

CfBT Education Trust
External Review of the British School of Washington,
April 2008
Commissioned by Fieldwork Education Services

Summary Report

This external review of the British School of Washington, conducted by two independent consultants from CfBT Education Trust, Chris Taylor and Nina Siddall, took place on 14th and 15th April 2008.

The specific focus for the review was to evaluate the school's responses to the recommendations made in the report following its most recent Internal Review (March 2006).

During our visit we observed parts of more than 40 lessons covering most subjects and every year group, interviewed members of the school staff as individuals and in groups, talked with many students and undertook a thorough survey of a sample of their written work. We observed students on arrival to school, at play during break-time and how they behaved while moving around the school.

We looked at reports of the school's self – review activities, at improvement plans and at various other items of school documentation provided before and during the review visit. We held scheduled meetings with the headteacher, with the deputy headteachers responsible for the primary and secondary phases, with the Key Stage leaders and other teachers with specific responsibilities, and with representative groups of parents and staff.

We provided oral feedback on our findings and our judgements to the school's leadership team.

Our report has three sections:

1. Headlines: students' attainment, the progress they make in learning and the quality of the teaching they receive
2. Specific focuses: an evaluation of the school's responses to each of the recommendations contained in the March 2006 Internal Review
3. Looking ahead: recommendations for future action.

Headlines

Most students continue to attain the generally high standards noted in the report of the March 2006 Internal Review. In the last two years the attainment of the youngest children, which is gauged by their teachers, and that achieved by students in English National Curriculum tests at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 is well above that reached by children of similar ages in maintained schools in England. Our observations of lessons and our review of a sample of students' written work indicate that similar levels can be safely predicted for the coming year. In the last two years students have recorded strong performance in most subjects at GCSE, although relatively few have achieved the highest grades. Results in the International Baccalaureate Diploma are improving year on year, and the programme is beginning to become established as an important component in what the school offers.

Learning

In the **primary phase** children learn well. Learning was most marked in lessons when the children were actively involved and aware of the next steps they should take. Children worked well independently in several of the lessons we saw, for example conducting their own research via the Internet to obtain information and images for individual assignments.

In many lessons in the primary phase the children regarded themselves as partners with one another in the learning process, working well in groups. Collaboration was a strong feature of several of the best lessons, in which children motivated and helped one another to make good rates of progress. Impressive classroom displays and learning prompts on the walls reinforced the work of the teachers in most classrooms.

Children celebrated their own success and that of others with equal spirit, illustrated by a child in one class, who said, "Working together we can solve anything; when you believe in yourself you can achieve anything."

Children were well behaved and understood how class rules and routines help them to learn. They value the new school premises highly and they are excited by the possibilities the new facilities present to help them learn even better in the future. On a very few occasions in the lessons we observed children became distracted when the pace was too slow and they were under – occupied.

Students made at least satisfactory progress in all the lessons we observed in the **secondary phase**. In every case they were genuinely interested in the topics they were studying and were concerned to make sure that they understood them fully. Most students in all classes were highly motivated to learn, frequently asking the teachers for clarifications and additional information. Many were articulate and confident in expressing their opinions and offering solutions to problems posed by the subject matter they were studying.

Where learning was strongest the students learnt from each other as well as from the teacher by commenting on their own and on each other's work. We saw students working well independently of the teacher in some lessons and our survey of students' work also yielded evidence of independent work of good quality, especially in the sketchbooks for art and design technology.

However, our overall impression was that learning independently of the teachers and collaboratively with other students were not characteristic or routine features of lessons in most subjects. Although there were examples of effective learning as a result of direct teaching to the whole class, the emphasis in many lessons on textbook and worksheet based written work limited the progress made by the most able students in particular. In some of these lessons the learning was appropriate but was not always sufficient.

Teaching for learning

All the teaching we observed in the **primary phase** was of good or excellent quality; it strongly supported the good progress that most of the children made.

The teachers mostly catered well for children with different abilities. This was done most successfully when they knew the children well enough to adjust their teaching to meet the needs of individuals.

We found some inconsistency of practice between classes in two respects: in the codes and conventions used to assess and feed back on children's work; and in the quality of classroom environments, the best displaying learning prompts and models of high quality work.

All the teaching we observed in the **secondary phase** was at least satisfactory in its promotion of student learning and in a few lessons it was good or excellent. In the best, the teachers made clear to the students (a) what they were going to learn and why; and (b) what they were to produce and the quality to aim for. In these lessons the teachers and students talked about how they could achieve high quality in what they were doing, sometimes modelling and inviting comments on what was expected.

In several lessons the teachers used their strong subject knowledge to maintain the students' enthusiasm and interest by providing adept answers to their frequent questions. We also observed several episodes of successful direct teaching to whole classes or groups, in which teachers probed the understanding of individual students for the benefit of the rest.

Relationships were simultaneously relaxed and business – like, but the pace of learning was rather deliberate for much of the time, particularly at Key Stage 3. Given the attainment levels that many students are capable of reaching, more could have been accomplished in some of the lessons we saw.

