

Preston Support Centre
Ringway House
Ringway
Preston
Lancashire
PR1 3HQ

Direct Tel 0800 389 5686
Direct Fax 01772 565353/565299

www.ofsted.gov.uk



7 June 2005

Dr S Sissons
Headteacher
Dorcan Technology College
St Paul's Drive
Swindon
Wiltshire
SN3 5DA

Dear Dr Sissons

Schools Where the Pupils' Behaviour has been Identified as a Concern by Inspection: Monitoring Inspection of Dorcan Technology College

Introduction

Following my visit with Robert Ellis HMI to your school on 12 and 13 May, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was a first monitoring inspection as part of the programme of visits to schools where the pupils' behaviour has been identified as a concern by inspection.

This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, the chair of governors, nominated staff, the school council and representatives from the LEA. The inspectors observed 22 lessons, three registration sessions, an assembly and the pupils' movement and behaviour around the school.

Context

Dorcan Technology College has 1320 pupils on roll in the 11–16 age range, and has experienced considerable growth in recent years. The pupils are predominantly White British, with an increasing number of pupils who have English as an additional language. The proportion of the pupils who have special educational needs is broadly average. The proportion of the pupils eligible for free school meals remains below average and reflects an area with high employment. The pupils' attainment on entry to the school is below average overall, but rising gradually. The recruitment and retention of teachers remains problematic,

although the school has led successfully the Swindon School Centred Initial Teacher Training scheme for the past two years, and this has assisted recruitment in some subject areas. The school achieved the Healthy Schools Award in 2004 and Investors in People recognition in 2005. As a specialist technology college, the school has made effective use of information and communication technology (ICT) to support administration.

Achievement and standards

The pupils' standards of attainment on entry to the school have risen slowly in recent years, but remain below average. The girls generally have higher levels of attainment than the boys, which is in line with the national difference. The school's own analysis of achievement by gender shows some variation between subjects. In almost half the lessons observed the pupils' standards of attainment were below those expected for their ages. They made satisfactory or better progress in 18 of the 22 lessons, and the best progress overall was seen in the groups with higher attaining pupils in Years 10 and 11. The progress of too many pupils in Years 7, 8 and 9 was adversely affected by low levels of disruptive behaviour and poor attitudes to learning.

Personal development and well-being

The pupils' attitudes and behaviour were satisfactory or better in 16 of the 22 lessons; they were unsatisfactory in six and good in 11. Where good and very good teaching shaped the lessons, the pupils responded accordingly: they were respectful to the teacher, to fellow pupils, and handled resources with care. In those satisfactory and unsatisfactory lessons where the teachers' expectations were less precise, 'The Dorcan Way' classroom code was not implemented consistently. Cramped conditions in some classrooms and workshops hindered the pupils' levels of concentration, and graffiti on chairs, benches, tables and walls reflected a lack of care for the learning environment. Many pupils do not arrive at school expecting to study and to enjoy their education.

Around the school, at break-times and when moving between lessons, the pupils' conduct was generally acceptable, although incidents of careless and over-boisterous behaviour and pushing fellow pupils occurred. A minority of the pupils dropped litter gratuitously and shouted abuse at one another thoughtlessly; this was usually from a lack of awareness of others, rather than with malicious intent. The learning centre provides a welcoming and inclusive environment at the start and end of the school day, and during break-times; it is popular with the pupils, but noise levels sometimes hindered those pupils who wanted to read or study quietly. Behaviour in the two dining areas, which are usefully designated for junior and senior pupils, was generally acceptable, and the catering staff, encouraged by the school council, provide a valued service. In the playgrounds, the pupils respected each other's spaces and a generally harmonious atmosphere prevailed. A number of areas of the school are in a poor state of repair; this bleak

accommodation is not conducive to the promotion among the pupils of care for their environment, although the school has plans to make suitable improvements.

In the Year 7 assembly and the form tutor periods observed, while provision for the pupils' social and moral education was secure, provision for spiritual education was underdeveloped and there was no opportunity for personal reflection or prayer.

The pupils' attendance during the 2003–04 academic year was 92.3 per cent, just above the national figure for secondary schools. The pupils' attendance for the 2004–05 year to date is 91 per cent, and on the first day of the monitoring visit was 90.5 per cent. The school's systems for monitoring attendance and following up absence by the pupils are robust. Child protection procedures are in place and reviewed regularly.

Punctuality at the start of the school day is improving, although too many pupils arrived late to lessons without good reason and failed to apologise to their teachers. A number of groups of pupils, even when cajoled by staff, were slow to move to their next lesson.

In 2003–04 there were 318 fixed-term exclusions representing 921 days; three permanent exclusions; and 1060 in-school exclusions. The figures for 2004–05 to date are 178 fixed-term exclusions representing 472 days; four permanent exclusions; and 457 in-school exclusions. While still high, these figures reveal a pattern of significantly improved behaviour. The school has been effective in addressing the needs of the pupils who exhibit more extreme behaviours.

