



Cowley Language College

Inspection Report

Unique Reference Number 104829
Local Authority St. Helens
Inspection number 287046
Inspection dates 11–12 January 2007
Reporting inspector Mark Williams HMI

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

Type of school	Secondary	School address	Hard Lane
School category	Community		St Helens
Age range of pupils	11–18		Merseyside WA10 6LB
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	01744 678030
Number on roll (school)	1781	Fax number	01744 678030
Number on roll (6th form)	202		
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair	Mr John Clegg
		Headteacher	Mr Cameron Sheeran
Date of previous school inspection	13 January 2003		

Age group	Inspection dates	Inspection number
11–18	11–12 January 2007	287046

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Cowley Language College is a well established school serving a mixed socio-economic area of St Helens. It is much larger than most secondary schools. The percentage of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is above average, as is the percentage with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Nearly all pupils have English as their first language. Pupils enter the school with broadly average Key Stage 2 test results, although their levels of literacy are below average. Since September 2006 the college has been managing the integration of pupils from Broadway, a local school undergoing closure procedures. The college is currently operating on two distinct sites.

The college currently holds a variety of awards including Artsmark and Sportsmark Gold.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

An outstanding curriculum lies at the heart of this well led and managed college. As a result, pupils make good progress in their learning and in their personal development and well-being. Inspectors agree with the college's own evaluation that it provides a good quality education for its pupils and gives good value for money.

Over the last two years more than 80% of pupils have gained five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C. This is well above the national average. Progress in Key Stage 4 is particularly good, mainly as a result of the outstanding curriculum that provides a wealth of opportunities to pupils. Progress in Key Stage 3 has improved recently but, as the college is aware, over time it has been less rapid.

The personal development and well-being of pupils are good and again are enhanced by curriculum provision. Pupils behave well, display positive attitudes and are keen to participate in college life. They appreciate the commitment of college staff who provide good quality care, guidance and support. Pupils also benefit from teaching that is of good quality overall. Where it is best, teachers use a variety of methods to fully engage pupils in their learning. However, this is not always the case and, on occasions, learning relies too heavily on teacher direction. As a result, pupils are sometimes passive. Nonetheless, no teaching is unsatisfactory.

The key strength of the college is the outstanding curriculum, particularly in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form. The curriculum makes a major contribution not only to the standards pupils achieve, but also to their personal development and well-being through academic, vocational and skills enhancement. Pupils enthusiastically enjoy an extensive programme of extra-curricular activities and this enhances their learning. The college makes effective use of its specialism in modern languages to enhance the curriculum.

Leadership and management of the college are good. Good work has been done to ensure the college has an increasingly thorough understanding of its strengths and areas for development. Self-evaluation is used effectively to monitor performance and set good quality plans for the future. Much good practice exists. However, self-evaluation in some areas does not fully analyse the impact of measures undertaken to secure improvement. Current good work is successfully and sensitively integrating pupils from the former Broadway school into the life of the college.

Effective progress has been made since the previous inspection and this, coupled with the standards achieved and the outstanding curriculum, shows the school has good capacity to improve further.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Provision in the sixth form is good. Students make good progress in their learning.

Although there is some variation between subjects, examination results are broadly in line with national averages. This represents good progress from students' starting points. This is the result of good quality teaching and the outstanding curriculum that

ensures that courses are tailored to meet individual needs. This provision is enhanced by an extensive range of enrichment activities.

There is mutual respect between teachers and students. Good quality leadership and management of the sixth form are effective in promoting the personal and academic development of students. Students enjoy their life in the sixth form and use private study facilities in a mature manner. Their enjoyment, maturity and success are reflected in good retention rates and the numbers proceeding to higher education.

What the school should do to improve further

- Accelerate rates of pupil progress in Key Stage 3.
- Ensure all lessons fully engage pupils in their learning.
- In line with best practice in the college, ensure self-evaluation fully analyses the impact of measures taken to secure improvement.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Over the last two years standards at the end of Key Stage 4 have been well above average. Pupils make satisfactory progress in Key Stage 3 and very good progress in Key Stage 4. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good progress throughout the school because of effective teaching and support.