Specific focuses

In this section of the report we present an evaluation of the school's responses to each of the key recommendations contained in the March 2006 Internal Review.

The March 2006 report made two closely related recommendations concerned with learning and teaching:

1. The school should improve the way in which learning intentions are explicitly shared with students in the secondary phase, as identified in the school improvement plan.
2. Teachers in the secondary phase should build on existing good practice and use Assessment for Learning as a way of giving students more ownership of their learning.

We found learning intentions, expressed as objectives, displayed in writing in every lesson in the secondary phase, usually on the whiteboard at the front of the class. Teachers explained them at the start of each lesson. Sometimes the objectives displayed were in the form of activities to be undertaken during the lesson, rather than an expression of the purpose of the learning that was planned to take place. In only a few instances were the learning objectives referred to in any concerted fashion once the lesson had begun. Similarly, learning intentions were seldom referred to explicitly in the teachers' marking of students' written work.

We looked for evidence of developed assessment for learning practice in our observations of lessons in the secondary phase and in our survey of students' written work. While we found some good examples, we concluded that they were not yet routine features of practice in the secondary phase.

Consequently, our judgement is that the school has recorded only partial success in its response to these two recommendations.

The report in March 2006 made a further recommendation about teaching and learning:

3. The school should closely monitor its tracking records for accuracy, consistency and target setting

We are satisfied that the staff have a clear and accurate picture of each student's current attainment and rate of progress in the core subjects in relation to his or her starting point. The Key Stage leaders monitor teachers' planning, review students' work and track their performance against targets, which are set for each student. We therefore conclude that the school has made substantial progress with this recommendation.

Regarding the organizational structure of the school, the internal review report recommended in March 2006 that it should:

4. In consultation with staff and the company, review the leadership and management structure with the intention of establishing greater clarity about responsibilities.

The school's leadership team has been restructured since March 2006 and now comprises the headteacher and two deputy heads, one each responsible for the primary and secondary schools. Four Key Stage leaders complete the wider leadership team.

Our judgement, tested in discussions with teachers and parents, is that the school now has a leadership structure that everyone can readily understand. Some confusion remains at the periphery and it may prove helpful to restate to the whole staff each post holder's responsibilities, particularly with respect to the pastoral care of students.

A further recommendation was for the school:

5. In consultation with the company, to investigate the reasons behind the discrepancies in the ways in which its leadership is perceived by parents and others.

The group of parents we interviewed during the review were overwhelmingly appreciative of the school's efforts on behalf of their children. They particularly praised the quality of the teaching and the quality of the care the school provides.

According to this group, the way in which the school's leaders communicate with parents depends on the nature of the issue. They drew a distinction between matters concerning the welfare of individual children and more general issues of policy and practice. With the former, the school's responses are always immediate and helpful; the interests of the children are paramount. With the latter, the parents' view was that the leadership of the school tends to respond less readily. They interpret this reticence as reluctance to take parents into their confidence as stakeholders in the future direction of the school. They acknowledged that the situation is now improving and see the arrival of the new headteacher as presenting an ideal opportunity to re-frame their relationship with the school.

In March 2006 the Internal Review team recommended that:

6. British Schools of America should regard as very high priority the acquisition of enhanced accommodation for the school.

In spite of the difficulties experienced during the first few weeks, the teachers, parents and students we spoke to were very positive about the school's new building. Regret at the reduction in play and recreational space was far outweighed by appreciation of the exciting possibilities they saw presented by the substantial upgrade in facilities. The teachers were particularly keen to maximise the opportunities offered by having the primary and the secondary sections of the school on the same site.

Looking ahead

As a result of this review we have identified two key areas of the school's work on which we recommend it should concentrate during the next stage of its development.

First, we recommend that the school establish more effective ways of acting on the outcomes of its self – evaluative activities. Our view is that the school currently conducts self – evaluation efficiently but that the leadership team is less successful in translating the findings that emerge from self – evaluation into effective action to produce improvements in student learning.

Second, we gained the clear impression from our conversations with staff and parents that the school is now poised for a period of rapid development. Both groups believe that, to achieve it successfully, the school community needs to re – visit its essential goals and purposes and agree a distinctive vision for the future. Although expressed in a variety of ways and with differing emphases, there was general consensus that the school's distinctiveness should consist in a celebration of its British brand of excellent teaching, curriculum breadth and care for all aspects of student welfare.

Once articulated, the vision for the next stage should strongly influence all that the school seeks to do: in its publicity, its policies and procedures and in its recruitment and induction of staff. Those we met were confident that parents as a whole would supply significant support and advocacy for such a vision, and saw it as an essential early task for the new headteacher.

Conclusion

We are very grateful for the welcome we received in the school from members of the leadership team, the teachers, the administrative staff and the parents. We were given every kind of assistance to make our visit both professionally rewarding and personally enjoyable.

We have produced an independent snapshot of what we found in April 2008, which we hope will help the school community to determine its future direction and development. We are convinced that those we met have the ambition and the professional capacity to move the school significantly towards achieving the goals it sets itself.

Chris Taylor
Nina Siddall

April 2008