

The Axe Valley Community College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	113497
Local Authority	Devon
Inspection number	289653
Inspection dates	22–23 May 2007
Reporting inspector	Anne Looney HMI

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	859
6th form	106
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Graham Godbeer
Headteacher	Elizabeth Pinfield
Date of previous school inspection	1 December 2002
School address	Chard Street Axminster EX13 5EA
Telephone number	01297 32146
Fax number	01297 35851

Age group	11–18
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Introduction

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

Description of the school

The Axe Valley Community College is a smaller-than-average comprehensive school for students aged 11 to 18. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is below average but few students come from affluent backgrounds. Very few students come from a minority ethnic background or speak English as an additional language. The number of students with a learning difficulty or disability is broadly average, although the percentage is higher in Years 7 to 9. The college has specialist status in business and enterprise.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

The Axe Valley Community College provides students with a satisfactory standard of education and has some good features. Since the last inspection, the college has received specialist school designation and this has improved curricular provision and extended links with the primary schools and local businesses. Students enter the college with broadly average attainment. Although the trend is upwards, standards in GCSE examinations are average and achievement is satisfactory. However, the rate at which students progress over their time at the college is different for boys and girls. Girls make good progress but boys make markedly less progress in Years 10 and 11. Achievement and standards in the sixth form are satisfactory.

Students are positive towards their school, show that they enjoy their learning, particularly in practical and creative subjects, are confident and behave well. Although the majority of students say that they feel safe and that any incidents of bullying are quickly dealt with, some parents and students are still concerned. Students are happy to take part in sport to stay healthy and understand the importance of a healthy diet. Attendance has improved since the last inspection and it is now satisfactory.

Teaching is satisfactory and some is outstanding but it is variable across the school. Relationships are good and teachers show a secure knowledge of the subjects they are teaching. Tasks are not always matched to students' needs, particularly when there is a broad range of ability in classes. Teaching is monitored when departments are reviewed but this does not lead to an ongoing professional dialogue in which good practice is shared.

Students are cared for, supported and encouraged well by the college. Teachers and non-teachers alike work hard to help students manage their behaviour and stay in education. In the last inspection, the college was charged with improving target setting and monitoring to increase the effectiveness of students' learning. Target setting and review systems have been introduced but there is a lack of consistency in how effectively they are applied.

Curricular choices meet students' needs well, particularly in Years 10 and 11, where the New Start programme is providing a well-tailored education for potentially disaffected students. Students also benefit from a wide range of extra-curricular activities.

The quality of leadership and management is satisfactory. Despite the fact that the senior management team is not at full strength, day-to-day management functions well. However, the college has a more optimistic view of its performance than that of the inspectors. Its self-evaluation indicates an extensive knowledge of its provision but is less precise in the way it evaluates the impact of that provision. The college has, however, identified appropriate priorities for improvement and these are linked clearly to student achievement. The college has satisfactory capacity to improve and provides satisfactory value for money.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 3

The college has a satisfactory sixth form, with some strengths. The college is striving to increase the breadth of its curriculum so that learners of a range of abilities can continue with their studies post-16. At the moment, students make sound progress over the duration of their courses. They receive good support and their progress is tracked regularly. Leadership and management of the sixth form are satisfactory.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve systems of target setting and monitoring of progress and ensure that they are consistently applied throughout the college and understood by all staff and students.
- Use the outcome of departmental reviews as a vehicle for sharing good practice.
- Ensure that teachers plan to meet the needs of all students. A small proportion of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection. A small proportion of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Achievement and standards are satisfactory. Students join the college with broadly average attainment, although there are fewer higher-attaining students in the college than is the case nationally. At the end of Year 9, standards are average overall. There is, however, considerable variability between subjects. Achievement in science is good; this results in above-average attainment, whereas students have been making less progress than expected in English and are attaining below average standards. In mathematics, progress is satisfactory. The English and mathematics departments have put in place detailed systems to establish exactly how well students are doing and to help students see in more detail what they need to do to improve. These systems are not yet being used by all teachers in those subjects. Standards at the end of Year 11 are broadly in line with national figures, although there has been an upward trend in the percentage of students attaining five or more A* to C grades in the GCSE examinations. In 2006, the GCSE results were the college's best yet. Standards in English were above average and achievement in that subject was good. There was, however, a considerable difference in the achievement of girls and boys. Girls made good progress, while boys were making satisfactory progress until their performance dipped in Years 10 and 11. The college has identified the underachievers in the present Year 11 and is mentoring them. Indications are that the college should reach the targets set by the local authority.