Results in the 2006 Key Stage 3 tests in English, mathematics and science were broadly average. These are an improvement on the below average results of 2005 and represent satisfactory progress and achievement. The improvements are the result of college initiated strategies that increased the number of above average ability pupils gaining the higher levels. In the current Year 9 standards are average and pupils are making satisfactory progress.

GCSE results in 2005 and 2006 were above average, a vast improvement on the results of recent years. More than 80% gained five GCSE grades at A* to C, responding with enthusiasm to the school's new range of motivating, vocational courses. This measure falls to a below average level when English and mathematics are included. The college is aware of this and has taken steps to improve its performance. For example, in the current Year 11 a new course, examined in Year 10, has led to a significant increase in the number gaining a GCSE grade at C or higher in English. Overall standards in Year 11 are above average, maintaining recent improvements.

Examination results in the sixth form are broadly in line with national averages. This represents good progress from student's starting points. This is the result of good quality teaching and the outstanding curriculum ensures that courses are tailored to meet individual needs.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Pupils' personal development is good and has a positive impact on their achievement. Most pupils settle quickly to work and respond well to the expectations of their teachers. A small minority of parents who responded to the inspection questionnaire expressed concerns about pupil behaviour. Inspectors found behaviour around school to be orderly. Pupils' moral, social and cultural development is good and enhanced by the outstanding extra-curricular opportunities which enable them to develop team-building skills and gain good understanding of other cultures, not least through visits overseas. Participation in these activities is high and contributes substantially to pupils' enjoyment of their education. As one pupil said, 'there's so much choice you could never be bored'. Pupils' spiritual development is satisfactory. Despite the best efforts of the college, attendance remains below average.

Pupils respond well to the college's programme for personal, social and health education (PSHE). This provides a particularly good foundation for younger pupils. Pupils' sense of community is enhanced as they see their views increasingly acted upon. The school council has proved its effectiveness in improving the school environment and further opportunities to enable pupils to contribute as peer mentors are planned. The curriculum is successful in raising pupils' awareness of healthy lifestyles and the school's efforts in this regard are reflected in its recent acquisition of Healthy Schools status. The vocational curriculum and pupils' use of information and communications technology is equipping pupils well for future employment.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The quality of teaching and learning is good throughout the college. Pupils want to learn, are confident, generally enjoy their lessons and make good progress in them.

A positive learning environment is fostered effectively through the good relationships that exist between pupils and their teachers. Teachers are confident and display very good subject knowledge. Typically, they use a variety of methods to make learning interesting including good questioning, varied use of interactive whiteboards and good opportunities for pupils to work in pairs and groups. Such methods are used well to engage pupils and help to clarify their understanding of concepts taught. For example, in an English lesson with Year 9 pupils, the teacher introduced 'The Tempest' by making good use of group work and paired discussion. Skilful questioning enabled the pupils to imagine what it would be like to be stranded on an island. They talked enthusiastically about items they would need for survival and luxury. In another lesson very good use was made of an interactive whiteboard to make clear to pupils values

of various angles. Pupils were then able to make good progress in their own work calculating angles.

However, on occasions learning relies too heavily on teacher direction and pupils are passive. They are not always fully engaged in their learning and the sometimes narrow range of teachers' questioning fails to catch their interest. Nonetheless, the college is making good use of the National Strategy to plan and deliver lessons that are matched to pupils differing needs. The majority of parents rightly feel that their children are making good progress.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The outstanding curriculum makes a major contribution to standards and achievement across the college. The college's specialism ensures a good range of languages is offered, with programmes to meet the needs of most pupils including fast-track GCSEs in Year 10.

In Years 7 to 9 the curriculum is broad and balanced with a good emphasis on PSHE. The college regularly modifies the curriculum to meet the needs of all learners. For example, in Years 7 and 8 pupils benefit from the 'Opening Minds' project. In Year 9, opportunities exist for some pupils to begin GCSE or Business and Technology Education Council courses early.

For pupils in Years 10 and 11 and in the sixth form, a much richer range of traditional and vocational courses than usual is meeting the aspirations and interests of all students. Pupils are given very good opportunities to experience the skills needed for the world of work and the college ensures that pupils are taught to develop healthy and safe lifestyles through a well-structured PSHE programme. Curriculum provision is further enhanced by the recent introduction of the International Baccalaureate.

