

St John Rigby Sixth Form College

Focused monitoring visit report

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Focused Monitoring Visit: Main Findings

Context and focus of visit

St John Rigby Sixth Form College is a Roman Catholic college situated four miles to the west of Wigan. The college offers provision from entry level to advanced level. Almost all students are aged 16 to 18 and the majority study at advanced level. Courses are offered in 10 subject areas, with most enrolments in science and mathematics, and in arts, media and publishing. There are slightly more females than males and nearly all students are from a White British background.

Wigan has a higher number of people without qualifications than the England and Wales average and fewer people are qualified to degree level. In 2010, the achievement rate for five or more GCSE grades at A* to C including English and mathematics was 56% compared to a national average of 55.2%.

The college was last inspected in October 2009 when it was judged to be satisfactory overall with satisfactory capacity to improve. Outcomes for students, quality of provision and leadership and management were all graded satisfactory. Two subject areas were inspected: science and mathematics, and arts, media and publishing. Both were judged to be satisfactory. This monitoring visit focused on the recommendations for improvement made at the previous inspection.

Themes

Self-assessment and improvement planning

How much progress has been made in embedding the quality assurance system to eradicate underperformance and ensure more consistent achievement across all subjects? **Reasonable progress**

The arrangements for using data for reporting on and monitoring students' performance that were introduced just prior to the last inspection have been enhanced significantly over the last two years. Twice a year, very detailed and prompt reports on attainment and progress at subject and individual student level are presented to the Principal and other senior managers. The analysis and evaluation of these data have been very effective in setting more challenging targets for improvement and in increasing the degree of accountability at all levels. Managers and teachers now have access to accurate data and benchmarking information to help them to make rigorous judgements about the quality of the provision. As a result managers and teachers have a much better understanding of the actions needed to improve performance and these are set out clearly in course action plans. These plans are monitored through team meetings and annual updating of quality improvement plans. However, the impact of these arrangements in improving outcomes for students remains variable. Processes for self-assessment have been streamlined since the inspection and the college is reviewing the

arrangements for the current year to ensure that course reviews have a greater impact in improving outcomes for students in the remaining underperforming areas.

Managers have also focused on quality assuring and improving the arrangements for monitoring the performance of students. For example, the arrangements for personal tutoring have been reviewed and have changed significantly. The majority of teachers are now personal tutors for groups of students they teach which means they have a better understanding of the progress they are making. Arrangements for monitoring their performance have also been strengthened and are quality assured by managers to ensure that teachers follow procedures carefully. Senior managers use a range of effective strategies to check the performance of students through informal discussions in social areas and by sampling their files.

What progress has been made in ensuring that key aspects of provision, including subject-specific support and enrichment, are evaluated rigorously?

Reasonable progress

Since the inspection the college has strengthened the focus on, and the arrangements for, evaluating cross-college services, and action taken to improve quality is swifter. For example, a more rigorous approach to identifying students' levels of literacy and numeracy when they join the college identified that a high proportion of students had lower levels of literacy than their main programme of study requires. In response to this managers have devised and are implementing a whole-college literacy strategy. Training has been provided for teachers on how to integrate the development of literacy into their teaching and the number of staff providing literacy support has increased. In addition AS-level students have an additional weekly 45-minute session for skills development.

Since the arrival of the new Principal in spring 2010, the college has reviewed and revised the quality of key cross-college support services. This has been effective in improving the efficiency of computing support to staff and students and of administration services.

Outcomes for learners

What progress has been made in improving outcomes for students, especially those on advanced-level courses?

Reasonable progress

The long course success rate has declined slightly since the last inspection but college data for 2010/11 indicate that the rate remains above average. At foundation level the high success rate evident at the previous inspection improved further in 2010/11 and is high. Success rates on intermediate-level courses have also improved and are very high. The proportion of grades A* to C at GCSE declined slightly in 2009/10 but college data indicate that the level recovered in 2010/11 and is now well above average, especially in English, mathematics and science.

At the previous inspection, advanced-level success rates were satisfactory overall. College data for 2010/11 indicate that the overall rate, although slightly declined, remains around the average for similar colleges. On A-level courses, success rates remain at the high national average for sixth-form colleges. Success rates on AS courses have declined since the previous inspection, but they remain broadly satisfactory. Much of the inconsistency across subjects has been remedied, but underperformance remains in a few key areas including biology and chemistry. The number of students achieving high grades at AS and A level has improved since the previous inspection, but is still too low in a range of subjects. Focused actions are in place to rectify the remaining underperformance and to improve the proportion of high grades. It is too soon to assess the full impact.

What progress has the college made in improving the progress students make in all subjects?

