

Suite 22
West Lancashire Investment Centre
Maple View
White Moss Business Park
Skelmersdale
WN8 9TG

T 0300 123 1231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 01695 566934
Direct F 01695 729320
Direct email: gtunncliffe@cfbt.com



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Mr Alan Chambers
Headteacher
Blakewater College
Shadsworth Road
Blackburn
Lancashire
BB1 2HT

Dear Mr Chambers

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools: monitoring inspection of Blakewater College

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 9 December 2010, for the time you gave to our telephone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during the inspection. Please pass on my thanks to the staff and students, especially those with whom I met, to the principal of Tauheedhul Islam Girls School and the National Challenge Adviser.

Staffing changes since the college's inspection in November 2009 include the appointment of two deputy headteachers and a director of learning for mathematics. In March 2010, the college became part of a National Challenge Trust with Tauheedhul Islam Girls School as the principal partner. The director for the partnership divides her time between the schools. Other important changes are on the horizon. The college is due to be co-located with Crosshill Special School on a new site in 2012. Another local school is due to close at that time: transition planning has started in readiness for the students who will join Blakewater College, potentially doubling its size.

As a result of the inspection on 30 November and 1 December 2009, the college was asked to address the most important areas for improvement which are set out in the annex to this letter.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school has made satisfactory progress in making improvements and satisfactory progress in demonstrating a better capacity for sustained improvement.

The 2010 GCSE results show that the college has recaptured the significant ground lost in 2009 when only 11% of students attained five or more A* to C grades

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including English and mathematics. The figure rose to 26%. Students made satisfactory progress in English and mathematics. Attainment in several other subjects, including vocational courses, continues to be strong. Results from early GCSE entry in English and mathematics, coupled with rigorous tracking of students' attainment and progress and well-targeted intervention activities, point convincingly to a further rise in 2011, despite the cohort's low attainment on entry to the college. The profile of students' attainment on entry to the college is rising. The college's projections take this into account but there is a need to check that teaching and schemes of work adapt to students' changing academic needs and potential.

The headteacher had been in post for two months at the time of the college's inspection in 2009. Work started at that time has developed appropriately; for instance, periodic assessment is now a regular part of the college's work, providing a suitable management tool for senior and middle leaders to tackle underachievement and to target interventions, while giving information to parents and carers. Of central importance, however, is leaders' understanding of the need to build for sustainable improvement in the longer term. A principal focus, therefore, has rightly been the development of robust systems and structures. Roles and responsibilities are well understood and staff are held to account for their work. Line management is backed up by suitable monitoring activities by senior and middle level leaders. The rigour of this work is underpinning the college's increased capacity for improvement.

Monitoring of teaching is coupled with support where it is needed and thorough induction for new and inexperienced staff. Discussions with senior staff, following observations conducted jointly, demonstrated their accurate evaluation of the quality of teaching and insight into current strengths, weaknesses and inconsistencies. Strengths included good use of assessment criteria and probing questioning, and activities that involved and challenged all of the students. Relationships were generally good but, where planning and teaching did not take close account of students' different starting points and needs, the pace of learning was slower. Weak basic skills in literacy, speaking and numeracy hamper the ability of many students to express their thinking. The college has begun to help staff to support students' literacy skills across the curriculum but practice is inconsistent. Greater attention to modelling good communication and explicit development of students' literacy skills is required.

The Year 11 students interviewed were very positive about their college. They spoke of the enrichment and academic opportunities they have, the generous way staff support them, through after-school lessons for instance, and their ambitions. They were clear that firm management of behaviour had improved learning and teaching. Behaviour in lessons and around the site was always at least satisfactory during this inspection. The rate of fixed-term exclusion is high but lower this term than last autumn term. Attendance rose in 2009/10 and persistent absence fell, moving both proportions closer to national averages.

The college's specialist mathematics and computing status makes some contribution to its work. Vocational qualifications in information and communication technology add positively to students' achievement. Until recently, the mathematics department has not had the depth and strength to contribute to whole-college improvement and has, therefore, rightly focused on raising attainment within the subject. From January, full staffing coupled with clear-sighted leadership places the department in a much stronger position to influence wider improvement.

The effectiveness and impact of the support provided by the National Challenge Trust, the local authority and others working with the college are good. The Trust's governing body has strengthened strategic leadership through effective committees, including 'monitoring and standards', and its involvement in the raising attainment plan. The partnership is effectively managed. The local authority has given valuable support on various fronts including that to senior staff, for subjects, on special educational needs and through various agencies to help vulnerable students.

I hope that you have found the inspection helpful in promoting improvement in your school. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Jane Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in November 2009

- Raise attainment, particularly in mathematics, so that the proportion of students gaining five GCSE grades A* to C including English and mathematics increases significantly by:
 - embedding and refining newly established systems to track the progress of all students and monitor their attainment
 - increasing the proportion of good or better teaching
 - encouraging students to become more actively involved in their own learning and to assess their own performance
 - building on curriculum improvements in Years 7 and 8 which equip students with the skills to learn effectively
 - ensuring all curriculum subjects are contributing to the development of students' literacy and numeracy skills.
- Improve attendance by:
 - continuing to implement robust strategies to follow up all pupil absences further strengthening the links with parents and carers, feeder schools and outside agencies to reduce the percentage of students who are persistently absent.