

Nord Anglia Inspections
Anglia House
Carrs Road
Cheadle
Stockport SK8 2LA

T 0161 491 4191
F 0161 491 9677

Ofsted helpline
08456 404045



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Mr L Harris
Headteacher
Blakewater College
Shadsworth Road
Blackburn
BB1 2HT

Dear Mr Harris,

FRESH START: MONITORING INSPECTION OF BLAKEWATER COLLEGE

Introduction

Following my visit with Christopher Griffin and Anthony Pearson, Additional Inspectors, to your college on 7 and 8 March 2006, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the second 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 college's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher and other staff, groups of students, the college's Improvement Partner, the chair of governors and a representative from the local authority (LA).

Context

The college, which opened just under a year ago, is smaller than most secondary schools with 545 students aged between 11 and 16 years on roll. The number has remained stable since the start of the academic year, although this masks the effect of some movement of students who start or leave during the year. The levels of social disadvantage in the local area continue to be reflected in the college's above average proportion of students eligible for free school meals. A higher than average number of students have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Around 30% of

students are from minority ethnic backgrounds. Staffing has remained stable since the last monitoring visit. Planned new appointments of teachers to music and food technology posts were made, although there remains a vacancy for a teacher of religious education.

Achievement and standards

A significant proportion of students enter the college with standards which are well below average, especially in literacy. Students make satisfactory progress overall and in almost half of lessons, progress is good. Inadequate progress was seen in only a very small number of lessons, and this represents improvement since the last monitoring visit due to the higher proportion of good teaching. The achievement of students in the Year 7 foundation group is very good in relation to their starting points. The college plans to build upon the success of this initiative by the formulation of a Year 8 foundation group. Efforts are being made to spread accreditation for some subjects across Years 10 and 11 to protect Key Stage 4 students from possible overload or stress. This is having a positive impact on achievement and some are on track to reach GCSE and GNVQ outcomes early. The college targets for GCSE achievement in the 2006 examinations are challenging and based on the prior attainment of the students. Nevertheless they are realistic given the raised expectations of those students and the guidance and support they are receiving, whatever their ability. The predictions for achievement of Year 9 students in the Key Stage 3 tests are less optimistic as many have some catching up to do in basic skills, although their progress in the lessons observed was good overall.

Personal development and well-being

Behaviour around the college continues to improve. During the inspection, students coped well with the difficulty of having to remain indoors at break and lunchtimes because of the poor weather. Improvements in behaviour continue to owe much to the vigilance of the adults on duty at these times. Students recognise that behaviour in lessons is improving and that this is having a positive effect on the quality of their learning. The college has built on the success of its Year 8 behaviour project and aspects of this are now applied across the college. For instance the 'Quality Audience' strategy contributes to the improving attitudes to learning observed during the inspection visit, as does the consistent promotion of the college's Code of Conduct. Although a small minority of students still display negative attitudes, the majority do appreciate the college's efforts to reward good behaviour and positive attitudes. Students see that negative behaviour is dealt with effectively and fairly, enabling them to concentrate more on their learning.

Attendance levels remain well below average. However, since the previous inspection visit the college's strenuous efforts in this area have led to some improvement overall, significantly so in the case of some forms in Years 8 and 9, and with particular groups of students; for example the Year 11 Achievement Group. This is due to the college's success in identifying some of the underlying reasons for poor attendance and its creation of effective strategies to bring about improvement.

The number of students using the college's internal exclusion unit also continues to fall. This is because of the way in which students generally are more readily accepting the college's high expectations of behaviour and attitudes to learning. It is also due to its success in devising and implementing strategies to deal with the problems of individual students.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in November 2005:

- Further improve pupils' behaviour and attitudes to learning –satisfactory progress
- Improve attendance—satisfactory progress

Quality of provision

Teaching was good or better in two thirds of the lessons seen while progress and learning were good or better in just under half.

Teachers consistently make good use of starter and settling activities which help the students to begin work promptly and calmly. Well-organised learning activities lead to the students enjoying the lessons and remaining on task. Good use of resources and well-planned, busy lessons capture and maintain interest. Students say they especially like lessons in which they can use equipment. They also like and respond positively to the teachers' frequent use of praise and rewards. Most teachers are now pitching their learning objectives to match the different levels of attainment in the class. A few help the students know exactly how to improve by linking these objectives to grade or level targets which helps their progress even more. Students say that they know how well they are doing in terms of grades and levels in most subjects. Some marking is very good, setting out precisely what has been done well and what needs to be better. Marking of this quality is not fully embedded.

