanted the students to learn. The teacher asked questions that challenged the students to think for themselves and fully explain their ideas. Learning was often checked throughout the lesson, and not only at the end.

The less well-taught lessons lacked these features. The teaching was sometimes unenthusiastic and uninspiring and the activities were dull with an over reliance on undemanding worksheets. The lesson plans frequently confused learning objectives with tasks, and this made it difficult for the teacher to assess the students' progress.

The lesson plans usually included the deployment of the teaching assistants. They often contributed effectively to the students' learning, sometimes taking the initiative in a lesson; for example, by moving to the white board and adding annotations to help particular students.

Marking has improved and good examples were seen of formative marking that related to the level of the students work and what they needed to do to improve. Although display around the school and in classrooms is tidy and often colourful it is not being sufficiently exploited as a learning stimulus. Displays frequently had a title, but no context was given and very little was annotated to indicate the level of work or the success criteria that it met. There is still inconsistency in the setting of homework and even more so in following up the students who do not complete the homework.

The school is developing its curriculum to meet the range of students' aspirations, but there is still some way to go. A Full Service Extended School is contributing to the school's alternative curriculum. The uptake of French in Years 10 and 11 is improving, and this may be a response to the more stable staffing of the last two years.

The leadership of the school has stabilised since the last visit. The relative roles of the headteacher and consultant headteacher have been clarified. The LEA continues to work closely and extensively with the school, which continues to benefit from its participation in the LIG collaborative. The close working relationship between Barr's Hill and another school has continued to develop, with informal joint working now being initiated directly by teachers. The joint governance committee of the two schools has met on three occasions.

The emphasis on self-evaluation has increased. Self-evaluations carried out by the headteacher and consultant headteacher, working with the LEA, generally mirror the judgements of inspectors during this monitoring visit. Those made elsewhere sometimes overestimate the impact of the improvements made to the school. The responsibilities held by senior managers have become fragmented.

The school has arrangements for the regular monitoring of teaching and learning through lesson observation and through the scrutiny of students' written work. Monitoring is undertaken by senior and middle managers, all of whom have been given relevant training. There have been detailed reviews of the effectiveness of each subject area and of provision and achievement in Year 8. Subject departments are now required to produce action plans to address the issues emerging from the monitoring process. Targeted support has been provided to meet the needs of individual staff and this has led to improvement in the quality of teaching during the current academic year.

The written records of the school's monitoring indicate that weaknesses as well as strengths have been clearly identified. Many of the lesson observation records are thorough and of good quality but this is not consistently the case; the evaluation of the students' learning was less detailed on a number of forms than that of the teaching so that it was not always possible to see how much progress had been made by different groups of students, by boys and girls for example, or by students of differing levels of attainment. In one instance, the evidence of the lesson observation did not support the judgements. School managers reported that the proportion of satisfactory or better teaching is now over 90 per cent and this evaluation accords reasonably well with the findings of this inspection. However, their view that the proportion of good and better teaching is now between 60 and 75 per cent is higher than inspectors found during the inspection.

The school has responded to the four points listed for further action during the previous visit. The quality of provision in mathematics has improved, but there is still some way to go; lesson observation and work scrutiny have continued apace, but the quality of some of it needs to be improved; the quality of teaching and learning has improved, but the dissemination of good practice remains under-developed; the relative roles of the headteacher and consultant headteacher have been clarified.

The school has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Education for Coventry. This letter will also be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

DR JANET MILLS
Additional Inspector

cc: chair of governors
LEA