

Barr Beacon Language College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	104264
Local Authority	Walsall
Inspection number	319408
Inspection dates	16–17 April 2008
Reporting inspector	Davinder Dosanjh HMI

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1350
6th form	180
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Barbara McCracken
Headteacher	Maureen Brennan
Date of previous school inspection	4 November 2002
School address	Old Hall Lane Aldridge Walsall WS9 0RF
Telephone number	0121 3666600
Fax number	0121 3666876

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Barr Beacon is a large and oversubscribed school. It has had specialist status as a language college since 2003. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including those with a statement of special educational need, is much lower than average. Over 81% of the pupils are White British. Other pupils are from a range of minority ethnic backgrounds, with the largest group of Indian heritage. The proportion of pupils eligible for free schools meals is low. After considerable instability of headteachers over a number of years, the current headteacher has been in post since April 2007.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

Barr Beacon is a satisfactory school with an increasing number of good features. Many aspects of the school have improved and pupils comment on how much better the school is since the previous inspection. They are proud of their school and the house system engenders a real sense of community spirit by encouraging pupils to try their best in lessons and in a wide variety of activities, earning rewards for their house team. Behaviour and attendance are now good. The school is an orderly place and there are high expectations for pupils' appearance and manners. The results of the parental questionnaires indicate significant support for the school and the changes that have taken place. Pupils make an outstandingly positive contribution to the community by acting as prefects and representing the school on the local area anti-bullying committee. The school and house councils have been very active, setting up an 'eco council' and improving the school environment. Pupils much enjoy school and many participate in a range of after-school clubs and sporting activities. The school is also rightly proud of its caring ethos.

Achievement is satisfactory and standards are average, with current data showing that pupils are on course to do better, after a declining trend in pupils' performance where progress was inadequate. Year 11 pupils have already taken examinations early in core subjects, confirming this improvement. The school has a number of intervention strategies that are increasingly effective, such as catch-up sessions and coursework days.

Teaching and learning are satisfactory overall with increasingly more good lessons. The high priority given to improving teaching and learning is starting to make a difference. Where teaching is good or better, pupils are engaged in a variety of stimulating tasks, and learning is reviewed and consolidated well. Less effective lessons are often too teacher led and do not stretch pupils through the tasks that are set. Assessment data are insufficiently used to plan learning. Marking of work is inconsistent across the school and does not inform pupils well enough on how to improve their work.

In line with its language college status, the school has begun to make better progress in developing and improving international aspects across the curriculum, for example, through the Japanese week and projects linked to subject areas. Such activities make a good contribution to pupils' cultural development and to preparing them for future employment. However, the school is aware that GCSE results in modern foreign languages remain below what they should be. The school is tackling this by ensuring that pupils have access to more language teaching from Year 7 and that good practice set by an advanced skills teacher is shared across all modern foreign language teaching.

The curriculum has been developed to meet the needs of pupils, with future plans also being well advanced. The range of extra-curricular activities available has increased to offer more choice and breadth. Pupils' good participation in all the activities provided, combined with their improved behaviour, indicates their growing satisfaction with what the school provides. The Makin Trax programme in music technology has been a strong motivator for pupils who have been underachieving.

The change of headteacher and a new senior leadership team have in a short space of time provided a clear vision and direction for the school, creating a common purpose amongst staff. The strong and purposeful leadership has made a number of key changes from introducing the house system and revising the school day to supporting weaker teachers. This has started to

improve achievement and has led to a greater focus on the personal well-being of the pupils. However, some actions have not been in place long enough to make a significant impact in improving pupils' achievement. Given the recent improvement, the school has a good capacity to continue on its path to further development.

In accordance with section 13 (3) of the Education Act 2005, HMCI is of the opinion that the school no longer requires significant improvement.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

Provision in the sixth form is improving and is satisfactory. The leadership team recognises that the academic curriculum has not met the needs of all pupils and major improvements will be introduced for next year. Student numbers have been declining and a significant proportion have not completed their courses. The wide access entry policy means that, although there are significant numbers of able pupils, overall standards on entry to the sixth form are lower than usual. Data for recent past years showed declining standards and unsatisfactory progress. Evidence gathered during the inspection shows that standards are rising and are now broadly average. Progress is satisfactory. Students appreciate the good relations that they have with teachers. 'They are always willing to give you time' is a common view. The personal development of students is good and enhanced through annual events such as the health day and the management conference. Students receive good guidance prior to entry to the sixth form but would welcome greater tutorial support after entry. Leadership and management of the sixth form are satisfactory.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise standards and improve achievement by ensuring marking is more consistent across the school and pupils receive specific advice on how to improve.
- Ensure better use of data is made by managers and teachers to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment.

