



The Spencer
Academies Trust

**Teaching and Learning Review of
Discovery Academy
15-16 March 2016**

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REPORT

The scope of the review

The review was commissioned by the Colleges Academies Trust, through Stoke Local Authority, with a clear focus on teaching and learning in the academy. It was undertaken by three reviewers working for The Spencer Academies Trust. One member of the team is a former HMI, the second is an Ofsted Inspector and former secondary Vice Principal, and the third a former secondary Headteacher.

Context

Reviewers used most of the available time in lessons observing teaching and learning. 51 parts of lessons were seen with observations lasting between 15 and 25 minutes. 36 lessons were jointly observed with senior or subject leaders from the academy, including some with teachers for CPD purposes. After each joint observation short discussions were held to draw out the main strengths and areas for development, and to agree judgements on student progress and behaviour. Where possible, school staff led feedback for observed teachers.

Reviewers spoke to a selection of ten students in Years 7 and 8 and 9 and another eight from Years 10 and 11. The discussions lasted for around 35 minutes. These students were selected by the academy and may not be fully representative of the whole student body.

Opportunities to discuss learning and progress were taken when reviewers gave feedback to the teachers observed. Individual discussions were held with subject leaders for English and mathematics, and there was a further joint meeting with a number of other subject leaders. These staff brought a selection of student work to look at during the end of day one discussions. Books were routinely sampled during lessons, as available.

Meetings were held with key senior leaders with responsibility for Teaching and Learning, Assessment and Data and Behaviour and Safety. Short summaries of the findings of these meetings are added, to indicate the impact of these areas on improving teaching and learning and thus raising attainment.

The lessons to be observed were decided by academy staff, but teachers did not know which lesson would be observed, as agreed in the planning of the review. All but a few teachers were seen during the two days, and findings were triangulated with the academy's own quality assurance findings, which are based upon a wide range of information beyond lesson observation, including work scrutiny and student progress as seen in examinations and assessments.

Overview of observation outcomes

Reviewers made judgements on the achievement (progress) of students, and of behaviour in all lessons. Overall, in around four fifths of the lessons seen, progress was good or better, with around a

fifth of lessons where progress was judged to be outstanding. Of the lessons judged to show good progress, more than three quarters were judged as stronger (using the school system of 2A or 2B). In around a fifth of lessons seen, progress was judged to require improvement.

In around a third of lessons, behaviour was judged to be outstanding, and good in the majority of lessons. Only in seven lessons was behaviour judged to require improvement. This was invariably linked to weaker progress being made in these lessons.

There was no teaching observed which was judged to be inadequate.

Main findings

Teaching and learning at Discovery Academy are characterised by an achievement culture focused on high aspirations. Students respond positively to the expectations and well embedded routines, resulting in good relationships. Their calm, orderly behaviour supports effective collaboration and increasing opportunities for independence in the classroom. Learning environments are well ordered and stimulating. Teachers have secure subject knowledge, which is used to plan increasingly active and varied learning experiences. There is a clear focus for promoting good literacy, including support for those who need it. Students confirm that appropriate homework is set and marked regularly. They take pride in their work; books and folders are invariably clean, neat and organised.

Senior leaders are well aware of pockets of weakness in some subject areas; these are being addressed through support, CPD and close monitoring. There are a small number staff who are identified as needing additional support and training; this number includes the three English teachers, NQTs and those on Teach First programmes.

The emphasis on creating a culture of high expectations and challenge is well underway, supported by both staff and students' understanding of the relevance of Growth Mind Set. Leadership of teaching and learning is strong; a range of data and evidence are used to compile a detailed analysis, both at Department and whole school level. This is used to provide support, encourage future leaders and inform well targeted CPD. Key development areas such as Language for Learning can be observed contributing quality and depth to students' learning.

In the majority of lessons where teaching leads to progress that is good or better:

- learning objectives are of good quality and linked clearly to outcomes
- planning is structured to promote knowledge, skills and understanding for all learners and used flexibly to adapt the lesson as needed
- timing is used effectively and the pace is appropriately brisk
- high quality resources are used to both challenge and support all levels of ability
- questioning is skilfully targeted to include all learners and to promote higher order thinking skills
- the use of 'SWANS' marking (strengths, weaknesses and next steps) feedback and reflection system is thoughtful, meaningful and effective
- opportunities for independent learning are regularly included
- whole school foci, such as 'thinking time', and 'quiz, quiz, share' are smoothly integrated into the lesson
- teachers' awareness of the needs of Pupil Premium students leads to planning and delivery that supports them well

In the minority of lessons where teaching leads to progress that required improvement:

- learning objectives are unclear, poorly expressed or 'lost' in the delivery of the lesson
- too often students are passive; this was often linked to excessive 'teacher talk'
- questioning lacks depth, suitability and focus, and is not directed well to involve all students
- teachers' marking responses and students' reflections are underdeveloped and superficial
- potentially effective resources are not fully or effectively deployed
- work is not well matched to the learners; there is insufficient challenge or support for all levels of ability
- a lack of teacher vigilance and student ambition results in students selecting activities which do not challenge them sufficiently

Main recommendations

- **provide the necessary training to ensure that all subject leaders are equally competent to judge the quality of teaching and learning and progress of learners**
- **continue to use the many examples of best practice across the academy to create even more consistently strong teaching and learning**
- **develop confidence and consistency in the use of the new 1-9 grading system, and make explicit links for staff and students to more familiar levels, where appropriate**

Progress from the previous review (April 2015)

- *'Foster the autonomy of each Faculty to develop teaching approaches to increase the rate of progress made by all students'.*
Mainly achieved. Remaining inconsistencies now lie with individual staff rather than at department level.
- *'Increase the strategies available to boost students' progress through oracy.'*
Strong improvement, noticeable in the contributions made by students in most lessons.
- *'Continue to develop active learning strategies, as seen in the work of the Kagan pilot'.*
These approaches are now well established in most lessons, and being used by most staff.
- *'Develop and strengthen the coaching programme, empowering teachers to refine their classroom practice'.*
Strong improvements seen in this aspect, commented on by staff and recognised by students.

