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Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg
a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru

Her Majesty's Inspectorate
for Education and Training in Wales

**Report following monitoring
Level of follow-up: special measures**

**Brecon High School
Penlan
Brecon
Powys
LD3 9SR**

Date of visit: January 2015

by

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

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The monitoring team

Jackie Gapper	Reporting Inspector
Robert Davies	Team Inspector
Jennifer Williams	Team Inspector
Gareth Roberts	Team Inspector

Outcome of monitoring visit

Brecon High School is judged to have made insufficient progress in relation to the recommendations following the core inspection in May 2012.

As a result, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales is maintaining the level of follow-up activity.

Estyn inspectors will re-visit the school in about three months' time to inspect progress against the recommendations.

Progress since the last inspection

Recommendation 1: Raise standards at key stage 3 and key stage 4, particularly in science, Welsh second language and the performance of boys

No judgement applied

In key stage 3, standards in the core subject indicator and separate core subjects have improved since the core inspection. In 2014, performance in English, mathematics and science at level 5 or above are in line with the average for their family of schools and place the school in the upper 50% of similar schools in terms of free-school-meal benchmarks. Standards in the core subject indicator in 2014 are now above modelled expectations. The very few pupils who take Welsh first language perform well in 2014, with all pupils gaining level 5 or above. However, standards in Welsh second language have shown little improvement since the core inspection. In 2014, performance is similar to that of the core inspection, still well below the family average and remains in the bottom 25% of similar schools.

In key stage 4, in 2014, standards improved in the level 2 threshold, level 2 English and science, moving the school's performance from the bottom 25% to the lower 50% of similar schools, and to the upper 50% of similar schools for the level 1 threshold, and level 2 Welsh first language. Performance in these indicators is higher than at the time of the core inspection in May 2012. Standards in science improved in 2014 by 28 percentage points on the previous year and are above the average for their family of schools. However, level 2 threshold and English performance remain lower than the family average.

Performance in the level 2 threshold including English and mathematics is further below modelled expectations in 2014 than at the time of the core inspection. Performance in this indicator is well below the family average and remains in the bottom 25% of similar schools based on free-school-meals benchmarks. In 2014, performance in the core subject indicator remains the same as for 2013 and continues to place the school in the bottom 25% of similar schools and further below the family average (by 11 percentage points). Standards in mathematics have declined since the core inspection. In 2014, performance in mathematics continues to place the school in the bottom 25% of similar schools and well below the family average.

In 2014, performance in the capped points score improved by 21 points but this performance remains below modelled expectation and the rate of improvement is slow compared with similar schools. Performance continues to place the school in the bottom 25% of similar schools and below the family average.

In key stage 4, boys have improved their performance in all indicators since the core inspection and particularly in the level 2 threshold, level 1 threshold, science and Welsh first language. They are performing better than boys in their family of schools for these indicators. However, they do not perform well compared to boys in their family of schools for the level 2 threshold including English and mathematics, the core subject indicator and the separate core subjects of English and mathematics.

In key stage 4, the gender gap in performance of boys and girls has reduced in English, Welsh first language and the level 2 threshold including English and mathematics. However, this is mainly due to the underperformance of girls in these indicators. Girls' performance has declined in most indicators except level 1 threshold and science when compared with their performance at the time of the core inspection. Girls are not performing as well as girls in their family for all indicators and especially in the level 2 threshold including English and mathematics, the core subject indicator, capped points score and mathematics.

In key stage 3, in 2014, boys and girls have improved their performance in all indicators at level 5 and there is not a significant gap in performance between girls and boys. Girls outperform boys in the core subject indicator, English and science although the gap in performance is small. Boys do better than girls in mathematics and also better than boys in their family. Boys and girls perform equally well in Welsh first language and their performance is better than that of boys and girls in their family. For English and science, at level 5 and above, boys perform slightly lower than boys in their family and their performance is similar to that of boys in their family for the core subject indicator.

At the time of the May 2012 inspection, in key stage 3 there was a large gender gap and girls outperformed boys in English, science and Welsh first language at level 6 and above. This has reduced and, in 2014, boys perform better than boys in the family for English and Welsh first language at this higher level. The gap is similar for science at level 6 and above, with improved performance of girls compared with girls in the family.

Standards of pupils' work and progress in lessons observed during the monitoring visit are in line with the school's judgements from lesson observations conducted in the autumn term. Staff absence in a few key subjects limits pupil progress.

In many lessons during the monitoring visit, pupils show positive attitudes to learning and concentrate well. They listen attentively and work together willingly. In over half of lessons, pupils make good progress in developing their knowledge and show a secure understanding of previous work. When given opportunities, a majority of pupils respond thoughtfully to teachers' questions and develop their arguments and opinions confidently, demonstrating sound reasoning skills. In a few lessons, pupils are well organised, independent and disciplined, developing their practical work well

and proof-reading their written work for errors, using dictionaries.

In around half of lessons, pupils do not make enough progress in developing their knowledge, understanding and skills. In a few lessons, this is because they do not understand the tasks set and show limited knowledge of subject terminology. A minority of pupils lack resilience and are over-reliant on asking the teacher for support or do not proceed with completing their work independently. In a minority of lessons, a few pupils are passive and reluctant to give their views due to lack of confidence or lack of understanding.