A small proportion of schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Evidence gathered in the inspection shows that standards are now rising and the progress made by pupils is improving. This contrasts sharply with recent years where standards were declining and progress was inadequate.

Pupils enter the school with broadly average standards but a greater proportion than normal have higher-level skills. In Key Stage 3, progress has improved over the past year but is still below expectations. Although standards are below average, they are improving. The number of pupils reaching higher levels of attainment has improved significantly in English and science.

Over the past year, the school has put much effort into improving GCSE standards and raising pupils' expectations. As part of this strategy, Year 11 pupils took their examinations early in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science. The percentage of grades at A* to C

was broadly in line with the national average, with science showing particularly strong improvement. Intensive support such as after-school revision and catch-up sessions have also helped bring improvements in many other subjects. Standards in modern foreign languages have risen significantly but are still below average. Pupils are on course to reach the school's realistic GCSE targets. Given their low starting points on entry to Key Stage 4, this represents satisfactory progress. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those from minority ethnic groups achieve at least as well as others.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Pupils much enjoy coming to school and this is reflected in above average and improving attendance rates. They are particularly happy with recent improvements that have taken place that have resulted in them feeling really safe and well cared for. Pupils say there is always someone to go to if problems arise, including fellow pupils, many of whom are trained to support younger ones. Pupils of all ages make an outstanding contribution to the school and local community by taking responsible roles, particularly organising house activities, assemblies and fund raising. The house and school councils take an active role in running the school. A large number of pupils apply to be prefects, receiving training in child protection and how to support younger children, and enabling them to take a significant support role in the school. Pupils also lead sports activities in primary schools and participate in the local area anti-bullying initiative. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good.

Pupils are good at adopting healthy lifestyles. Well supervised and shorter lunch times are now calm, social occasions. Pupils are allowed to drink water in lessons, a large number take up the opportunities offered to develop personal fitness, and pupils of all levels of ability take part.

Behaviour is usually good around the school and in lessons, although there are a small number of cases where teaching is less effective. Pupils now have high expectations of their peers and express concern that a small majority persist in disrupting their learning. Pupils are polite and welcoming to visitors to the school and many display a maturity and confidence in their relationships with adults. These personal skills will enable them to develop as rounded individuals and to transfer them to working roles, although key skills, including information and communication technology (ICT), still require further development.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Teaching is satisfactory overall. A growing proportion is good, and some is outstanding. The school is monitoring the quality of its provision rigorously and taking appropriate action to raise standards. Common expectations have ensured that lesson planning is consistent and all staff now follow the three-part lesson. The most effective lessons make good use of starter activities, which are well linked to the main lesson. Learning objectives are made clear to pupils. Behaviour is well managed so that all pupils are focused and ready to learn. Lessons are well structured with a range of stimulating activities, involving pair work and independent learning. There is good consolidation of learning via peer assessment and the use of plenary activities,

which review learning effectively. Pupils make more progress when teachers use very skilful questioning to challenge their learning, deepen understanding and encourage pupils to apply what they have learnt to a new situation. Lessons can sometimes be too teacher led, with little opportunity for pupils to become actively involved in their learning. There is insufficient challenge for pupils, and tasks and work set are not always well matched to the prior attainment and needs of the different pupils. The school recognises that assessment is an area for further development. While good practice is evident in the school, it is inconsistent across departments. Not all marking of work guides pupils on how to get better, or it is sometimes superficial without subject-specific guidance.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

The curriculum has improved and is now satisfactory. The school is committed to ensuring the curriculum better meets pupils' interests and capabilities. Pupils in Key Stage 3 now have more opportunities to study dance and drama and those in Key Stage 4 are offered greater opportunities to take up physical education. The Makin Trax music technology programme is proving successful in engaging pupils who were previously disaffected from their studies. From September 2008, a wider range of vocational courses will be available for pupils to give them greater opportunities to develop practical and work-related skills. Students' and parental response has been positive to these increased opportunities and more are now choosing to stay on into the sixth form as a result. An audit of ICT resources and staff expertise has already led to plans to improve ICT teaching and its use across the curriculum. As yet, pupils do not receive their statutory entitlement to ICT at Key Stage 4.