Leadership and Management

The Principal has a clear vision for the Academy and has developed a strong academy ethos based on achievement and success. The newly re-structured leadership group is a cohesive team that fully

shares this vision. In particular, it is notable that teaching and learning development and student progress is at the heart of planning and priorities.

Teaching and learning development is energetically led by a Assistant Principal. Faculties have successfully embedded active learning approaches that are tailored to the subject. In this they have been well supported by Leaders of Learning who have promoted academy-wide agreed approaches and strategies and assisted in coaching and supporting staff. Specific coaching programmes are in place for staff who have been identified as requiring additional training and support, and there is evidence that this has improved teaching quality.

Middle leaders are much more confident in their roles, particularly in terms of the quality assurance of learning and learning. During the review, most paired observers could accurately identify strengths and weaknesses and judge the overall quality of learning seen. Not all were as confident, particularly when observing lessons beyond their own subjects. Middle leaders feel that weekly line management meetings provide excellent communication between senior leaders and staff, with a clear focus on improving classroom practice.

Staff training priorities are seen in practice, and the great majority of teachers are committed to providing engaging, varied and well-planned lessons. Kagan approaches, which were being trialled last year, are now becoming well embedded in most classrooms. Appointments have strengthened teaching, most notably in mathematics, and students report that they are now rarely taught by supply teachers. Staff feel valued and supported.

Leadership in mathematics has been secured and there is a strong team ethos, resulting in the effective sharing of practice and joint planning. As a result, the progress of students in the subject has improved considerably; progress in most mathematics lessons during the review was good.

Leaders have had a similarly impressive impact in improving attendance, attitudes to learning and more consistently good behaviour in classrooms and around the site.

Personal Development and Welfare

Behaviour during lessons is very good overall. As the quality of teaching has improved over time a similar improvement in behaviour has been recorded. All classrooms display a prominent poster which outlines a set of clear expectations the academy has established for behaviour, and explains the operation of the reward system. Students clearly understand these expectations, and feel that the system recognises positive contribution to lessons rather than compliance. Students say that any disruption to their learning is not tolerated. Both positive rewards and sanctions are closely monitored and followed up by tutors and other staff. Behaviour around the academy is calm and orderly. Staff are highly visible on the corridors and social spaces at these times. Students are polite and helpful to visitors and towards each other.

A detailed approach for improving attendance includes rigorous monitoring by senior leaders and Heads of Year. Data illustrates significant improvements in overall attendance, which is now around the national average, having improve by around 1.3% on the previous year. Persistent absence has been reduced, and there has been a narrowing of the gaps in attendance for disadvantaged students. Fixed term exclusions are also falling over time. No permanent exclusions have been made over the last three academic years. These figures illustrate significantly less time lost to learning that

has been the case in previous years. The challenge the academy now faces is to further reduce the small number of students who are repeatedly placed in internal exclusion.

Records of staff training in child protection and the Single Central Record were not examined during the review.

Student interviews indicate that students receive regular training in esafety and cyber bullying and are fully aware of the anti-radicalisation agenda. Students of all ages express confidence that any issues relating to bullying or other personal difficulties are quickly and effectively dealt with by staff. An older group of students particularly appreciate the quality of advice, guidance and support provided in preparation for moving on to further education, training or employment.

Outcomes

2015 Raise Online shows an improving picture after previous decline. 5A*-C figures including English and mathematics improved and were above floor targets. Attainment in English rose considerably, although it remained weak in mathematics. Value added measures showed English close to national figures, but mathematics still well behind. Science was a relative strength, but Humanities were weaker. Gaps in performance for disadvantaged students remained relatively wide and did not close significantly overall.

The current Year 11 and Year 10 students are making much stronger progress, making up the legacy of previous underachievement. They are currently making levels of progress from starting points similar to those seen nationally in 2015. In mathematics, expected progress is projected to be much closer to national figures in 2016. Progress 8 projections, therefore, are close to average for the Year 11 cohort, which would represent a significant improvement on previous value added measures. Gaps also appear to be closing for disadvantaged students; the academy can provide case studies to explain the impact of a small number of students who adversely affect some of these figures.

Data tracking remains a strength. The academy has followed a local initiative to introduce the new GCSE assessment grades 1-9. There is some evidence that not all staff are confident about how these grades relate to previous levels, even though these are made explicit in 'flight path' charts on the front of student books. Until grade descriptors for the new grades are available for all subjects, and staff are confident in their use, it may be necessary to show even more explicit links with the old levels in the interim, for both staff and students. The assessments seen in younger age groups do indicate that students are making accelerated progress and that gaps are closing.