



Rhagoriaeth i bawb - Excellence for all

Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg
a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru

Her Majesty's Inspectorate
for Education and Training in Wales

**Report of visit
Level of follow-up: significant improvement**

**Willows High School
Willows Avenue
Tremorfa
Cardiff
CF24 2YE**

Date of visit: January 2014

by

**Estyn, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and
Training in Wales**

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The monitoring team

Denise Wade	Reporting Inspector
Stephen Davies	Team Inspector
Farrukh Khan	Team Inspector
Christine Hooper	Team Inspector

Outcome of monitoring visit

Willows High School is judged to have made sufficient progress in relation to the recommendations following the core inspection in December 2012.

As a result, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales is removing the school from the list of schools requiring significant improvement.

Progress since the last inspection

Recommendation 1: Raise standards at key stage 4

This recommendation has been largely addressed.

In 2013, at key stage 4, the school's performance in almost all indicators improved when compared with performance in 2012. As a result, key stage 4 pupils' attainment shows a continuing and significant trend of improvement over the last two years.

In 2013, key stage 4 pupils' performance in the level 2 threshold including English and mathematics improved by almost nine percentage points when compared with performance in 2012. This is above the family average and expected level of performance, when compared with similar schools, placing the school in the upper 50% of similar schools. Pupils' performance in both the level 1 and level 2 thresholds improved significantly when compared with performance in 2012 although the school remains in the bottom 25% of similar schools.

In 2013, the proportion of key stage 4 pupils gaining level 2 in English, mathematics and science in combination improved by almost eight percentage points when compared with performance in 2012. In mathematics, pupils' attainment in the level 2 threshold increased by over 12 percentage points when compared with performance in 2012. This is the highest performance in the family of schools and places the school in the top 25% of similar schools. This is a strong outcome. In English, pupils' level 2 performance increased slightly when compared with performance in 2012 although this places the school in the lower 50% of similar schools. The proportion of pupils gaining the level 2 threshold in science improved by almost 17 percentage points when compared with performance in 2012. However, the school remains in the bottom 25% of similar schools.

In 2013, at key stage 4, the difference between the performance of boys and girls in many indicators is smaller than the family average. Pupils who are entitled to free school meals generally perform well across a wide range of indicators.

In 2013, at key stage 4, almost all pupils achieved a recognised qualification.

Overall, the school has made sound progress in raising standards at key stage 4 when compared with performance in 2012. However, the headteacher and senior leaders are fully aware of the need to make further improvements, particularly in the threshold indicators which place the school in the bottom 25% of similar schools.

The impact of the actions they have already taken to raise standards is a positive indicator of their capacity to bring about these further improvements.

Recommendation 2: Ensure that pupils who experience difficulties in reading make good progress

This recommendation has been largely addressed.

The school has placed a higher priority on improving pupils' reading skills, which is helping all pupils, particularly those who have the greatest difficulty with reading, to make good progress. For example, the school's detailed data indicates that nearly all pupils receiving intervention support at key stage 3 improved their reading ages each term, with many exceeding expected progress.

The school has successfully implemented effective systems and a range of strategies to help pupils who have the greatest difficulty with reading to develop and improve their skills. This includes focusing on comprehension skills as well as independent reading. Strategies include the use of reader software packages and intensive withdrawal lessons with literacy support specialists. These arrangements have been supplemented by the introduction of 'drop everything and read' timetabled sessions for all key stage 3 pupils. A group of university students also provide pupils with additional one-to-one support on a weekly basis and the school operates an effective rewards system to encourage all pupils to improve their reading skills. These combined arrangements have made a significant contribution towards improving pupils' reading skills.

The school makes effective use of a commercial scheme to assess, monitor and track pupils' progress in reading. This data is used extremely effectively to review and action pupils' specific support needs.

Overall, pupils who have the greatest difficulty with reading make rapid progress over time, relative to their ability on entry to the school.

Recommendation 3: Improve standards in literacy across all subjects through a co-ordinated whole-school approach

This recommendation has been partly addressed.

Since the core inspection, the school has revised its arrangements to help improve standards of pupils' literacy in all subjects. There is now a well co-ordinated and coherent whole-school approach to develop and improve pupils' literacy skills.