Many pupils read fluently, locate information from a range of sources and select appropriate evidence to support their written responses. A majority analyse and interpret information successfully. However, a minority do not develop their written analyses of texts read and a few pupils misinterpret information from texts.

Many pupils use appropriate subject-specific terms in their written work. Across subjects, many pupils write suitably in a range of forms for specific purposes and audiences, including reports, essays and narratives. In a few lessons and in books, written work completed is too brief or superficial, and the development of a clear structure to the writing is more limited. A minority of pupils' written work, from all abilities, contains too many spelling, punctuation and grammar errors.

Pupils construct graphs and use accurate scales for experiments in science and correctly label graphs in geography. Where pupils are given the opportunity, they show accuracy and clear understanding of general number skills. However, a minority of pupils' work shows errors in writing units correctly by not taking enough care in their calculations. In mathematics, a minority of pupils show a lack of conceptual understanding of place value work related to decimals. Pupils' numerical reasoning skills are not well developed. They have limited opportunities to solve problems in context because the focus is mainly on the mathematical process rather than applying this to real-life situations.

Recommendation 2: Improve attendance

No judgement applied

Since the core inspection, attendance has improved by 4.3 percentage points to 94.5%, and persistent absence has decreased significantly. Attendance rates in 2014 now place the school in the lower 50% of similar schools based on free-school-meal eligibility, from previously being in the bottom 25%. However, the attendance of girls is well below that of boys. There is a 1.4 percentage points' difference in the attendance of girls and boys and this is noticeably larger than that of girls and boys in the family, local authority and Wales.

Strategies to improve attendance are continuing to have a positive impact since the core inspection. The school's attendance working group is beginning to have a positive impact on attendance by analysing data more thoroughly. Since September 2014, they have planned suitable support strategies, such as mentoring and coaching pupils with low attendance or persistent absence. However, these strategies do not include support for identifying and improving girls' attendance. An

appropriate tracking system gives staff regular information about pupils' attendance.

Since September 2014, the newly-appointed progress and guidance managers have a more clearly-defined role in analysing and monitoring attendance data for all year groups. They are beginning to work with the attendance working group to improve the rigour with which absence is followed up.

The daily text alert to notify parents of any unreported absences continues to ensure that reasons for absence can be acted upon quickly. Attendance figures are distributed weekly to form tutors and recorded in pupil planners. This, together with rewards for good attendance, raises the awareness with pupils and staff of the importance of regular attendance. All these strategies are beginning to have a positive effect on improving the attendance of many groups of pupils.

Recommendation 3: Increase the challenge of teaching to match that in the best lessons

No judgement applied

Since the last monitoring visit, senior leaders continue to develop a wide range of sound strategies to improve the quality of teaching. Procedures and guidelines for lesson planning and teaching approaches are beginning to become an accepted part of school routine. Since September 2014, there are well-planned arrangements for regular lesson observations and learning walks by senior and middle leaders. Most evaluations from lesson observations comment appropriately on strengths and areas needing improvement, particularly for teaching. However, a minority of these are too descriptive of what is happening in the lesson rather than evaluating pupil progress and the impact that the teaching has on standards. There are useful strategies to address the areas for improvement identified from these lesson observations. However these have yet to take place.

In a very few lessons where teaching is most effective, teachers have high expectations. In these lessons, teachers use questioning techniques skilfully which allow pupils to think, consider and reflect on their answers. They plan effectively to integrate literacy and numeracy into the lessons to enhance subject standards and improve pupils' understanding.

In around half of lessons observed, teachers plan sequences of activities carefully to include a wide range of interesting and relevant resources. These tasks are well matched to pupils' abilities. Teachers give clear explanations and support pupils effectively. In these lessons, teachers monitor pupils' progress well and, where appropriate, provide useful opportunities for pupils to consider how to improve their work.

In under half of lessons, teaching has important shortcomings that limit pupils' progress. In these lessons, teachers do not plan effectively enough to develop pupils' knowledge, understanding and skills. For example, activities are either too easy or difficult and do not draw well enough in their planning and delivery of lessons on clarifying pupils' prior knowledge or understanding. Teachers ask questions that do not require extended or considered answers or they are too readily satisfied with

answers which are brief or superficial. The level of challenge in these lessons is not high enough and there are limited opportunities for pupils to work independently and consolidate their learning.

In a few lessons, teaching is unsatisfactory. In these lessons, the level of challenge is either too high or too low, lesson planning does not cater well enough for the needs and abilities of pupils, and teachers do not manage pupils' behaviour effectively. Teachers do not monitor pupils' progress well enough throughout these lessons to make sure that they understand concepts, acquire new skills and work independently.

Recommendation 4: Improve the quality and consistency of marking and feedback given to pupils

No judgement applied

Since the last monitoring visit, senior leaders have continued to introduce several initiatives to improve the quality and consistency of marking and assessment. These include a new marking policy and detailed guidance on pupil self and peer assessment. However, these strategies, including the new marking codes, are too complicated and are only used by a few departments. Overall, the impact of these strategies has been limited in improving the consistency of marking and assessment.

