

Francis Combe Academy

Inspection report

Unique reference number	135876
Local authority	N/A
Inspection number	381944
Inspection dates	20–21 June 2012
Lead inspector	David Jones HMI

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

Type of school	Academy
School category	Non-maintained
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	1067
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	96
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Gill Worgan
Headteacher	Leo Gilbert (Principal)
Date of previous school inspection	30 June 2011
School address	Horseshoe Lane Garston Watford WD25 7HW
Telephone number	01923 672964
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Introduction

Inspection team

David Jones	Her Majesty's Inspector
Michael Sheridan	Her Majesty's Inspector
Sa'ad Khaldi	Additional Inspector
Joan Beale	Additional Inspector

This inspection was carried out with two days' notice. Inspectors conducted 57 lesson observations, including 10 joint observations with members of the senior management team. Inspectors were able to see 57 of the 75 teachers on the staff teach; a total of 27.5 hours was spent directly observing teaching. All staff were offered professional feedback.

Meetings were held with groups of students, governors and nominated staff. Informal discussions with many students took place throughout the inspection. The inspection team took account of the responses to the online questionnaire (Parent View) in planning the inspection. Inspectors looked at a range of documents provided by senior managers, the Principal's reports to the governing body, the minutes of the sponsor's meetings, the minutes of the governing body meetings, and the academy's most recent self-evaluation. Inspectors scrutinised the 81 parental questionnaires, a lower than average return, and also evaluated the pupil and staff questionnaires.

Information about the school

Francis Combe Academy was established in 2009, and benefits significantly from sponsorship by West Hertfordshire College, an outstanding Further Education provider. The current Principal took office in January 2011. The academy is larger than the average secondary school. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is above the national average and rising. The proportion of students from minority ethnic heritages is above the national figure and so is the proportion who speak English as an additional language.

The proportion of disabled students and those with special educational needs being supported by school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is above the national average. There are a small number of children who are looked after by the local authority. The academy hosts the local authority specialist provision for students with a specific learning difficulty (dyslexia). Academic outcomes are above the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for attainment and progress. Staff turnover has been significant since the academy opened and 16 new appointments have been confirmed for September 2012. The academy employs staff from the Teach First programme.

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	3
Achievement of pupils	3
Quality of teaching	3
Behaviour and safety of pupils	3
Leadership and management	3

Key findings

- This is a satisfactory school. It is not yet good because although attainment is rising, variations in the students' rates of progress remain in the main school where teaching and behaviour management are not consistently good. Sixth form provision is good; effective teaching ensures that students make good progress. Schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory may receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.
- Achievement is satisfactory with some groups of students making good progress. Disabled students' progress and those with special educational needs, including those who attend the specialist dyslexia provision, has improved and is satisfactory. Attainment at the end of Year 11 is below average but has risen since the academy opened. The proportion of students securing five higher grade passes including English and mathematics rose by 18% in 2011. Early results for 2012, show stronger outcomes in mathematics and science than previously.
- Teaching is satisfactory; six out of every ten lessons were good or better, a figure that matches the Principal's most recent analysis of the quality of teaching. However, just over a third of teaching seen was satisfactory and three lessons were inadequate.
- Students' behaviour and safety are satisfactory. Students have responded well to the new buildings, and the academy provides a calm and friendly environment. However, where teaching is weak, disengagement can lead to disturbance. Attendance is average, having improved markedly in the last year.
- Leadership and management are satisfactory. Improvements secured in the quality of teaching are satisfactory and so is performance management. The governing body has become an effective 'critical friend'. Good provision in the sixth form is a notable achievement. The effective curriculum and the Academy Challenge intervention programme have had a positive impact on attainment,

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achievement and attendance. However, for the academy to be judged as good, further work is required to secure good teaching and behaviour. The academy's capacity to improve is good.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise standards and improve achievement by providing students with a high proportion of good teaching each day by:
 - making use of the best practice in each faculty area to model effective questioning and behaviour management,
 - enhancing the pace and challenge provided where teaching is currently only satisfactory,
 - ensuring tasks are matched closely to students' learning needs.
- Consolidate the challenge provided within the academy intervention programmes by:
 - promoting high expectations of behaviour
 - using the behaviour management information available to target the small number of students whose behaviour does not meet expectations.

