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Mr Graham Pennington
Principal
Sandwell College
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Dear Mr Pennington

Short inspection of Sandwell College

Following the short inspection on 15 and 16 November 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The inspection was the first short inspection carried out since the provider was judged to be good in May 2014.

This provider continues to be good.

Since the previous inspection, you, your senior colleagues and governors have maintained a high proportion of the strengths identified by inspectors and made very good progress to tackle the small number of recommendations made in the report.

You have been relentless in your efforts to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, which is now consistently good. Teachers increasingly take part in a range of carefully considered activities to improve their teaching and to share their skills and ideas. Learners place a high value on their teachers' knowledge and skills, as well as the feedback they receive on their theoretical and practical work. These improvements are critical in order to remedy the small amount of underperforming provision and increase the proportion of learners achieving high grades in relation to their starting points, which is currently too low.

You have focused intently on, and been successful in, improving the quality of GCSE English and mathematics provision at the college. This has led to an increase in the proportion of learners, most of whom have very low starting points, making good progress and achieving high grades in these subjects. However, although attendance has improved, it remains below the college target and you recognise that further steps are necessary to increase attendance at these lessons.

Most learners value the broad opportunities to develop their employability skills well through relevant work experience, work-related projects, events and competitions.

You have been proactive in developing appropriate employer links to provide learners with work experience that matches closely with their career ambitions. Additionally, managers have prioritised work-related units in vocational qualifications to ensure that learners have ample time to develop the skills and behaviours expected in their future job roles. You have improved the monitoring and reporting of work experience activities to senior leaders to ensure that all learners benefit from their work experience, and that they continue to record their experiences and skills developed in their logbooks.

You and the board of governors have taken effective steps to take over two local failing apprenticeship providers. In doing so, you have ensured that their apprentices were able to continue with their qualifications, even though this has had a limiting effect on improving apprenticeship outcomes. You have invested carefully in the apprenticeship infrastructure and ensured that there are sufficient resources and expertise for sustainable improvement and to develop specialist apprenticeship standards with the local health service, among others.

Safeguarding is effective.

Since the previous inspection, leaders and managers have developed further strong safeguarding policies and invested in additional safeguarding specialists to enhance the support for learners. As a result, there is a positive safeguarding culture that pervades the organisation, resulting in learners saying that they feel safe at the college.

Managers have developed highly effective partnerships with a range of local agencies, including the local authority, police, health services and interfaith organisations. As a result, college staff are kept very well informed about issues in the community and know whom to contact if they are concerned. Designated safeguarding officers act swiftly to support learners, tailoring support and providing them with referrals to relevant agencies where necessary.

Teachers make good use of recent events and topics in lessons to develop learners' understanding of the dangers of extremism in all of its forms, and how to keep themselves safe from the threat of radicalisation. For example, staff and learners practised college 'lockdown' procedures to ensure that they are well prepared in case of a terrorist attack.

Inspection findings

- Senior leaders have a clear understanding of the role they play in improving the life chances of people in the area. They have developed a curriculum that is designed to allow the many learners with low attainment aged 16 to 18 in the area to gain qualifications. College leaders provide a great deal of support for the learners from disadvantaged backgrounds who attend the college. This contributes to a high proportion of learners completing their course and progressing to a higher-level course in the college.
- College leaders have taken effective action to tackle the areas for improvement

identified by inspectors at the previous inspection and have continued to improve the college in the best interests of their learners. They also take effective action to tackle further weaknesses that they identify. For example, leaders tackled effectively the deterioration in the quality of provision in business studies, and outcomes for learners are now improving. A relentless focus on improving learners' English and mathematics skills has resulted in achievement rates in both GCSEs and functional skills rising to a high level. However, a small number of areas of weakness have not improved sufficiently or have not been concentrated on enough by managers, for example the progress level 3 learners make when taking into account their prior achievement.