A minority of students continue to pose challenges but teachers consistently respond effectively defusing and non-confrontational way. Good partnerships between teachers and support staff result in students receiving good individual support. Staff provide good role models for their students, treating them with respect and patience, sometimes under difficult circumstances. These positive relationships are beginning to pay dividends as an increasing number of students trust the college and its staff and have more belief in their own potential.

Several factors lead to progress not always being as good as teaching. The low motivation of some students, together with their low self esteem, impedes the pace of learning. Impulsive calling out disrupts the flow of some whole class questioning, and not all teachers are using a broader range of methods to manage these sessions better. Students do not have enough opportunities to reflect on their learning. For example, students in a science lesson described clearly what they were doing and what they observed, but were less assured when answering the question: 'What are

you learning?’ This lack of clarity about learning is reinforced by some teachers’ tendency to use mainly closed questioning in question and answer sessions. The opportunities to make inferences and to explore in an open-ended way ideas suggested by fellow students, such as inspectors saw in some history and English lessons, do not occur often enough. Students require more support with all aspects of literacy in all subjects to help them do justice to their knowledge and understanding.

The curriculum is emerging as a strength of the college. Leadership at all levels is engaged in a continuous process of critically assessing the relevance of its provision. This has led to some highly innovative and successful amendments such as the achievement classes in Years 7, 8 and 11. Furthermore, such innovations are leading to a coherent strategic approach to improving the curriculum further, such as the planned and publicised model for September 2006. This radical rethink will provide students throughout the college with personalised learning paths, enhanced by the opportunity to gain national qualifications before they reach the end of Year 11. Students spoke enthusiastically about the opportunities they are given to go on trips and visits, and of the range of extra-curricular activities provided, for instance in art, drama, information and communication technology (ICT) and music, as well as sports.

The college continues to provide good care and support for its students. Systems aimed at promoting good behaviour, which were previously at an embryonic stage, are now relatively well embedded and having a positive impact. Links with outside agencies which contribute to this continue to expand, adding to the range of strategies which the college uses well to provide effective care and guidance. For example, Year 11 students are very satisfied with the quality of careers advice and information provided by the college and the Connexions agency which has also encouraged them to set their sights high. Academic support across the college is inconsistent. Some variation exists in the quality of target setting and the way in which students are shown what they need to do to improve. However, older students in particular recognise that where specific issues are raised, then their teachers and support staff provide effective support.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in November 2005:

- Improve the quality of teaching so that a higher proportion is good or better, and unsatisfactory teaching is eradicated – good progress

Leadership and management

The headteacher is an effective leader who is ensuring that the college maintains a clear focus on the key areas for improvement. He is well supported by effective senior and middle managers whose skills and confidence have developed since the college’s first monitoring inspection. All issues identified for improvement at that time are being rigorously tackled within a strong sense of teamwork and shared responsibility.

The positive ethos of the college is built upon the strong commitment, modelled by the headteacher and staff, to the belief that their students are valued as individuals. The college demonstrates its belief that students deserve as much support and encouragement as possible in order to achieve to the best of their ability and has a clear determination that this will happen.

Staff are empowered to take initiative and to grow and develop themselves. The majority are secure in their roles and responsibilities and relish the opportunity to make a positive contribution to the development of the college. Well focused staff development is paying dividends. For instance, the impact of whole staff training in behaviour management and 'Quality Audience' is being seen in the increased proportion of strong teaching. The learning and teaching policy is being applied more consistently across the college, and positive developments are being made in assessment and target setting. Although a satisfactory range of data on students' achievement is available and being used more by subject teachers, the leadership team are aware that this requires further work in order to implement effective assessment for learning. A plan is in place for the development of this in the summer term.

Governors are fully involved in monitoring the college's progress. Committee structures and financial controls are established, and governors are involved in key decisions regarding staffing issues and development planning.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in November 2005:

- 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 – satisfactory progress

External support

The LA has continued to provide effective support to the college. Its school improvement officer works collaboratively with the headteacher and the allocated School Improvement Partner (SIP). This benefits the college through shared expertise and advice along with continual monitoring and evaluation of progress. The SIP is now supporting the leadership team in producing a self-evaluation overview which accurately reflects and provides evidence of progress being made.

Main Judgements

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

Priorities for further improvement

- Firmly establish the use of attainment data and assessment systems, including a whole-college marking policy, to measure progress and set

targets, ensuring that these are consistently shared with students and lead to improved achievement

- Continue to use a wide range of positive strategies to motivate students and raise their self-esteem, leading to further improvement in attitudes, behaviour and attendance
- Implement planned developments in the English curriculum so that students have more opportunities to improve their literacy and communication skills across all subjects

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

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "M. McCloy". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped 'M' and 'y'.

Marguerite McCloy
H M Inspector