Main report

Achievement of pupils

Overall achievement is satisfactory and has improved significantly since the academy opened. The progress made by girls and higher-attaining students is just above average although the performance of other groups varies across the academy and between subjects. In 2011, the progress made by disabled students and those with special educational needs was inadequate. However, provision has been reorganised and effective intervention strategies developed with the support of the sponsor college. As a result, the academy's robust assessment database shows these students are now making satisfactory and in some cases good progress.

In 2011, 49% of students secured five higher grade GCSE passes including English and mathematics. This 18% rise is the result of an effective intervention programme. During this inspection, students made good or better progress in just over 60% of lessons. The inspection team scrutinised the students' books during lessons and cross-referenced the standard of work seen with the grades recorded in the academy assessment database, finding the information to be robust. Inspectors heard students read in a number of classes in Years 7 to 10 and noted that many lacked confidence in their speaking skills.

Completed examination coursework and the results of the GCSE winter entry make it clear that standards in English, mathematics, science and religious education are likely to be above that recorded in 2011. Similarly, the proportion of students securing vocational qualifications in computer studies, art, business, performing arts and child

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care have also risen. Significant numbers of students, who began their GCSE courses in English and mathematics at the start of their Year 9 studies, took these examinations just before this inspection; these results will be available in August 2012. More than three-quarters of parents and carers who responded to the inspection questionnaire felt their children made good progress.

Achievement in the sixth form is now good; students make good progress in lessons, particularly at 'A' level.

Quality of teaching

The quality of teaching varies between and within all faculties. Good teaching makes effective use of questioning to prompt the students' attention and drive forward learning. In the most successful lessons, teachers sustain a good pace and use imaginative activities that are varied and challenging to engage students at their different starting points. In good or better lessons, effective strategies to enhance subject-based literacy focus on reading and writing accurate topic-specific sentences. In these effective lessons, the students' attitudes and behaviour contribute positively to the rising standards and rate of progress. Effective lessons draw strong social, moral and cultural connections that help engage the students' attention, notably in science, art and textiles. Disabled students and those with special educational needs are well supported where teaching is good and make good progress. The Academy Challenge programme provides strong inclusive coaching and as a result of these effective intervention strategies these students now make satisfactory or in some instances, good progress.

In the most successful lessons, teachers use questions extremely skilfully to extend the students' answers and to prompt them to think and explain their ideas. Subject vocabulary is emphasised and reinforced with the use of specialised terms. In an outstanding Year 7 literacy lesson, conducted with a lower ability set, the students' investigation of the language used in Greek myths and legends would have been a credit to older students. These investigations were introduced by a student-led question and answer session and completed by students reading their own written conclusions aloud to the class. Similarly, in an outstanding Year 9 science lesson, the precision of the teacher's questioning and the very effective use of individual whiteboards was consistently focused on extending the students' ability to speak and write coherent, factually accurate, science sentences. These students made rapid progress. More than three quarters of parents and carers offered positive comment on the quality of teaching.

Where teaching was ineffective, the pace or challenge of the lesson was often inappropriate. In some lessons, teachers talked too much and failed to provide meaningful opportunities for the students to learn. As a result, individuals or groups of students found the work too easy and disengagement was too often the prelude to disruption.

Teaching seen in the sixth form was good or better on almost every occasion and

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students made good progress because of the challenging discussion instigated by staff.

Throughout the academy, effective lessons used a combination of good questioning and the academy's behaviour management strategies; less successful lessons failed to manage this critical combination appropriately.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Behaviour is satisfactory. Attendance has improved significantly, rising by 1.3% in a year, and is in line with the national average. This improvement is the result of the rigorous monitoring of attendance, clear systems and protocols, and improved communication routes with parents and carers of students who are poor attenders. Punctuality to school is good and students move around the site promptly and often in easy social groups. These all reflect the students' positive attitudes to learning, particularly where teaching is good or better. Staff supervision is low key but effective.