- Governors demonstrate effective leadership when taking action to mitigate risks to secure high-quality resources and to develop a curriculum that meets the needs of the local area. Governors mostly have a good understanding of the outcomes for learners and the areas for improvement in the college. However, in a small number of cases, the reports they receive are not sufficiently detailed to provide them with insight into the performance of different groups of learners and to hold senior leaders fully to account for the improvements that need to be made.
- Leaders and managers have been effective in substantially improving the quality and achievement of English and mathematics qualifications across the college. As a result, learners and apprentices develop their English and mathematics skills well. Learners benefit from well-planned and interesting lessons where teachers continually check and support their learning. Most learners are aware of how to improve and the areas for which they need more support. Gaps in learners' skills are identified quickly and rectified accordingly. Teachers use innovative strategies and high-quality resources so that learners understand, step by step, how to improve their skills in mathematics and English, particularly those learners who have not attained a GCSE grade 4. Learners feel able to improve on their prior understanding.
- Teachers develop learners' independent study skills well. Consequently, the vast majority of learners achieve their goals in both English and mathematics as a result of their increased confidence in reviewing and improving their own work. However, the development of mathematical skills on level 3 study programmes is less well developed. In particular, for those learners who have achieved a GCSE mathematics A* to C (9 to 4), during vocational and A-level lessons, teachers do not support them to develop sufficiently well the theory of advanced mathematical methods, such as statistical analysis in A-level psychology lessons, so that they can confidently transfer and apply these skills in different subjects and their future job roles.
- Learners benefit from the feedback that they receive. Written feedback is particularly detailed and helps them to understand how to improve further and progress in the next steps in their learning. Teachers provide good verbal feedback to learners in practical lessons.
- As a result of teachers' skilful questioning and well-planned extension activities, learners develop practical skills quickly, with the most able learners demonstrating very high-level skills. For example, learners in a hairdressing

lesson used a range of techniques well to apply hair extensions. The most able learners progressed quickly from using clips and used micro-bonds to attach hair to a commercial standard.

- In a minority of theory sessions, work set for learners is not sufficiently tailored to challenge learners appropriately, in particular the most able. Consequently, in these lessons, as a result of all learners working at the same level, the most able learners are not able to make the progress of which they are capable.
- The proportion of learners achieving their qualifications has continued to increase and is now high. Achievement rates for learners studying substantial level 2 and level 3 courses have improved and are now around the national average. High-performing subjects include A-level government and politics, geography and English and AS-level accounting, law and biology. Highly performing vocational areas include health and social care, child care, engineering, sport and travel and tourism.
- While learners' achievement of high grades has improved in vocational areas, the progress of learners compared to their starting points is not consistently good and is too low in a minority of A-level subjects. Too few learners, particularly on level 3 courses, make the progress of which they are capable. A small minority of courses are not yet good enough, particularly at level 3.
- Leaders and managers have been relentless in improving the quality of English and mathematics. Consequently, achievement rates for GCSE mathematics and English A* to C (9 to 4) have improved rapidly and are now above the low national rate. Additionally, the progress of learners from their starting points in these subjects has also improved. The college's own data shows strong improvement in the progress of learners in these subjects compared to similar providers.
- The proportion of apprentices completing their qualifications in the time allocated has improved marginally and is slightly above the low national rate. The slower-than-expected progress is as a result of the acquisition of two local failing training providers. Managers have identified specific actions to ensure that the pace of apprenticeship improvements continues to increase.
- Leaders and managers have successfully improved the quality of work experience for all learners on study programmes. Consequently, the vast majority of learners now benefit from well-planned work experience, compared to a small minority at the time of the previous inspection. Work experience placements are particularly well matched to meet the individual needs of learners and their career ambitions. As a result, learners are confident and able to make good progress because they know what to expect in terms of their roles and responsibilities while at the work placement. The range of employers engaging in work experience is extensive and has significantly increased since the previous inspection. A high proportion of learners secure employment, take up apprenticeships and start their own business as a result of their work experience.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- managers and teachers monitor closely the progress of A-level and vocational learners in the small number of underperforming subjects, and act swiftly and effectively to ensure that learners achieve the grades of which they are capable, given their starting points
- managers improve the small minority of vocational subjects that are not yet good
- for learners who have achieved a GCSE grade 4 in mathematics and English, all teachers develop further these skills so that learners can use them confidently in their future careers
- leaders and managers continue to improve attendance in mathematics and English lessons
- governors receive sufficiently detailed reports to provide them with insight into the performance of different groups of learners and to hold senior leaders fully to account for the improvements that need to be made
- teachers share good practice and develop effective strategies in challenging all learners to achieve their best, given their starting points.

I am copying this letter to the Education and Skills Funding Agency. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Richard Deane
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Inspectors were assisted by the vice principal as nominee. They held meetings with a range of managers, teachers, learners and support staff. Inspectors carried out observations of teaching, learning and assessment, and conducted walk-through observations of courses to explore particular themes. They scrutinised learners' work and assessment records, and key documents relating to the provider's strategy and implementation plans, self-assessment and improvement plans, and safeguarding records. Inspectors considered the views of learners through discussions during learning sessions visited.