The school council has influenced changes at the school in a number of measurable ways, and is rightly proud of its achievements. The pupils cited their efforts to improve arrangements for eating and to secure better social facilities, as well as their major fund-raising events. The year councils have played an important part in ensuring that bullying, where it occurs, is not ignored, and that it is dealt with promptly by the staff. The pupils feel that the staff's vigilance and attention to detail throughout the school day have had a powerful impact on providing a safe environment for all pupils. The members of the school council were adept at identifying the constituent features of effective teaching and learning; their opinions on a number of issues are valued by the staff.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in December 2003:

- Ensure greater consistency in the management of student behaviour by providing additional teacher training and support - satisfactory progress.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching was satisfactory or better in 18 lessons. It was good in 11 and unsatisfactory or poor in four. The school is aware of the strengths and weaknesses in its teaching, and is providing appropriate support to staff to

eradicate unsatisfactory lessons and ensure a greater percentage of good and very good teaching. Many of the good lessons also included very good features.

Stimulating and effective teaching was rooted in the teachers' imaginative and thorough planning, positive relationships, challenging expectations and skilful orchestration of time. Tasks and materials were thoughtfully deployed to meet the needs of individual learners, and the teachers harnessed ICT with enterprise to stimulate the pupils. The teachers' passion for learning and excitement in sharing their subject knowledge with the pupils were evident in food technology, product design, history and mathematics. In a number of broadly satisfactory lessons, the overall tone was one of passive containment, with progress not as forthcoming as it needs to be. The elements of fun and excitement were potentially present, but did not bubble to the surface. Where teaching was unsatisfactory or poor, the teachers failed to enforce the basic code of conduct; chronic low-level chatter and poor concentration by the pupils were accepted as the norm by too many teachers.

The teachers' lesson plans clearly indicate opportunities for assessment. The staff handbook identifies strategies and procedures to assess the pupils' work, but these are not implemented consistently across and within subjects. The teachers have access to detailed information about the pupils' prior attainment; many teachers make effective use of this information to set challenging targets and to plan tasks that are well matched to the pupils' interests and prior attainment. The quality of marking is varied. Some books were regularly marked and the teachers provided useful advice as to how the pupils could improve or develop their work. In a few cases, clear reference was made to the learning objective or to examination grade criteria. However, in too many instances marking was cursory or missing altogether. In some lessons, the pupils were given appropriate success criteria and were encouraged to assess their own learning or the learning of others. Most pupils were aware of their personal targets but some were unsure about what they needed to do to achieve them.

Progress of which the pupils could be proud occurred when, taking a lead from the teachers' high expectations, they worked at pace and with diligence, and were keen to cover new skills and acquire fresh knowledge. They were proud to share their achievements with the teacher and with fellow pupils. However, too many of the pupils' exercise books were not well kept and many were covered in graffiti. Some pupils made good use of ICT to present their work, but standards of presentation were generally unsatisfactory and sometimes they were poor. Many pupils' achievements continue to be hampered by low levels of literacy. The pupils' link books, in which homework should be recorded, are generally poor, and reflect a lack of pride from the pupils and a lack of challenge and expectations from the staff.

The curriculum is well matched to the pupils' needs and interests, and the curriculum in Year 10 and 11 offers a good range of learning opportunities. Provision for the pupils who have special educational needs is appropriately planned and specialist support enables the pupils to make at least satisfactory, and often good progress in lessons. The unsatisfactory attitudes to study displayed by too many pupils in Year 11 do not provide a sound basis for these pupils' independent learning habits as they move into further education.

Leadership and management

The headteacher and senior leadership team have worked assiduously to marginalise the detrimental impact of those pupils who display the most challenging behaviours. Subject directors are providing sound and often good leadership of their curriculum areas. Learning managers and learning mentors provide a cohesive and effective team approach, with learning support assistants skilfully deployed to meet the needs of individual pupils. Pastoral teams provide good support for all pupils' health and welfare, and the pupils' achievement and needs are reviewed at meetings of the Strategic Panel, which often lead to the provision of appropriate additional support or intervention programmes. The pupils are clear about the system of rewards and sanctions, although it is not consistently implemented by the staff. The organisation of the school day is fit for purpose. The school begins each term with a Standards Day in order to reassert its values and expectations; this innovative practice has important potential if the school is to address the continuing undercurrent among many pupils of low-level disruption in classrooms.

The school has demonstrated sound capacity to improve. The headteacher's self-evaluation is well judged, but underestimates the urgency with which the issues around basic classroom practice need to be addressed.

External support

The LEA has provided good support, through consultants, training and advisory visits, with promoting improved behaviour and attendance, particularly in relation to the pupils with particularly challenging behaviour and chronic absence patterns. In the LEA's interventions, there has been a growing recognition of the priority of improving the quality of behaviour and attitudes in classrooms for the majority of the pupils. The school is involved with a number of external initiatives which have contributed meaningfully to gradual school improvement.

Main Judgements

The school has made satisfactory progress towards improving the pupils' behaviour. This visit has raised some concerns about the standard of education provided and the school's performance will be monitored.

Priorities for further improvement

- To improve the quality of teaching, with a particular focus on basic classroom practice.
- To continue to improve the pupils' attitudes to learning.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Education for Swindon.

Yours sincerely

ROY BLATCHFORD
HM Inspector of Schools