

Bicester Community College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	123233
Local Authority	Oxfordshire
Inspection number	359400
Inspection dates	20–21 October 2010
Reporting inspector	Janet Mercer

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1094
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	187
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Roger Dyson
Headteacher	Jason Clarke
Date of previous school inspection	21 October 2010
School address	Queen's Avenue Bicester, Oxfordshire OX26 2NS
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four additional inspectors. Inspectors observed 40 lessons with 40 different teachers and held meetings with groups of students, governors and staff. They observed the school's work, and looked at the school's self-evaluation and development plan, records of observations of teaching and learning, the school's analysis of students' achievement, lesson plans and schemes of work. They also took account of the responses on 294 parental questionnaires, as well as 153 questionnaires from students and 74 from school staff.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at a number of key areas.

- The reasons for the recent improvements in students' achievement, and the extent to which the school has addressed previous underachievement by middle and higher ability students.
- The impact of the actions taken to improve teaching and learning and how well teachers meet the needs of all students, including the middle ability group and the more able.
- How well leaders and managers at all levels are driving improvements so that recent improvements will be sustained.
- How well the sixth form provision meets the needs of all students, including sufficient stretch and challenge for higher ability students.

Information about the school

Bicester Community College is one of two secondary schools serving the market town of Bicester. The school is an average-sized secondary school. Students are drawn from across the town and surrounding villages. The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups is well below average, and a very small number of students speak English as an additional language. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is slightly above the national average, but the proportion with a statement of special educational needs is below average. The range of needs includes moderate learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, and behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is broadly average.

The school has had specialist status as a technology college since 1998 and currently holds the Healthy Schools award, Sportsmark, Artsmark Gold and the International School award. The school provides Diploma and other vocational courses in partnership with the East Oxford 14-19 Consortium. The current principal has been in post since April 2010.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?**3****The school's capacity for sustained improvement****3**

Main findings

Bicester Community College provides a satisfactory standard of education, and good care and support. Students' levels of attainment when they join the school are around average, but in recent years their attainment in GCSE examinations has been below the national average. A concerted effort to improve performance in 2010, with a particular focus on English and mathematics, has resulted in the school attaining its best ever GCSE results. The proportion of students achieving five or more A* to C grades at GCSE including English and mathematics improved markedly and was just above the national average. However, the school has rightly identified that too few students achieved the higher grades and a considerable proportion of middle and higher ability students did not achieve their target grades. This was a weakness at the last inspection and remains a priority for further improvement in the school's development plan.

Teaching is satisfactory. However, inspectors observed examples of good, and some outstanding, practice, but also a small amount where it was inadequate. The teaching in most sixth form lessons was good. Where lessons are effectively planned to take account of their different interests and abilities, students participate well and make good progress. However, in too many lessons, teachers do not make effective use of assessment information to plan activities to match the varied abilities in the class. Lesson plans are often no more than a list of activities, and do not identify well-structured opportunities to develop students' knowledge, understanding and skills. More able students are not sufficiently challenged in lessons to stretch their knowledge and understanding and help them reach higher grades. Many students are attentive, work hard in lessons and are keen to do well, but progress is too often hindered by the disruptive behaviour of a small minority of students.

The care and support provided for the most vulnerable students and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities is a particular strength. Good partnership working helps the school to provide well-targeted, individual support for these students.

The school has experienced considerable change in the past year, with a new principal and a restructured senior and middle leadership team. Senior leaders and governors share a clear vision for the future of the school. They are determined to secure the necessary improvements in the quality of teaching and learning and students' achievement and are implementing the necessary changes to achieve these goals. There is an increasing focus on ensuring that all students attain the highest levels of which they are capable. The school's self-evaluation is largely accurate and senior leaders and governors have a good understanding of the relative strengths and weaknesses in the school's performance. The school's own priorities for improvement match closely with those identified by inspectors.