Three quarters of parents who responded to the inspection questionnaire felt that behaviour was good. However, students and staff who completed questionnaires expressed concerns about behaviour. In contrast, the students interviewed informally, as inspectors moved around the academy, were very positive about behaviour and the absence of bullying; improvements they often linked to the new corridors, toilets and walkways. A high proportion of the parents and carers, students and staff who responded to the inspection questionnaires were positive about the students' safety.

The inspection team interviewed groups of students chosen by HMI and the comments received from the more vulnerable students were enlightening:

- 'bullying is rare' and 'emotional support is often brilliant'
- 'the new toilets are good – much safer and more hygienic'
- 'behaviour is better – we have more opportunities and they have employed better teachers'.

In a small number of lessons, boredom, inappropriate behaviour and ineffective behaviour management were an unhappy combination.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are satisfactory although much has been achieved since the academy opened. The senior team have driven improvement and sought to embed ambition. The academy's self-evaluation is realistic and well-matched to the current inspection framework. An effective range of coaching and mentoring programmes has been established for newly qualified teachers. The curriculum is good; changes quickly introduced since the academy opened have helped to raise attainment. The curriculum provides access to an appropriate range of vocational and GCSE examinations and is effectively linked to the Academy Challenge inclusion/

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intervention programme so that equality of opportunity is good. The improvements secured in science, religious education, design and textiles provide effective spiritual, moral, social and cultural opportunities.

The senior leadership team and a number of other key staff worked alongside the inspection team in the joint evaluation of teaching; the views they expressed consistently matched the judgements given by HMI. The academy's monitoring of teaching is robust and, as a result, teaching has improved since the previous inspection. The formative comments provided as part of the leadership team's evaluations of teaching are clear and precise.

The governing body has been strengthened by the close working relationship with the sponsor. The impact of the support provided by the sponsor is clearly evident in the improvements secured in the provision for disabled students and those with special educational needs and in the effective sixth form provision. A number of parents and carers, staff and students noted the short lunch periods provided insufficient time to eat, enjoy a social contact and get some fresh air. The academy's arrangements for safeguarding students meet statutory requirements.

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

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	54	42	2	2
Primary schools	14	49	32	6
Secondary schools	20	39	34	7
Special schools	33	45	20	3
Pupil referral units	9	55	28	8
All schools	16	47	31	6

New school inspection arrangements have been introduced from 1 January 2012. This means that inspectors make judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September to 31 December 2011 and represent judgements that were made under the school inspection arrangements that were introduced on 1 September 2009. These data are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2010/11 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Primary schools include primary academy converters. Secondary schools include secondary academy converters, sponsor-led academies and city technology colleges. Special schools include special academy converters and non-maintained special schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning and development taking account of their attainment.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Attendance:	the regular attendance of pupils at school and in lessons, taking into account the school's efforts to encourage good attendance.
Behaviour:	how well pupils behave in lessons, with emphasis on their attitude to learning. Pupils' punctuality to lessons and their conduct around the school.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving based on its self-evaluation and what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Floor standards:	the national minimum expectation of attainment and progression measures.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the governors and 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:	inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school.
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.
Safety:	how safe pupils are in school, including in lessons; and their understanding of risks. Pupils' freedom from bullying and harassment. How well the school promotes safety, for example e-learning.

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 June 2012

Dear Students

Inspection of Francis Combe Academy, Watford WD25 7HW

It was a pleasure to meet so many of you when inspectors visited the academy recently. This was my second visit to Francis Combe Academy and I was very pleased to see the progress with the new accommodation and to hear your positive views about how it is helping you to learn and feel safe.

The inspection team found standards, achievement, behaviour and leadership to be satisfactory. We noted that some students lose concentration in less effective lessons and that sometimes their behaviour affects learning; these students need to be more mature. However, we were very pleased to hear the positive comments of so many students who went out of their way to speak to us. One young man summarised many of the comments we heard when he said: 'The school has better teachers - with more passion and heart - who are willing to help because they care.'

Inspectors were pleased to see the good sixth form provision, the rise in attendance and standards and the improvements in the curriculum.

I have asked the Principal to ensure that all teaching is effective, that tasks match your learning needs and that good behaviour is required from everybody.

Yours sincerely

David Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector

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