

22 November 2005

Mr L Harris
Headteacher
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Shadsworth Road
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Dear Mr Harris

FRESH START: MONITORING INSPECTION OF BLAKEWATER COLLEGE

Introduction

Following my visit with Joe Clarke AI to your school on 14 and 15 November 2005, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the college opened in April 2005.

This letter will be published on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the work of the college, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher and other staff, groups of students and a representative from the local authority (LA).

Context

Blakewater College opened in April 2005 following the closure of its predecessor, Queen's Park Technology College. The college is smaller than most secondary schools with 545 students aged between 11 and 16 years currently on roll, reflecting the gradual decline in numbers attending the predecessor school over a period of several years. Approximately 30% of the students are of minority ethnic background. The college is situated in an economically disadvantaged area, with 52% of students eligible for free school meals. Around 40% are identified as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including a high proportion with emotional and behavioural problems. The college experiences a high rate of student mobility.

Nine teachers who were employed in the predecessor school have remained as part of the 34 full time equivalent teaching staff now employed at the college. There is to

be an increase of three teachers in the spring term following recruitment for music, food technology and religious education teachers.

Refurbishment of areas of the college has taken place in recent months, including the reception area, corridors and classrooms, and the building of a new restaurant facility. The college has partnership links with Blackburn College and Training 2000. There are also links with a local Leading Edge secondary school for the sharing of staff expertise and development.

Achievement and standards

The majority of students are making at least satisfactory progress. Almost half are making good progress in improving basic skills and acquiring new knowledge and understanding. However, around a quarter of the students are not making enough progress because of weak teaching. Students of differing abilities and backgrounds, including those with learning difficulties and disabilities, achieve as well as other students.

Older students told inspectors how much better they are doing this year than in previous years. As yet, there are no national test results for students at the end of Year 9 to compare with schools nationally. GCSE results in 2005 were well below average but students had only attended the new college for a few weeks before taking the examinations. In some subjects, for example art and design, business, textiles and science, students achieved well and results were not far below the national average. Students taking sports studies and Urdu did particularly well and these results were above the national average.

Personal development and well-being

The majority of students say that they are happy to come to the college, and have commented on the improved discipline in lessons, enabling them to be more focused on their work. Behaviour in and around the building is mainly calm and orderly. Changes to the main corridor, along with the increased presence and vigilance of staff, have contributed to this improvement.

Where students are less supervised, for instance during lunch and break times, it is proving more difficult for the college to contain the minority whose behaviour is persistently challenging, and these can be particularly noisy and boisterous times.

There is still a minority of students in most year groups who find it difficult to meet the college's code of conduct regarding behaviour during lessons. Strategies such as the Year 8 behaviour project have been set up to remedy this, and the college intends to monitor and evaluate the impact of these measures throughout the year. The college's policy for behaviour and motivation is not consistently applied by all staff in order to give students a very clear picture of expectations and boundaries.

A number of students come into lessons with negative attitudes which hinder their learning, and this often creates a challenge for the teacher right from the start.

However, an increasing number display more positive attitudes to learning. They become fully absorbed in their lessons and listen intently to their teachers, so that a positive working atmosphere is created in the classroom, and students feel a sense of achievement and satisfaction in having completed a task to the best of their ability.

Attendance remains unsatisfactory, despite the college's best efforts to improve this. Attendance in the predecessor school was 82.4% in the spring term. Although Blakewater College data for the summer term increased to 87.1%, the rate so far in the autumn term is around 86%. However, these figures are affected by a significant number of students who are on the college admission register but have never attended, either because they have moved out of the area, have medical issues or are persistent truants or non-attenders. These students account for over 3% of attendance data so far this term. Attendance during the inspection visit was 83%, which remains unacceptably low.

Fixed-term exclusions reduced significantly between the spring and summer terms, and remain lower than at the time of the opening of the new college. The college's commitment to inclusion is evident in the way many students, who might otherwise have been excluded, remain in college for a one or two day 'internal exclusion' when they are expected to continue their work under the guidance of staff.

Students express positive opinions about the improvements in the college building, including refurbished classrooms, more attractive and colourful displays, and particularly the newly built restaurant facility. Many students are proud of their college and the staff, and look forward to future planned developments in the building.