The principal is rightly ensuring that all staff are accountable for the quality of their work and outcomes for students, and many middle leaders are already taking on new

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challenges with relish. Teachers and support staff are strongly committed to doing the best for the students, although many remain uncertain about the speed and impact of recent changes. The school demonstrates satisfactory capacity to build on its recent improvements. Some staff have not had sufficient time and training to help them adapt to, and feel confident in, their new roles and responsibilities, and in implementing revised working practices. Recent changes in the school represent a significant and rapid change of culture for many staff, students and parents and carers, which has led to a sense of uncertainty and anxiety for many, reflected in their responses to the inspection questionnaires. Leaders are beginning to encourage more sharing of good practice seen within the school and in other local schools to support improvements in teaching and learning, but this has yet to show sufficient impact.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning so that, within the next 12 months, at least 75% of lessons secure good or better progress and raise achievement, by:
 - ensuring that teachers make more effective use of detailed assessment information to align teaching and learning more closely to students' individual needs and abilities, especially in stretching and challenging the middle- and higher-ability students, and in monitoring their progress
 - supporting all teachers to develop their skills in managing incidents of disruptive behaviour effectively in lessons
 - ensuring that lesson planning focuses more effectively on learning and the development of knowledge, understanding and skills, rather than on activities, so that the purpose of the lesson is clear to students
 - fully developing strategies to share the good and outstanding teaching practice seen in the school, as well as sharing best practice available in local outstanding schools.
- Train and support middle leaders to develop their skills and confidence in taking on new roles and responsibilities to secure improvements in all areas of the school.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils**3**

While GCSE results improved overall in 2010, considerable variations remain between subjects. Marked improvements in English, mathematics and science over the past year have raised attainment in these subjects to the national averages. Results in music and physical education have been above average in the last two years. However, results did not improve equally well in all subjects and remain well below average in several design and technology subjects and in two of the three modern foreign languages offered. Pass rates on vocational courses are high.

Progress in lessons is satisfactory. When teachers' expectations are high and students have opportunities to work independently and take greater responsibility for their own learning, progress is good and, occasionally, outstanding. Relationships between teachers and students are good. Although many students concentrate well, progress is often slowed when teachers have to deal with the disruptive behaviour of a few students. More able

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students are not sufficiently challenged in lessons. Consequently, standards of work are not as high as they could be and too few attain higher grades.

Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities make good progress and achieve well, as a result of the very precise diagnosis of their needs and well-tailored individual support in lessons and in individual or small group sessions. The small number of students who speak English as an additional language also achieve well.

While the large majority of students say they enjoy school, a significant minority do not. Many enjoy the wide range of extra-curricular activities, especially in sports and the arts, but students express clear dissatisfaction about the disruption caused by the poor behaviour in lessons of a small minority. Many feel that behaviour is not managed consistently well by all teachers and that the quality of teaching varies between and within subjects.

Most students say they feel safe in school and know to whom to go if they have any concerns about safety or bullying. However, students who spoke to inspectors said they were aware of incidents of bullying taking place. A few parents and carers also raised these concerns. Actions taken in the first few weeks of this academic year, where bullying has been reported, are reducing the number of repeated incidents by the same students.

The promotion of healthy lifestyles is satisfactory. The school café offers a good range of healthy options, and important health-related topics are covered in the curriculum. Despite this, and good levels of participation in sports activities, only just over half the students and less than two thirds of the parents and carers who responded to questionnaires felt the school helped students to stay healthy.

Some groups of students make very good contributions to the school and local community, for example through the school council, the sixth form leadership group and participation in local community events. However, opportunities for such involvement are not consistently well developed for all students. Strong international links enable students to develop a good understanding of how different societies live and work. Students' understanding of respect for others, fairness and right and wrong is well developed through assemblies and tutorials.

Most students in Year 11 progress to further education, training or employment, but the school does not routinely analyse this destination data. The proportion of sixth form students progressing to higher education remains low. Students on vocational courses develop good work-related skills, but the school has not evaluated the benefits of work experience for Year 11 students. Attendance rates are at the national average. Persistent absence rates were above average in 2008/09 but the school has not analysed rates of persistent absence last year to evaluate the impact of strategies to reduce this.

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These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	3
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment ¹	3
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	3
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	2
The extent to which pupils feel safe	3
Pupils' behaviour	3
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	3
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	3
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attendance ¹	3
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low

How effective is the provision?