Students with learning difficulties and disabilities make sound progress. Achievement in the sixth form is satisfactory overall and in the vast majority of subjects, and leads to attainment which is broadly average at both AS and A level.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Personal development and well-being are good. Students have a very positive attitude towards their college. They enjoy practical subjects but some find academic subjects less interesting. Attendance has improved since the last inspection and is now satisfactory in the main school and good in the sixth form. Behaviour around the college and in lessons is usually very good. Although there are occasional bullying or racist comments, most students feel that these incidents are quickly sorted out and stopped. However, responses to questionnaires show that bullying is still an issue which worries students and parents. Students' spiritual moral, social

and cultural development is good. They have many opportunities in the personal, social and health education programme to develop a sense of what is right and wrong. Their social development is encouraged right from the start. They learn to plan, cooperate and delegate when working in teams and to listen to the opinions of others. Many older students have impressive leadership skills. Junior sports leaders train local primary children and sixth formers mentor younger students. The year councils and the student council make a very good contribution to the college community by debating issues, advising and making decisions which affect the college and the local community. Students have some knowledge and understanding of other societies, cultures and religions. They say they feel safe in college and they are able to talk sensibly about the dangers of different situations. They benefit from sport both during and after college and know all about healthy eating even if they do not always make healthy choices! Students' chances of future economic success are good as they leave with improving basic skills, some knowledge of the workplace and a solid grounding in business and enterprise skills.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory throughout the college. Strengths in teaching were found in the excellent relationships that exist between staff and students, good planning, teachers' secure knowledge of the subjects being taught and the sharing of learning objectives at the beginning of the lessons. In a drama lesson, tasks were very well planned to develop students' skills in, and understanding of, physical and vocal control and this led to students making good progress. In a business studies lesson, excellent use of information and communication technology (ICT) by students and the teacher led to outstanding progress being made. However, the quality of marking is variable throughout the college. In some lessons, tasks are not sufficiently well matched to students' needs and this slows the rate of learning. This is particularly the case in classes where there is a broad range of ability.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The curriculum meets the needs of the students well. In Years 10 and 11, the curriculum is broadened by the study of short courses in ICT and citizenship and students can choose from a wide range of optional subjects. Although the college is aware of the need to increase the uptake in modern foreign languages in Years 10 and 11, numbers remain low. The college's New Start programme has offered a significant and successful additional choice for those older students who might not benefit from the traditional curriculum and who might be at risk of exclusion. Courses post-16 offer good provision for a range of ability. Students also much appreciate the good opportunities provided for them to enrich their experience through a wide range of activities, including sport, music, drama and outdoor activities.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

The quality of care, guidance and support is satisfactory, with strengths in pastoral care. Students are given very good care, support and encouragement. Attendance is closely monitored and poor attenders are supported and encouraged to improve. The procedures for dealing with bullying and racism are clear. The college uses the expertise of outside agencies well to provide good support for students with emotional, social and physical problems. The 'time out' system, training in anger management, life coaching and other skills enable most students with behavioural problems to stay in college. Targets are set and reviewed but students are not clear in every subject about how well they are doing, nor about what they need to do to improve. Tracking of progress in the sixth form is good.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Leadership and management are satisfactory throughout the college. The college has lacked a full-strength senior leadership team through the past year but the headteacher, her deputy and the extended senior management team have ensured that the day-to-day running of the college has remained smooth. New senior staff have been appointed and will start at the beginning of the next academic year. The college has been innovative in successfully applying workforce reform, and non-teaching staff play a significant role in freeing time for teachers to teach. Since the last inspection, the college has made good progress with improving attendance, but there are still inconsistencies in the way that target setting and monitoring are used to focus students' learning. There is some good practice in the way in which some heads of department and heads of year are tracking students' progress but this is not shared across the college. The senior management team is using the review of departments effectively to get an overview of provision but is not using the outcomes fully to spread good practice. Through this review process, teaching and learning are monitored but judgements about the quality of teaching and learning are somewhat overgenerous. Governance is good. The chair and the governors are experienced and provide both good support and good challenge to the headteacher and senior management team. This was especially useful in the successful application for specialist school status. This status is a strength of the college. It has brought benefits in terms of increased curricular opportunities and improved partnerships with the community.

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Annex A

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?	3	3
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	3	3
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	3	3
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes

Achievement and standards

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

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?	3	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	3	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.

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	3	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3	
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets	3	
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	3	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	3	
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

24 May 2007

Dear Students,

Inspection of The Axe Valley Community College, Axminster, Devon EX13 5EA

I am writing on behalf of the inspection team to let you know the judgements we made about your college. Thank you for making us welcome, for showing us your work and for taking the time to talk to us.

- We believe that the Axe Valley Community College provides a satisfactory education for you.
- GCSE results are improving steadily.
- You make satisfactory progress over your time at the college but girls are making better progress than boys.
- Teaching is satisfactory. We recognised the good relationships you have with your teachers in lessons and saw that teachers know their subjects well. Marking is not as regular as it might be and not all of you were clear on how well you were doing or what you needed to do to improve in every subject. In some classes, tasks were too difficult for some students.
- The curriculum has something for everyone and you enjoy plenty of opportunities for extra-curricular activities.
- We think your behaviour is good and we believe that the college creates many opportunities for you to develop well socially and morally.
- You have benefited from the business specialism of Axe Valley and we believe that the college prepares you well for your future working life.
- The college looks after you well.
- Your college needs to:
 - improve the way it sets targets for you and check your progress against those targets
 - ensure that teachers plan tasks that will meet all students' needs
 - help teachers share teaching ideas so that all teaching is as good as the best.

With best wishes,

Anne Looney HMI

Lead Inspector