The school's literacy co-ordinator and two senior leaders have worked together effectively to manage the development of and provision for improving all aspects of pupils' literacy skills. This includes organising a comprehensive programme of professional development activities to help staff gain a fuller understanding of their responsibilities towards improving pupils' literacy skills. It also includes the successful introduction of a skills-based curriculum in Year 7. On entry to the school, all pupils' literacy skills are assessed. This information is used appropriately by the literacy co-ordinator to identify and make timely arrangements for intervention

sessions or specific additional support pupils may need in lessons to help them to improve.

The school uses its extensive data base on pupils' literacy skills effectively to record and monitor pupil progress regularly in order to identify underachievement and take appropriate action quickly. The school's recently formed literacy intervention group meets frequently to oversee this work.

These revised strategies, together with planning for literacy in all lessons, are helping to improve pupils' literacy skills. In the lessons observed during the monitoring visit, relative to their age and ability, pupils read a range of different texts well, often with deep concentration and understanding. They used their subject knowledge effectively to respond to comments constructively, using varied and subject specific vocabulary appropriately. Many pupils organised their ideas and information well to write accurately for a range of purposes such as summarising information, creating flow diagrams or completing extended writing tasks. However, a minority of pupils do not sustain the legibility of their handwriting, the presentation of their work is too untidy and they rely too much on simple sentences to complete their work.

The school has successfully implemented a coordinated whole-school approach to improve standards of literacy across all subjects. However, it is too early to evaluate the sustained impact of the revised arrangements on improving pupils' overall performance in literacy, particularly in relevant national assessments at key stage 3.

Recommendation 4: Improve attendance

This recommendation has been largely addressed.

Since the core inspection, the school has made good progress in improving attendance. In the academic year 2012 to 2013, attendance improved by nearly three percentage points when compared with 2011 to 2012. This has moved the school from the bottom 25% of similar schools to the lower 50% and is now in-line with modelled expectations.

The school's revised arrangements to improve attendance include the appointment of additional welfare and attendance officers to work more closely with pupils, parents and carers, primary feeder schools and pastoral staff. Effective use is also made of the school's recently introduced house system to re-enforce the importance of attendance in house assemblies and through competitions and a pupil rewards system. As a result, pupils and their parents and carers have a stronger understanding of the link between attendance and achievement.

The school has improved its systems and use of data to monitor, track and report on attendance within the school and with parents and carers. This is helping to give attendance a higher profile and raise expectations. Pastoral staff make effective use of the information from the systems to produce weekly attendance reports and initiate appropriate interventions for pupils with attendance difficulties. This has been particularly effective in improving the attendance of the few pupils with persistent absence.

Recommendation 5: Increase the proportion of good and excellent teaching

This recommendation has been largely addressed.

The school has successfully implemented a range of appropriate strategies to increase the proportion of good and excellent teaching in subjects across the school. For example, teachers have participated in peer lesson observations and professional development activities with the school's partner in the 'Lead and Emerging Schools' project in order to develop and share best practice. This is helping to improve the quality of teaching in key areas such as teachers' questioning skills and planning to develop pupils' literacy skills

Senior leaders use a range of performance management information from the school's robust quality assurance system to address issues of underperformance in teaching sensitively and with appropriate support. They make effective use of the essential criteria list from the school's 'every lesson a good lesson' initiative to set suitable targets for improvement in individual staff action plans. Performance against these plans is monitored rigorously by middle and senior leaders.

The lessons observed during the monitoring visit produced broadly similar judgements to the school's, which shows an increase in the proportion of good or better teaching when compared with the judgements at the time of the core inspection. Teachers know their pupils well and have positive professional relationships with them. This helps pupils to enjoy their learning and make good progress in many lessons.

In those lessons where teaching is particularly effective, teachers provide a high level of challenge to pupils, together with opportunities for pupils to trial and error solutions using a range of techniques. This helps pupils to develop their confidence, as well as their thinking and problem solving skills, by exploring concepts more widely and deeply in order to gain a secure understanding.

In many lessons, teachers plan well-chosen activities to challenge and meet the needs of pupils of different ability levels. This, together with a brisk pace and skilful use of teachers' subject knowledge to probe and extend pupils' understanding and provide effective one-to-one support, is helping to improve pupils' standards.

In the minority of lessons where the quality of teaching is no better than adequate, this is most commonly because learning activities do not match the needs of pupils. Often, this is because planned activities are too difficult or do not challenge pupils well enough to enable them to make appropriate progress.