Since September 2014, there have been regular book scrutinies by senior and middle leaders. The most recent scrutiny has revealed a wide variation in the quality and consistency of marking both across and within subjects.

Work sampled during the monitoring visit confirms the school's recent findings. The quality of marking and assessment of a few teachers is detailed, supportive and provides pupils with clear guidance on how to improve their work. In these examples, teachers and pupils engage in a useful dialogue where the pupil responds appropriately to teacher comments and the quality of their work improves.

Generally, marking is up to date but in too many instances, it is superficial or lacks clear guidance about how to improve. In a minority of books, teachers do not ensure that pupils complete their work or are too easily satisfied with responses that are too brief or lack accuracy.

Teachers are beginning to use purposeful opportunities for pupils to be involved in assessment processes, for example, at the end of units of work or when preparing pupils for external assessments.

Recommendation 5: Increase senior and middle managers' accountability for improving standards and quality, through rigorous line management arrangements

No judgement applied

Since the last monitoring visit, there have been significant changes to the make-up and roles of senior and middle leaders. Despite this period of instability, the current

senior leaders have continued to improve the school's systems for holding leaders to account for their roles. However, uncertainty over a number of leadership positions remains. Currently, the school has one acting deputy headteacher, a vacant assistant head teacher post and nine temporary leadership positions funded until the end of the spring term 2015.

Since September 2014, leaders have redesigned the pastoral structure in the school, moving away from heads of key stages. The new progress and guidance managers provide an overview of both pastoral and academic standards across their year groups. As a result, pupils' progress, along with pastoral issues such as behaviour and attendance, are now monitored more closely. However, these middle leaders are new into their roles and it is too early to see a consistent impact on pupils' outcomes to date.

Line management meetings between senior and middle leaders take place fortnightly. Meetings have common agenda items with a consistent focus on standards, teaching and leadership matters. This has improved the focus of these meetings and, as a consequence, action points identified relate more directly to raising standards. However, there remains inconsistency in practice. For example, there are no records for a number of meetings and the quality of written feedback from these meetings varies between senior leaders. These inconsistencies are due to the changes in leadership and the dual roles that some leaders have had to cover in recent months.

The school has improved its systems for analysing data and tracking pupils' progress. This has meant that middle leaders are now being held to account more effectively for the performance of pupils in their subject areas and year groups.

Governors are improving the way they challenge the school on the performance of pupils. Core subject leaders now present their data analyses at governing body meetings and governors challenge middle leaders suitably on aspects of this. Non-core subject middle leaders present their data analysis to senior leaders and a designated link governor. These improved links between governors and middle leaders has increased the level of accountability in the school, as well as improving governors' understanding of performance data.

Recommendation 6: Improve the sharpness and clarity of improvement planning at all levels, using specific and measurable targets

No judgement applied

Since the last monitoring visit, the school has improved its systems and processes for improving quality across the school. Importantly, leaders have begun to establish a positive climate of trust between staff that is allowing for open and honest discussions around school improvement matters to raise pupils' standards.

The school's calendar clearly maps out the arrangements for self-evaluation and improvement planning. Expectations for staff's involvement in these processes are clear. The self-evaluation work of the school draws on a range of evidence from worthwhile activities such as data analysis, lesson observation, work scrutiny,

learning walks and collaborative reviews. Findings from these activities are used appropriately to inform school and departmental improvement plans. The school's evaluation of its own provision is honest and is generally in line with the team's findings.

However, self-evaluation activities are not always accurate or sharp enough and a number of important aspects require improving. For example, the school's analysis of data in its self-evaluation report contains gaps in important areas such as the analysis of non-core subjects at key stage 4 and performance across subjects at key stage 5. In addition, while findings from lesson observations and work scrutinies provide useful information, these activities do not yet focus sufficiently on evaluating pupils' standards, either in subject skills or in skills such as literacy and numeracy. Furthermore, findings from lesson observations and book scrutinies do not feed directly into whole school and departmental self-evaluation reports. As a result, leaders do not use all available evidence effectively to guide priorities.

The school has adopted new formats for departmental evaluation reports and improvement plans. These are beginning to improve the consistency of the work of middle leaders, although not all departments have used the new formats. Furthermore, there is considerable variation in the quality of the reports and plans produced by middle leaders.

Targets set by the school are generally challenging, realistic and set the ambition for the school. However, targets for improving the performance of girls in mathematics and improving their attendance are not explicit.

Although self-evaluation and improvement planning is improving across the school, the school's systems for improving quality have not had a consistent impact on improving pupils' academic standards in important indicators at key stage 4.

Recommendation 7: Plan to resolve the budget deficit effectively

Very good progress in addressing the recommendation

We reported after the monitoring visit of July 2013 that the school has made very good progress with this recommendation.

Recommendation 8: Meet statutory requirements for the daily act of collective worship

Very good progress in addressing the recommendation

We reported after the monitoring visit of July 2013 that the school has made very good progress with this recommendation.

Recommendations

In order to maintain and improve on this progress, the school should continue to work towards meeting the inspection recommendations.