

Great Barr School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	103550
Local Authority	Birmingham
Inspection number	336107
Inspection dates	24–25 November 2009
Reporting inspector	Ken Bush

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

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	2342
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	301
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Leigh Crowe
Headteacher	Mrs Catherine Abbott
Date of previous school inspection	8 October 2008
School address	Aldridge Road Great Barr Birmingham
Telephone number	0121 366 6611
Fax number	0121 366 6007
Email address	admin@greatbarr.bham.sch.uk

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Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester M2 7LA

T: 08456 404045

Textphone: 0161 618 8524

E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk

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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by six additional inspectors. The inspectors visited 41 lessons, and held meetings with governors, staff and students. They observed the school's work, and looked at school policies, development plans, 72 parental questionnaires, 43 staff questionnaires and 206 student questionnaires.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at:

- attainment and progress in all year groups
- the quality of teaching and of assessment
- attendance and behaviour
- safeguarding
- the quality of provision in the sixth form and the outcomes for students.

Information about the school

In this very large comprehensive school, most students are from a White British background with minorities from Black/ Black British and Indian backgrounds. The number of students whose first language is not English is close to the national average but increasing. Both the percentage of students eligible for free school meals and the proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities are above the national average and on an increasing trend. The most commonly identified of these needs relate to moderate learning and to emotional and behavioural difficulties. Some courses for 14-16 year olds are offered in partnership with other providers, including a local further education college. The school was designated as a specialist science college in 2005. At the previous inspection, the school was given a Notice to Improve as it was judged not to be meeting government requirements for safeguarding students.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?

3

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

3

Main findings

In accordance with section 13 (5) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that the school no longer requires significant improvement. Great Barr School now provides its students with a satisfactory and improving standard of education. Safeguarding procedures, which were judged to be inadequate in the previous inspection, are now good, as are the care, guidance and support for students. An emerging strength of the school is the quality of its self-evaluation procedures which involve a wide range of stakeholders. These procedures mean that the senior leadership team, other leaders and, increasingly, governors, know the strengths and weaknesses of the school well and have robust plans in place to address areas in need of improvement. These plans, together with the evident success of curriculum reform, the growing impact of specialist school status and rising levels of student achievement reflect a satisfactory capacity for sustained improvement.

By the end of Year 11, the standards reached by students are broadly average, and improving. Whilst currently progress is satisfactory, the rate of progress over time has been erratic. Consequently, with the exception of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities who do make good progress, a significant proportion of students have not achieved as well as they should have done. This has now been addressed by the school through the adoption of a more systematic approach to tackling underperformance by both senior and middle leaders, including more intensive monitoring of lessons. However, as this has not yet had a full impact, achievement overall, while improving, remains satisfactory.

Although there has been some recent improvement, the rate of overall attendance is still below the national average and the proportion of persistent absentees remains too high. Behaviour in lessons is satisfactory, although some instances of low level disruption tend to occur when students are not sufficiently motivated by their learning. However, students and parents are generally in agreement that behaviour has improved in the past few years which is contributing to better progress. The school provides a safe environment in which most students, including those whose circumstances make them vulnerable, feel secure. They report that incidents of bullying do occur occasionally but that staff deal with them effectively. It is a tolerant and welcoming community in which most students thrive.

Major modifications to the curriculum have made the most marked contribution to the improving trend in achievement and the curriculum is now an emerging strength. Effective partnerships with other providers have increased the range of vocational courses significantly. Lower attaining Key Stage 4 students, in particular, are now finding

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greater success and relevance in their studies as a consequence of the creation of a well focused learning programme known as the Foundation Learning Tier. The standard of teaching overall has also improved since the previous inspection. Progress has been made in tackling inconsistent practice across different subjects, for example, through department reviews. Some variation in quality persists and progress dips when assessment data is not used well enough to challenge all pupils or the pace of lessons is not finely tuned enough. The best practice evident in the school is not always effectively shared, although this is now being addressed by middle leaders taking more responsibility for quality assurance and professional development. The standard of marking remains variable and students do not always get enough good quality written feedback to guide them in how to improve their work and to reach higher levels of achievement.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- ? Improve achievement so that challenging attainment and progress targets, as agreed by the governing body, are met or exceeded in the present and subsequent academic years. This is to be done by:
 - - effectively sharing good and outstanding practice
 - - ensuring that the pace and challenge of lessons are sufficient to enable all students to make at least good progress.
 - ? Improve the attendance of students to 93.0% by the end of the present academic year and to 93.5% by the end of the following year. Equally reduce the percentage of students who are persistently absent from school to 6.0% by the end of this academic year and to 5.5% by the end of the following academic year. Particular action should be taken to re-engage students who are persistently absent, through intensive monitoring and through making best use of support from other agencies.
 - ? Improve the effectiveness of assessment by ensuring that:
 - - there is consistency across subjects and key stages in the quality of feedback given to students so they know more clearly how to improve their work
 - - information about students' progress is used more consistently so that lessons are better planned with individuals' different needs and starting points taken into account.
- About 40% of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory may receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils**3**

Most students enjoy learning, are keen to do their best and behave well in lessons.