Reasonable progress

The progress that students make, as measured by value-added analysis, has improved since the last inspection. The scores for AS subjects indicate that students consistently achieve better than expected grades in several subjects, including visual and performing arts, and physical education. At A level the improvements are more modest. Students in English language and literature make consistently excellent progress compared to their starting points. In most other subjects students make satisfactory progress. However, in AS- and A-level biology and in chemistry students underachieve. The college is very aware of this and rigorous measures are in place to tackle the issue. Students on advanced vocational courses make excellent progress.

Quality of provision

How much progress has been made in ensuring that teachers use a range of strategies to provide sufficient stretch, support and challenge?

Reasonable progress

The senior management team has given a high priority to improving teaching and learning. The lesson observation system in place at the previous inspection has been refined further to provide a more objective view on the quality of teaching and learning. The team of observers has participated in training, and focused strategies, including an extensive programme of peer observation and the newly established teaching and learning group, are effective in ensuring the sharing of good practice.

Scrutiny of teaching and learning observation records reveals that teachers are using a much broader range of strategies than at the previous inspection and this is leading to improvements in students' outcomes. However, the extent to which all teachers challenge their students and raise their expectations to achieve their full potential remains an area for development in a number of subjects. Managers are

aware of this and are working with individuals and small groups of staff to improve their practice.

How much progress has been made in improving links and partnerships with employers to better inform vocational provision and to provide more opportunities for work placements?

Significant progress

The college has successfully developed a culture that supports managers and teachers in using links with employers to widen students' experience of the world of work. Entry-level students benefit significantly from work experience in a local garden centre that offers them the opportunity to work in a range of settings including catering, horticulture and retailing. Since the inspection the good arrangements for providing work experience for child-care students have been extended to others. The BTEC extended diploma in sport has been redesigned to ensure that the focus is on preparing students for employment. Students on health and social care courses have the opportunity to attend placements in a wide range of settings including doctors' surgeries, dental practices and care homes. On business and information technology courses the curriculum is enriched through visiting speakers and organising events such as fundraising for charity. New teachers for vocational areas are required to have recent industrial experience that they can use to ensure that the curriculum meets industry requirements.

Teachers, fully supported by the work-placement officer, are now provided with time to monitor the performance of their students on placement and to share good practice to extend the links with employers. The impact of this can be seen in the high progression from health and social care courses to related higher-education provision such as in nursing, social work and podiatry.

What progress has been made in improving careers advice for those students wishing to seek employment?

Significant progress

The programme of tutorials has undergone significant revision since the previous inspection and now includes a much stronger focus on providing careers advice for those students seeking employment after college, while maintaining the extensive support for applications to university. Students frequently attend assemblies and careers workshops throughout the year. Guest speakers and a wide range of employer representatives and business partners attend the college's annual careers and higher-education events to offer advice and inspiration to students. Close working with the college's Connexions adviser has secured a comprehensive programme of guidance for students, especially those on foundation and intermediate programmes. Other events include Year 12 and Year 13 non-university assemblies, job-seekers' workshops and one-to-one in-depth interviews with all students who are unclear about their next steps.

Leadership and management

How much progress has been made in developing the student involvement strategy to ensure that students are more effectively engaged in the decision-making process?

Reasonable progress

Immediately following the inspection the college reviewed its arrangements for involving students in decision-making processes. In consultation with students a learner involvement strategy was produced and an action plan has been implemented. The well-established arrangements for gathering learners' views through the student council have been enhanced through the election of tutorial representatives. The ideas, issues and concerns discussed by students in their tutor groups have been used to inform changes to the open learning centre, and plans are in place to involve them in the design of new teaching accommodation. Students are playing an increasingly active role in reviewing the quality of teaching, learning and support through focus groups and the annual learner voice conference. The outcomes of the latter have been influential in informing an agenda for change in the implementation of the student code of conduct, the organisation of one-to-one tutorials and the enrichment programme. In addition, students' views are discussed at departmental meetings and they inform self-assessment and quality improvement plans. The college uses a good range of strategies to ensure that students are informed of the actions taken in response to their views. These include feedback during tutorials, posters displaying what the college has done and a particularly effective method where members of the student council make presentations at assemblies.

What progress have the governors made in developing robust arrangements to enable them to support and monitor closely the college's improvement strategy and to ensure sufficient challenge to the college's leadership in order to drive forward improvements?

Significant progress

Governors and the Principal have reviewed and revised the college's aims and strategic objectives. The new objectives are appropriately focused on improving outcomes for students and securing the future of the college through effective collaboration with the community and sound financial management. Governors have carried out a robust and self-critical evaluation of their performance and are implementing plans to improve their effectiveness. They receive very good information on the performance of the college and have established very effective mechanisms for monitoring progress against the strategic objectives through a very detailed report from the Principal. They receive high-quality information on students' success in examinations very quickly. Governors have a very strong commitment to the college and its communities and the new chair of the corporation has a strong educational background. They use these skills and the reports they receive to provide high levels of challenge to senior managers. They have a very good

understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement in the college and have appropriate plans in place to increase their focus on monitoring poorly performing curriculum areas.

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