Quality of provision

In just under half the lessons seen, teaching and learning were good. In these lessons, teachers set work that interested and motivated the students; good management skills ensured that discipline was maintained and little time was wasted establishing control. Expectations about what students could achieve were high. Lessons proceeded at a very brisk pace, with teachers chivvying and motivating students to try harder and achieve higher standards. In about a quarter of lessons seen, however, teachers were not able to settle students down to work quickly enough or to manage effectively poor behaviour. The college disciplinary code was rarely used to establish order with the result that in these lessons little new learning took place. In nearly every lesson seen, lesson plans were good, having a clear structure and with teachers sharing with students at the outset what it is they expected them to have learned by the end of the lesson. Teachers work hard to provide good role models for their students. They treat students with respect, which is generally but not always, reciprocated. Consequently relationships are usually positive and helpful in motivating students to want to learn. The college is beginning to gather and record accurate and relevant data from test and examination results. However, the use of data to help plan work to match the needs of individual students is not consistent among subjects.

The college curriculum is good. It is broad and balanced and all statutory requirements are met. In Years 10 and 11, subjects and courses meet the different needs and aptitudes of students extremely well. Good links have been developed with the local college, and work placements are available for a small number of students. Outside of lessons, a good range of clubs and activities, particularly in sport, helps support students' learning in lessons.

The college cares for and supports its students well. There are effective links with a range of local agencies involved in promoting students' health, safety and welfare. Careful attention is paid to health and safety, but risk assessments are not up to date in all areas. Pastoral support is strong and students commented on how much the teachers and other staff were always prepared to listen to them and give them time. However, systems to promote good behaviour and improve attendance have not been in place long enough to effect a significant improvement in these vital areas. Academic guidance and monitoring is satisfactory. The use of information about students' performance in tests and examinations is used to set targets for GCSE but students are not always clear enough what their targets are and what they must do to improve. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are looked after well. Provision for students who are particularly gifted or talented is being developed, with a view to early identification and extension.

Leadership and management

The headteacher and senior leadership team are committed to the improvement and further development of Blakewater College, and have clear roles and responsibilities allocated to them. Teaching and support staff are similarly determined to provide a high quality education and support to the students in their care.

The recently updated school improvement plan is strongly focused on the five key areas through which the college aims to improve the education offered to all students. It is written in a way which ensures that key priorities are clearly stated, identifying actions to be taken and evaluative criteria by which success can be measured.

Good systems are being established to monitor and evaluate the quality of education provided, and senior leaders are developing an accurate view of the college's strengths and weaknesses. The role of middle managers is being developed through relevant training and sharing of good practice. Teachers are regularly observed in their work and benefit from continuing professional development, support and training as appropriate to their needs. A learning and teaching policy is being developed to improve consistency across the college, and this is due to be fully implemented in the spring term. This is vital in order to focus on the qualities required to produce teaching which is consistently good or better, along with well motivated learners.

The college ethos is positive, with an air of optimism and excitement for the continuing challenges which lie ahead, indicating a good capacity for further improvement.

External support

The LA has provided effective support to the college through the regular involvement of subject consultants and a school improvement officer. The college also has a School Improvement Partner, as the LEA is a pilot borough for this initiative. The Fresh Start for the college was initiated as a joint agreement between the LEA and the DfES, and as such did not require a Raising Attainment Plan to be in place prior to opening. The requirement to set up a School Improvement Partnership Board has been met, and this group meets at least twice each term. The LEA and School Improvement Partner supported the college in writing its latest action plans for improvement, and these are of good quality.

Main Judgements


The college has made satisfactory overall progress since it opened in April 2005.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve the quality of teaching so that a higher proportion is good or better, and unsatisfactory teaching is eradicated
- Further improve pupils' behaviour and attitudes to learning
- Develop assessment systems and make effective use of data to measure progress and set targets, ensuring that these are shared with students and lead to improved achievement
- Improve attendance

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Education for Lifelong Learning in Blackburn.

Yours sincerely



Marguerite McCloy
H M Inspector