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Students' concentration and attitudes to study are good when the tasks they are asked to do are engaging and encourage active learning. In one Year 11 English lesson, for example, high teacher expectations and careful planning led to some outstanding personal responses to a GCSE novel. However, when activities are less challenging, some students do not apply themselves as fully as they should.

In 2009, the proportion of Year 11 students gaining five good GCSEs rose significantly compared to the previous year. Attainment overall is now broadly average and is improving. Standards in science at Key Stage 4 remain well above average as a result of effective teaching and the provision of a wide and appropriate range of courses. Attainment in English improved markedly in 2009. It also rose in mathematics, although there are remnants of a legacy of underachievement in this subject because of former turbulence in staffing. Better monitoring of students' progress and the use of more sophisticated and accurate assessment tools are leading to improving achievement in Key Stage 3. As a consequence of well focused and timely individual support and high staff expectations, students with special educational needs and/or disabilities and other vulnerable groups achieve well and make progress, overall, at a faster rate than their peers.

Students' understanding of what it means to live a healthy lifestyle is good and they take advantage of the wide range of activities on offer to demonstrate this knowledge in practice. Staff regularly seek and respond to the views of students, who are involved in a wide range of events both within the school and in the local community. The improving curriculum supports the effective development of students' information communication and technology (ICT), numeracy and literacy skills. In addition, the school's commitment to providing comprehensive work-related learning programmes is making a sound contribution to students' future economic well-being as well as to gaining higher levels of attainment in vocational courses. The school's link with a school in Sierra Leone has given impetus to students' awareness of global issues, enriching their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	3
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment ¹	3
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	3
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	2

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low.

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The extent to which pupils feel safe	2
Pupils' behaviour	3
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	2
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being Taking into account: Pupils' attendance ¹	3
	3
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	3

How effective is the provision?

Teachers' secure subject knowledge and their good relationships with students are common features in most lessons. In the best lessons seen during the inspection, the setting of challenging tasks and regular checking of progress against the intended learning aims led to good achievement. In the less successful lessons, work was not matched sufficiently well to students' needs and capabilities and there were only limited opportunities for independent learning. Planning is usually thorough but does not build sufficiently on students' prior learning. Whilst the majority of students are aware of their targets, they are not always clear about their current level of achievement or precisely what is needed to improve their work. However, a strength of the school's approach to assessment is that students are actively encouraged to provide feedback on their own work and that of their peers, which they find valuable. Overall, both teaching and assessment make a satisfactory impact upon students' learning and achievement.

Great Barr provides an appropriate and improving curriculum for its students, giving them a secure foundation for achievement. Creative strategic planning by key senior leaders has created a good range of courses, notably in science, and an increasing proportion of students are now benefiting from courses better suited to their needs and interests, especially in Key Stage 4. The school is a technologically rich environment and initiatives such as e-learning are beginning to have impact in a range of subjects. Provision is further enriched by 'theme days', which like many of the more successful curriculum initiatives in the school, are driven by the specialism. The school is working towards developing its cross-curricular provision, although this is not yet fully established. Extra-curricular activities make a useful contribution to curriculum provision, although for a school of this size, these are not extensive.

The school's good pastoral care for students through its effective tutorial system is a feature of provision highly valued by most students. One parent commented: 'My daughter's tutor and Head of House always put themselves out to make sure she is doing as well as she can, which is great considering how big the school is. She really enjoys school now she is at Great Barr which she didn't really do before'. The quality of information, advice and guidance is good, enabling students to make well-informed

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choices at transition points such as the end of Key Stage 3. Vulnerable students and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities are especially well supported and nurtured, which enables them to make good progress and take part fully in the life of the school. The guidance and support unit is an important and flexible resource in successfully promoting the value of learning and raising aspirations for those students and their families in most need of intensive support. The contribution of teaching assistants in mainstream classes is satisfactory but they are not always deployed or utilised as effectively as they could be.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	3
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	3
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	3
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	2

How effective are leadership and management?

The headteacher provides the school with clear and effective leadership and direction. She is well supported by senior leaders and governors who share a commitment to improve the outcomes achieved by all students. Middle leaders are becoming more proficient in monitoring and evaluating the quality of provision and students' progress, notably in identifying underperformance and providing appropriate intervention strategies. Progress has been made in raising the overall standard of teaching, although the investment in professional development and the valuable support provided by outside consultants have yet to have a full impact on students' progress. Leadership of the science specialism is particularly strong and is driving improvement in most aspects of the school's work, including through its partnerships with other providers, regional and national educational bodies and the local business community.