In the best lessons, teachers plan carefully to involve all students actively in their learning. Students value and enjoy opportunities to think for themselves, working independently and constructively in groups. Imaginative planning makes the lesson fun as well as challenging, such as in a geography lesson where students had to respond as geologists to frequent updates on a volcanic eruption. However, good planning is not a routine feature of all lessons. Many lesson plans do not identify clearly what students are learning, and the purpose of lessons is not always clear. Teachers do not always make effective use of the widely available assessment information to plan learning for different abilities. Students usually know their targets but not necessarily how to reach them. Inspectors saw few examples of marking which provided helpful and explicit guidance on how to improve. In the better lessons, teachers assess individuals' learning well through good use of targeted questioning but such checking of learning and understanding during lessons is not consistent. The school has introduced half-termly assessment points to monitor students' progress more closely, so that prompt action can be taken to rectify any underachievement and parents and carers kept better informed.

The curriculum is well matched to students' different needs and interests. Strong partnership arrangements with local schools and the further education college enable students to benefit from a good range of vocational options in Years 10 and 11, including courses in hairdressing, sport and leisure and engineering. The school is currently

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reviewing its curriculum to ensure that all students are taking the most appropriate options, not only a larger number of qualifications. Managers acknowledge that changes to provision for gifted and talented students this year were not as well managed and communicated to students and parents and carers as they should have been. While the school's specialist status in technology has contributed to the increase in provision of information and communication technology (ICT) courses and increasing use of digital technology in other subjects, its influence in other aspects of the school's work is less apparent.

Students value the good care and support they receive from school staff. Very careful assessment of individual learning needs and well-targeted support has improved attendance and achievement for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The restructuring of support staff through the Access team has enabled students requiring support to be provided with a clear central point, although it is too early to see the full impact of these changes. Good links with local primary schools, including visits and taster days, help students to settle in to school quickly. However, students in Years 9 and 11 have not always received comprehensive and impartial advice on their choice of options. Plans are already in place to improve these arrangements and the timetabling of courses for next year.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	3
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	3
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	2
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	2

How effective are leadership and management?

Leaders and managers have been effective in raising standards in the school in 2010, but recognise that there are still areas of underachievement, where further improvement is needed. Governors are very committed to the school, and are fully supportive of the new principal and leadership team and the changes being made. Appropriate actions are being taken to secure further improvement. For example, very detailed subject reviews, conducted with subject leaders, senior leaders and governors, are supporting detailed and specific action planning for improvement in each subject.

The school pays close attention to safeguarding and records relating to staff recruitment checks are excellent. Staff and governors have received appropriate training and procedures are well understood. The school is currently updating policies to reflect new developments in the school and to ensure greater consistency in the management of students' behaviour by all staff.

Strategies to promote community cohesion are in place, with particular strengths in the development of international links. However, the school recognises that there has not been sufficient attention given to ensuring that students develop a good understanding of

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ethnic, religious and socio-economic differences within the United Kingdom. The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. The school has appropriate policies in place and monitors the performance of different groups of students, but inspectors saw few examples of diversity being actively promoted through the curriculum.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	3
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	3
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	3
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	3
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	3
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	3
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	3
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	3

Sixth form

Achievement is satisfactory overall with high pass rates in A-level and vocational examinations, although too few students achieve the higher grades. The school has identified that a significant minority did not achieve their target grades. As at Key Stage 4, results are inconsistent between subjects.

Inspectors observed mostly good teaching in sixth form lessons, the best of which was well focused on meeting individual needs and supporting good progress. Students made most progress where they had opportunities to work on extended tasks, often in groups, so that they could work independently and take responsibility for their own learning. However, in many lessons, assessment was not sufficiently closely linked to improvement or how to achieve higher grades.

Students choose from a good range of A-level subjects and vocational courses. They value the good pastoral care they receive from tutors, but academic guidance has not focused sufficiently on promoting higher levels of attainment. Initial advice and guidance have not always been effective in ensuring students enrolled on to the most appropriate courses and too many do not continue their studies into Year 13.