The headteacher and senior leadership team have made improving the quality of teaching a continuing and important priority for the school.

Recommendation 6: Improve the consistency in the quality of marking to ensure that pupils receive clear guidance on how to improve their skills

This recommendation has been largely addressed.

The school has successfully implemented a revised marking policy with a strong focus on improving the consistency in the quality of marking to ensure that pupils receive clear guidance on how to improve their skills.

The senior leadership team and subject leaders work well together to monitor the implementation of the school's marking policy. They have a well-structured programme to regularly scrutinise pupils' books against agreed criteria. This includes effective use of 'what went well' and 'even better if' to help pupils improve their work, as well as consistent application of the whole-school spelling, punctuation and grammar marking policy.

The scrutiny of pupils' work in the monitoring visit confirms that there is a high level of consistency in marking across subject departments. Teachers' feedback provides pupils with helpful guidance on how to improve their work, which many pupils respond to by re-drafting or correcting errors. This includes responding to teachers' marking of spelling, punctuation and grammar, with few errors repeated in later work.

Overall, the school's revised arrangements to improve consistency in the quality of marking have had a positive impact on helping to improve pupils' standards. Pupils confirm that teachers' comments and feedback from assessments are helping them to develop and improve the relevant skills.

Recommendation 7: Improve middle managers' use of comparative performance data and increase their responsibility for self-evaluation

This recommendation has been largely addressed.

Middle managers use comparative performance data well and have appropriately increased their responsibility for self-evaluation.

The school has provided valuable training and support for middle managers to enable them to use a wide range of data more effectively. As a result, middle managers have developed increasing knowledge, understanding and skills in this area. They now follow a consistent format in the analysis of data which ensures that collation and comparison is easier within and across subjects. Senior leaders monitor the quality of data reports appropriately and gain an overview of these reports. They identify where there is good practice and share this among staff. They also identify departments that are under-performing and provide appropriate support to help them improve.

The school has a stronger focus on departmental self-evaluation and improvement planning. This ensures that every middle manager produces an effective evaluation of the performance of their department, which is strongly linked to the subject improvement plan. Senior leaders monitor subject self-evaluation and improvement plans appropriately, ensuring that these plans have a sufficient focus on school priorities such as improving pupils' literacy skills. These plans are largely suitable although a very few do not contain specific and measurable targets.

Recommendation 8: Improve the quality of middle management in areas where it is less effective

This recommendation has been largely addressed.

Since the core inspection, the overall quality of middle management has improved and become more effective. Middle managers monitor their departments well and identify and action areas that require improvement appropriately.

Senior leaders have provided supportive mentoring to middle managers to help ensure greater rigour and consistency in their quality assurance role. For example, book monitoring is carried out on a weekly basis and middle managers and senior leaders work together closely to discuss and follow-up areas for improvement. Middle managers also undertake lesson observations. Where there is underperformance identified, they offer appropriate support and set and monitor targets for staff to improve. Middle managers meet regularly with their line manager in order to standardise these judgements and discuss progress. As a result, middle managers know the capabilities of their staff well and are able to provide suitable support to help facilitate improvement.

Middle managers meet together weekly, as well as with senior leaders on a fortnightly basis. They use these meetings well to share good practice and offer valuable help and support to each other in order to improve consistency and performance.

Recommendation 9: Ensure that the school meets requirements for the daily act of collective worship

This recommendation has been fully addressed.

The school has taken appropriate actions to ensure that it meets requirements for the daily act of worship. This includes introducing a whole-school approach to sharing a common thought for the day during house tutor time and assemblies, which provides the opportunity for daily prayer and reflection.

To help ensure consistency, all staff have attended a training course focusing on the effective implementation of the school's approach and the positive contribution that this can make to pupils' spiritual and moral development. A suitable bank of daily resource materials has been developed to support the school's structured weekly topic. Senior leaders and heads of house monitor implementation appropriately.

In the house tutor times and assembly observed during the monitoring visit, pastoral staff used the resource materials effectively to lead the daily act of collective worship. Pupils were attentive and respectful during their participation of this activity.

The school meets requirements for the daily act of collective worship.

Recommendations

In order to maintain and improve on this progress, the school should continue to work towards meeting the inspection recommendations that have not yet been fully addressed.