Inclusive practice and equal opportunities are vigorously promoted and the school exploits its extended services provision effectively to make a good and distinctive contribution to community cohesion. This has been carefully evaluated by school leaders and governors to ensure future developments are appropriately targeted and reflect the school's context. Although governors have not yet developed their monitoring and evaluation role fully, they are making an increasingly important contribution by adopting a strategic role in school improvement and by holding senior leaders to account for the school's performance. They discharge their statutory duties effectively and they have ensured, for example, that safeguarding requirements are now securely in place and that policy and procedures in that area are regularly scrutinised and consistently applied.

These are the grades for leadership and management

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The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	3
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	3
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	3
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	3
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	3
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	2
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	3

Sixth form

Attainment in the sixth form is broadly average and progress is satisfactory. There are some marked differences in achievement between subjects at both A2 and AS levels. Attendance is in line with expectations in Year 12, but in Year 13 is low. However, most students report that they enjoy school and appreciate the wide range of options available to them, partly as a result of partnership arrangements with other local providers. Students' contribution to the school and wider community is improving with more opportunities to show leadership skills being taken up. The proportion of Year 13 students going on to higher education has risen markedly in recent years as a result of more effective information, advice and guidance being given to students and their families. Progression rates from AS to A2 are generally satisfactory but, again, there is considerable variability between subjects.

Teaching and learning are satisfactory, but of an inconsistent quality across the range of the curriculum, mainly because too many lessons are excessively teacher-directed. However, students feel that most of their teachers go out of their way to help and guide them in their studies. Assessment is thorough and students get effective feedback which enables them to improve in most subjects. Leadership and management in the sixth form are satisfactory with improving systems for monitoring and evaluating the quality of provision and more effective tracking of students' progress. Progress has been made since the previous inspection in establishing a clearer strategy for the development of the sixth form and providing a wider range of vocational courses, although these developments have not yet had a full impact upon student outcomes.

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These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	3
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	3
The quality of provision in the sixth form	3
Leadership and management of the sixth form	3

Views of parents and carers

Although the number of questionnaires returned by parents/carers was exceptionally low given the size of the school, the majority is supportive of, and appreciate the efforts made by the headteacher and other staff to bring about improvements. Many commented favourably on the quality of pastoral care and the support given to vulnerable students and those with additional needs. A few parents raised concerns about the number of supply teachers and the lack of regular, good quality homework. Inspection evidence indicated that neither of these issues has a significant impact upon the quality of education currently provided by the school.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Great Barr School to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school. The inspection team received 71 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 2342 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	22	31	44	62	4	6	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	15	21	47	66	5	7	0	0
The school informs me about my child's progress	20	28	38	54	11	15	2	3
My child is making enough progress at this school	23	32	36	49	7	10	3	4
The teaching is good at this school	19	27	40	26	9	13	3	4
The school helps me to support my child's learning	16	23	38	54	11	15	3	4
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	15	21	35	49	18	25	1	1
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	17	24	40	56	5	7	4	6
The school meets my child's particular needs	20	28	37	52	8	11	3	4
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	27	35	35	45	13	17	0	0
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	13	18	40	56	13	18	2	3
The school is led and managed effectively	17	24	34	48	11	15	4	6
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	25	36	32	46	12	17	0	0

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools inspected between September 2007 and July 2008

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	39	58	3	0
Primary schools	13	50	33	4
Secondary schools	17	40	34	9
Sixth forms	18	43	37	2
Special schools	26	54	18	2
Pupil referral units	7	55	30	7
All schools	15	49	32	5

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above were reported in The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2007/08.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100. Secondary school figures include those that have sixth forms, and sixth form figures include only the data specifically for sixth form inspection judgements.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement.■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils.■ The quality of teaching.■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupil's needs, including where relevant, through partnerships.■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



26 November 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Great Barr School, Birmingham. B44 8NU

Thank you for the very warm welcome you gave to the inspection team when we visited your school recently. We enjoyed being in your lessons, meeting with you and were impressed with the pride most of you have in your school. Great Barr, including the sixth form, is a satisfactory and improving school.

These are the main findings of the inspection:

Standards reached by students by the end of Year 11 are broadly average compared to most other schools, and you make satisfactory progress

Teaching and your curriculum are both satisfactory and are improving

Most of you told us that you feel safe at school and behaviour is satisfactory

Attendance is below average compared to most other schools and too many students are frequently (or persistently) absent - this slows their progress

Staff at the school care for and support you well, but the guidance that you are given about how to improve your work could be better

Your school is satisfactorily led and managed and your headteacher has good plans for how it can get even better.

The headteacher agrees with the inspection team that students could achieve more at school and we have asked that:

- the standards reached by the time students leave school should be higher with a faster rate of progress made
- the level of attendance should be at least as good as most other schools and more should be done to encourage those who are persistently absent to come to school more frequently
- assessment is made more effective so that teachers in different subjects give clearer written advice about how you can improve your work and plan lessons that link more closely with what you already know and can do.

You can help by continuing to work as hard as you can and some of you could improve your concentration and behaviour in lessons and your attendance at school.

On behalf of the inspection team, the very best of luck with your studies in the future.

Yours sincerely

Ken Bush

Lead Inspector

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