The range of extra-curricular activities, including creative, aesthetic, cultural and sporting opportunities, is much improved. New opportunities such as the Activities and Cluedo weeks are well designed to widen pupils' experiences and learning beyond the classroom. Gifted and talented provision is improving with opportunities for enrichment activities such as a visit to Cambridge University and Rocket day.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

The newly established house system has led to improvements in the care, guidance and support of pupils. Support begins for pupils before they enter the school, and efficient processes are in place to ease the transition to school, enabling them to settle quickly. Appropriate child protection policies are in place and vulnerable children and their families are well supported by a variety of outside agencies coordinated by the school. Attendance continues to improve, particularly that of persistent poor attenders, because of rigorous school procedures supported by the educational welfare officer. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are well supported, enabling them to achieve as well as their peers.

The school has worked hard to improve the behaviour and attitudes of the most difficult pupils. The 'success centre' provides a wide variety of support matched to individual needs, including stress and anger management, promoting self-esteem and encouraging older pupils who have experienced difficulties to support younger ones. As a result, the referral rate for poor behaviour for these pupils and the exclusion rate are falling.

Pupils receive good guidance about their future options and the Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 pathway interviews to which parents are also invited, help them make considered choices. Although systems are in place to track academic progress, the data are not used effectively enough by teachers in their lesson planning, to meet the individual needs of pupils.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

The leadership and management of the school are good, and have improved from the situation identified in the last inspection. There is clear direction from the headteacher and senior managers. The initial priorities of establishing a secure platform for improvement have been successfully introduced and are continuing at a rapid pace, although the impact on standards is only just starting to show. The results of the parental questionnaires indicate overwhelming support from the parents and carers for the actions that have been taken. Some concerns over discipline and staff absence remain, partly as a legacy from the previous situation.

There is regular monitoring of classes, books and planners, and both staff and pupils are now clear about what is expected of them. Core subjects have been reviewed in depth, and the first one completed, science, has improved greatly. Middle managers, particularly in the core subjects, have been given extensive support and now feel that they can plan ahead. They are starting to use data to inform them of how well their pupils are progressing and to set realistic targets. This has not yet spread across the whole school.

The new Interim Executive Board has become firmly established. It is taking an active role in monitoring, challenging and supporting the headteacher in her initiatives. The members have a clear view of the strengths and weaknesses of the school, and have, for example, bought in expert advice to put it on a firm financial footing. They have refined the school development plan to include targets, which help staff to monitor progress and delivery of the plan.

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Annex A

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall	16-19
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Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	3	3
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3	3
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	3	

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
How well learners enjoy their education	2	
The attendance of learners	2	
The behaviour of learners	2	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	3	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	3	3
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	3

¹ Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average to below average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	3	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	3	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2	
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No	
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No	

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

18 April 2008

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Barr Beacon Language College, Aldridge, WS9 0RF

I would like to thank you for the welcome you gave to my colleagues and me when we visited your school recently. Thank you for talking with us and giving us your views about how much the school has improved. We were very impressed by your good behaviour and attendance.

You are rightly proud of your school. It is a satisfactory school with an increasing number of good features. The school is an orderly place and the house system has brought about a feeling of team and community. You make an outstandingly positive contribution to the community by acting as prefects and representing the school at the local area anti-bullying committee. The house and school councils take an active role in running the school. Barr Beacon is a caring school, you feel safe and know where to go for help. Teaching is improving and a wider range of courses are being offered to help you do better. The variety of clubs and after-school activities on offer is much greater and your involvement in them is good. The 'Makin Trax' pupils were certainly enjoying the music technology course on the bus! The school's language specialism has begun to develop an international dimension and there are an increasing number of projects across different subjects.

The change of headteacher and the new senior leadership team have quickly made a difference to the school. Your parents are very supportive of the school and the changes being made. There is still more to happen and the changes have started to improve GCSE performance and results in the sixth form, which had been declining.

Senior managers have a clear view of how the school is doing and where they can make improvements. There are some things that the school can do to become better, and we have asked the headteacher and senior managers to:

- raise standards and improve achievement by ensuring marking is more consistent across the school and you receive specific advice on how to improve
- ensure data are better used by the school to plan teaching and assessment so work is more closely matched to your starting points.

The managers, teachers, governors and staff are very committed to their work. We encourage you to continue to support the school and play your part in making it even better. I wish you every success in the future.

Yours sincerely

Davinder Dosanjh Her Majesty's Inspector

18 April 2008

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Davinder Dosanjh
Her Majesty's Inspector