

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404040
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



11 February 2009

Miss C Thompson
Headteacher
Birkenshaw Middle School
Bradford Road
Gomersal
Cleckheaton
West Yorkshire
BD19 4BE

Dear Miss Thompson

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Planning for change: the impact of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 04 February 2009 to look at work in planning for and implementing the new Key Stage 3 curriculum with particular reference to Year 7.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of five part-lessons, discussions with staff and students and scrutiny of documentation.

The overall effectiveness of the planning for and implementation of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards in Year 7 are good.

- Standards at the end of Year 6 are above average. Some students leave school at this point to attend a local grammar school and students' attainment overall is broadly average at the start of Year 7. The school has addressed the issues raised at the last inspection and

improved standards and achievement in Year 8 where school data indicate that most students meet or exceed challenging targets.

- At this early stage of the implementation of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum, it is not possible to make a firm judgement on its impact on achievement, but the progress of the students observed in lessons was good.
- In addition, the school has carried out substantial analyses of the attainment of students in Year 7 and compared their progress with previous cohorts. These initial findings indicate improvements in the rates of progress.
- The school has made focussed improvements to students' learning in English maths and science and now intends to incorporate the functional skills more explicitly. The school has begun to redesign the Personal, Social, Health and Citizenship Education (PSHCE) curriculum to match the overarching themes in Key Stage 3 and recognises that this needs further work.
- The impact on students' personal development of the changes to learning at Key Stage 3 has been outstanding. Students are overwhelmingly enthusiastic about their lessons and their growing self-confidence.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in Year 7 is good.

- Evidence from lesson observation was supported by students' work and by records of progress: teachers focus clearly on developing students' skills. Teachers use questions and prompts very well, within a variety of engaging learning activities and some practice is outstanding. Teachers can demonstrate that students make good progress.
- The school's view that skill development is now a common focus across the whole curriculum was borne out in lesson observations and in students' 'passports'. Students at all levels of prior attainment have become used to working together in teams. They value each others' roles and viewpoints and consciously include everyone in discussion. Students are increasingly familiar with the personal, learning and thinking skills and so they know when their 'passport' should be stamped.
- Assessment information, observations and discussions with students support the teachers' view that students are much more confident in identifying where they are still uncertain or lacking in confidence. Teachers respond with appropriate help.
- Although teachers' good subject knowledge is apparent, there were times in lessons where the focus on specific skill development did not pick up on the superficial or mistaken expression of subject-specific understanding.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the new curriculum in Year 7 is outstanding.

- After whole-school dialogue, staff in all subjects have rewritten their schemes of work in the light of National Curriculum guidance; all have incorporated the personal, learning and thinking skills. These changes are not superficial but embedded in lesson planning and lesson practice.
- The impact of these changes to the curriculum on staff motivation and student progress has been very positive. Students are very much aware of what their teachers and their parents expect of them in terms of completing their 'Passports'. They understand when team work or independent enquiry is appropriate and where other skills can be developed. They know what they should be able to do and very much want to show that they can.
- The curriculum has a strong link with its local community and the overarching theme of community cohesion is an effective connecting element between subjects.
- Additionally, the school has adapted and enhanced the curriculum in a number of other ways: the use of personal, learning and thinking skills has been adopted across all year groups; increased opportunities for learning outside the classroom have led to increased take-up; intensive work is allowed by using collapsed timetable days each half term; homework projects have been designed to link subject work and they give helpful information to parents.
- All Year 7 students spoken with noted the difference between their general experience in Year 6 and that of Year 7. They cited in particular the personal, learning and thinking skills, 'Life Skills', which were an integral part of their school day and which they enjoyed immensely.
- The school's overall planning includes statutory requirements and non-statutory elements but as yet there is no planned evaluation point for that coverage.
- The school contributes to discussions on the curriculum within its cluster of middle schools and local high school. The extent to which the benefits of curricular changes in Years 7 and 8 will be built on is not yet clear.

Leadership and management of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum

The leadership and management of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum is outstanding.

- The far-reaching changes to the curriculum have been given a clear lead by you and your senior staff. The focus is explicitly to improve the generic and subject skills of all students. The school is able to indicate that standards and achievement are improving.

- The whole-school approach has improved staff development in that they are better able to understand and contribute to what is being learned across the curriculum.
- Staff have welcomed training and built on it to devise a well coordinated curriculum.
- Evaluation is thorough. The school's analysis has brought together assessment data, students' questionnaires, parents' responses, examination of the take-up of enrichment activities and teachers' subject reports to evaluate the effectiveness of the approach from a range of evidence. Most is very positive but where it is not, the school has adapted its approach.

Inclusion

The impact of the curriculum on inclusion is good.

- Vulnerable students and those who have difficulties in learning are given individual attention so that their progress is as good as their peers and often better. Students with gifts and talents as well as those who achieve standards typical of their age are also given support when they appear to be achieving less than they should. The school's detailed tracking systems note underachievement at all levels of attainment and intervene in a number of ways to ensure that gaps are made good. The school's data indicate that this is effective.
- The focus on working with students so that they know how they are learning is having a galvanising effect on many. For example, one student spoken with who has a learning difficulty was both articulate and insistent on demonstrating the improved level of work he had been able to achieve in art, geography and science.
- The use of the 'Life Skills Passport' across all lessons has been a good support to ensure that all are included in improving their achievement. The emphasis on team building has led to a growing understanding from students that everyone has a valuable role to play. Teachers ensure that students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities succeed, are recognised and are encouraged to build on success.
- The very large majority of the school's students are from white British backgrounds. The school ensures that the curriculum celebrates local culture, including those of its minority ethnic students, and other British religions and cultures.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- maintaining the current momentum so that students continue to enjoy their learning
- including in evaluation plans a check on coverage of the statutory curriculum
- ensuring that students are able to express their understanding of specific subject skills and knowledge.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop the curriculum in the school.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Linden Phillips
Her Majesty's Inspector