The recently appointed head of sixth form has a very clear grasp of the priorities for improvement and students understand and appreciate her relentless drive for improvement. Plans are in place to improve advice and guidance for students progressing

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to the sixth form and students' progress towards their targets is being monitored more effectively, though it is too early to see the full impact of this in raising achievement.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	3
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	3
The quality of provision in the sixth form	3
Leadership and management of the sixth form	3

Views of parents and carers

Inspectors received questionnaires from the parents and carers of over one quarter of the students registered at the school, representing a much higher proportion of responses than usually seen in secondary schools. However, the proportion of positive responses was noticeably lower than usually found. Most parents and carers agreed that the school kept their child safe, but only half were confident that unacceptable behaviour was dealt with effectively. Around two thirds stated that teaching was good, but their comments reflected their concerns about the variation in the quality of teaching across the school. Almost one third who replied did not feel that they had sufficient information about their child's progress. A significant minority of parents and carers felt that communications with the school could be improved, with a number of parents and carers particularly concerned over poor communication about the curriculum and timetable changes this year. The very mixed picture on the effectiveness of leadership and management in the school reflects the period of very significant change and current uncertainties about new initiatives. However, several parents and carers explicitly expressed the view that these changes are needed and would be beneficial to the school in the longer term.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Bicester Community College to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school.

The inspection team received 294 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 1,094 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	45	15	184	63	38	13	20	7
The school keeps my child safe	40	14	214	73	25	9	6	2
My school informs me about my child's progress	32	11	154	52	69	23	17	6
My child is making enough progress at this school	36	12	172	59	39	13	10	3
The teaching is good at this school	28	10	172	59	36	12	13	4
The school helps me to support my child's learning	19	6	133	45	96	33	15	5
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	22	7	153	52	77	26	12	4
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	22	7	150	51	53	18	20	7
The school meets my child's particular needs	31	11	165	56	50	17	17	6
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	26	9	123	42	64	22	31	11
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	20	7	119	40	65	22	39	13
The school is led and managed effectively	23	8	100	34	80	27	45	15
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	38	13	154	52	45	15	23	8

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools

	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
Type of school	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	58	36	4	2
Primary schools	8	43	40	9
Secondary schools	10	35	42	13
Sixth forms	13	39	45	3
Special schools	33	42	20	4
Pupil referral units	18	40	29	12
All schools	11	42	38	9

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2009 to 31 March 2010 and are the most recently published data available (see www.ofsted.gov.uk). Please note that the sample of schools inspected during the autumn and spring terms 2009/10 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100. Secondary school figures include those that have sixth forms, and sixth form figures include only the data specifically for sixth form inspection judgements.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement.■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils.■ The quality of teaching.■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships.■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



22 October 2010

Dear Students

Inspection of Bicester Community College, Bicester, OX26 2NS

On behalf of the inspectors who visited your school recently, I would like to thank you for making us so welcome and helping us with the inspection. We enjoyed meeting and talking to you in your lessons and around the school. We have taken your views and those of your parents/carers and school staff into account in arriving at our judgement that your school, including the sixth form, is satisfactory.

The GCSE examination results improved significantly in 2010 and are now similar to the national averages, but the school is aware that too many of you do not attain the higher grades of which you are capable or reach your target grades. In the sixth form, pass rates are high in A-level and vocational examinations, but the proportion of students who reach the higher grades is low.

Inspectors judge teaching to be satisfactory overall, but note that its quality in lessons is too variable. When lessons are well planned to meet your different interests and abilities, you enjoy your learning and make good progress. However, too often lessons do not meet everyone's needs and not everyone makes as much progress as they could. Sometimes, the poor behaviour of a few students disrupts learning for everyone and not all teachers manage this well.

The new principal and staff are all very determined to build on the improvements made last year to ensure that you all attain the best results you can. We have asked the school to focus on:

- improving teaching and learning so that lessons are well planned to meet everyone's interests and different abilities, especially the middle- and higher-ability students, and to help you all to reach your target grades
- ensuring that any disruptive behaviour is dealt with well, so that everyone can make good progress in lessons. You can all help with this by participating well in lesson activities and behaving well in lessons and with each other around the school
- improving communications with you and your parents and carers about changes in the school so that everyone understands the reasons for these, and how they are going to help bring about further improvements.

Yours sincerely

Janet Mercer

Her Majesty's Inspector

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