As a specialist language college, participation in a wide range of visits and trips abroad is relished by students and contributes significantly to their enjoyment and achievement. In addition, the excellent range of extra-curricular activities is well attended. The commitment of staff to these activities is much appreciated by pupils.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Care, guidance and support are good with all statutory procedures observed.

Procedures to ensure health and safety are secure. Child protection systems are in place. There is a suitable range of interventions to support pupils' pastoral welfare, based on the early identification of needs. Pupils say that there is always an adult to confide in and most pupils feel safe in school. The Behaviour Management Unit offers a more strategic approach for working with pupils at risk of exclusion, but it is too new to have had a demonstrable impact.

Good induction arrangements for Year 7 pupils help them settle in quickly and pupils are equally well prepared for transfer to their new courses in Years 10 and 12. Contacts with a number of external agencies support 'at risk pupils' successfully. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities do well as their targets are precise and regularly reviewed. The school has developed good systems for tracking the academic progress of its pupils. As a result, pupils know their strengths and use this information effectively to inform their choice of courses. Most parents are supportive of the work of the school, but some feel communication channels could be improved further.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Leadership and management are good.

The principal, senior leadership team and governors have a clear, well articulated and shared vision for the college which is leading to effective developments in curriculum and teaching. Good, sensitive work is being undertaken to integrate pupils from the former Broadway school into their new college community. Through its specialist status the college is increasingly proving a valuable resource for the wider community as a result of expanding educational partnerships.

Staff are highly motivated and dedicated to the success of the college as seen through their commitment to extra-curricular activities and the inclusion of learners. The management of the performance of all staff to ensure their talents are put to best use is a strong feature of the school. As a result, the college ensures its efforts are rightly concentrated on ensuring pupils make good progress in their learning and personal development.

The college is thorough in its evaluation of its strengths and areas for development. It monitors and evaluates the success of its work well and has good quality plans for further improvement. While much progress has been made, it is aware some aspects of self-evaluation are still developing. For example, the best plans make clear what success is to be expected, but this is not always the case. The governing body have a good understanding of the college's strengths and areas for development. They hold the principal and his staff to account while, at the same time, supporting their work. Leadership and management are further enhanced by the good quality work of the business manager who ensures that financial management is strong and supports the college's aims.

The college has made effective improvements since the previous inspection. These coupled with the good standards achieved and the outstanding curriculum show those responsible for the leadership of the college are demonstrating good capacity to make further improvements.

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Inspection judgements

<i>Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate</i>	School Overall	16-19
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Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	2	2
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	2	

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2	
The behaviour of learners	2	
The attendance of learners	3	
How well learners enjoy their education	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	2	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	2

¹ Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average to below average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2	
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets	2	
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	2	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	2	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2	
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No	
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No	

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

As you are aware, Mrs Harris, Mr Aitken, Mr Griffiths, Mr Meakin and I visited your college recently as part of the schools' inspection programme. I am writing on behalf of us all to thank you for your warm welcome and for your time and assistance in helping us to find out just how effective Cowley Language College is.

You will all be delighted to hear that we judge your college to be good. We particularly like your curriculum which we judge to be outstanding. Our judgements confirm what

Mr Sheeran, your teachers and the governors think. This is a good sign that your college has the capacity to make further improvements. To help you all do this, we have asked

Mr Sheeran to ensure pupils in Key Stage 3 make more rapid progress in their learning and that your teachers engage you more fully in lessons. We would also like the staff to do more analysis of any improvements they make each year to see how well they make a difference to your learning.

So, what makes Cowley good? This is what we found:

- your GCSE results at five or more A* to C are above the national average
- you make very good progress in your learning in Key Stage 4 and good progress in the sixth form
- your personal development and well-being is good
- teaching is good overall
- your teachers and support staff care, guide and support you well and you appreciate their efforts
- Mr Sheeran and his team lead the college well
- pupils at the former Broadway school are being integrated well into Cowley
- the curriculum provided is outstanding. It provides you with many opportunities to succeed, deepen your understanding of other cultures, work in teams and ensure you make good progress in your learning and quest to be good citizens. The range of educational visits at home and abroad, plus the very wide range of extra-curricular activities, is excellent.

We hope our findings will help you all in the next steps of your learning and development.