

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

T 0161 491 4191
F 0161 491 9677

Ofsted helpline
08456 404045



15 November 2006

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 Brian Dower and Anthony Pearson, Additional Inspectors to your school on 14 and 15 November 2006, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the fourth 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 school's work, scrutinised documents and held discussions with the headteacher, middle and senior leaders and groups of students.

Context

At 520, the number of students on roll is a little lower than the college's projected number for the start of this term. Staffing is stable, with no teaching vacancies unfilled in any subject area. The college appointed four newly qualified teachers this term, to increase provision in some subjects.

Achievement and standards

Provisional results for the 2006 national curriculum tests and examinations show over half of the Year 11 students achieved five or more good grades at GCSE. This is

a significant improvement on the 2005 results, and exceeded the college's own challenging targets. Despite the overall results remaining below the national average, they represent excellent progress based on students' previous attainment. Standards in the Key Stage 3 tests were well below average, although better than previous results in the predecessor school. This is particularly evident in mathematics and English when compared to students' attainment on entry to the college. Standards in science at Key Stage 3 have not risen at a similar rate. Attainment was higher in writing than in reading, one factor being the college's well targeted emphasis on this. Students' speaking and listening skills are well below average and many find it difficult to clearly articulate their ideas or opinions either individually or within group discussions.

The considerable improvements made in achievement have come about as a result of a combination of factors: strong leadership at senior and middle management levels; well focused teaching and assessment; opportunities provided for additional revision, study and mentoring; and slow but steady improvement in students' attitudes and self belief.

In 70% of lessons observed on this visit, students made good progress. In other lessons, progress was satisfactory and at no time was it inadequate. This illustrates the upward trend seen in lessons over the last year, and bodes well for the college's well-focused priorities for future improvements in achievement and standards. Students with learning difficulties or disabilities and those who are looked after make similarly good progress.

Personal development and well-being

Behaviour in lessons is good and many students now expect more of themselves and have ambition. In a group of 17 more able Year 11 science students only 5 had been attaining at a level commensurate with their ability at the start of this term. In just two months every student has exceeded expectations, standards are above average and some are realistically expecting to attain at grade A or A* in the GCSE examinations. The teacher has got them to believe in themselves. There was evidence of improved attitudes in many of the lessons seen and the consistent and regular application of the college's procedures for classroom management and for rewarding good behaviour has improved the climate for learning. Attendance levels remain below average but are rising, testimony to the consistency and rigour with which unauthorised absences are pursued.

The high level of staff supervision outside of lessons ensures that movement around the college is as orderly as possible on crowded corridors. Fixed term exclusions continue to decline. The college's recent reorganisation of its internal withdrawal facilities for students at risk of exclusion is already demonstrating its effectiveness. Only a small minority of students now find themselves returning to the base because of poor behaviour. The majority are successfully integrated back into lessons because they are made to keep abreast of the mainstream curriculum, receive individual guidance on realising the impact of their behaviour and are given appropriate support in modifying this.

Students continue to speak positively about the college. They say that there is a calmer atmosphere in lessons and that they feel safe and secure and able to learn without distractions. Their views are listened to and they can influence what happens in the college. They have been influential, for example, in bringing about the improved toilet facilities and the installation of lockers. Members of the college's student council have the confidence to represent the views of their peers and they now meet on a regular basis and play their part in forward planning. They have been involved, along with the college chef, in developing the healthy eating approach; in the decision to re-organise the 'Smart Centre' internal exclusion facility; and in reviewing the student rewards system.

A minority of students still present challenging behaviour which has to be carefully managed in order to minimise disruption to others. The college has been successful in balancing its work with such students with the need to reward the deserving majority. Students appreciate the recognition and the merit awards which come their way. Their confidence and self-esteem is enhanced and they are motivated to work hard. The policy of appointing Lead Students is an example of how the college is harnessing the talents of such well-motivated boys and girls to work with younger students. It is also to the students' credit that around half of them attended a recent open evening. This is indicative of the sense of pride which most now feel for their college, as confirmed in discussions with groups of students during the visit.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in June 2006:

- 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. – good progress

Quality of provision:

Teaching and learning

The proportion of lessons judged to be good has increased in comparison with that found in the March 2006 monitoring visit. Teaching and learning were good or better in 70% of lessons although relatively few were outstanding. No unsatisfactory lessons were observed which also represents an improvement. A significant feature of lessons is that students' progress now more consistently reflects the quality of teaching. This is because teachers are more confident in using the college's effective "quality audience" strategy which keeps pupils more focussed on tasks. This, along with the students' more positive attitudes and self-esteem, contributes to a better quality of learning. Learning has also improved because of more effective ongoing assessment. Students know what they are expected to learn and are often involved in evaluating the progress they make in lessons. In the best lessons, progress is regularly checked against the learning objectives and teachers use questioning skills effectively to challenge and support all learners as appropriate to their level of ability. Students appreciate the way in which many lessons benefit from the

teachers' skills in using interactive whiteboards. The effective deployment of learning support assistants is another key feature of many good lessons. Well briefed, they have the confidence to be proactive in supporting individuals and groups of students. Many lessons also provide evidence of the college's recent drive to improve the quality and effectiveness of pupils' writing. Not all teachers are yet completely secure in using positive behaviour management strategies and this together with the weak attitudes to learning displayed by a minority of pupils slowed the pace of learning in some satisfactory lessons.

A common feature of lessons is the good quality of relationships which exist between teachers and students, with high levels of care and concern and good use of praise and encouragement. The strategies used by the college to bring about improvements in teaching, behaviour and attitudes over the last year have necessitated high levels of planning and structure within lessons. Many students need close guidance and clear explanations at all times to ensure they have the confidence to attempt the work set. This inhibits opportunities for teachers to develop students' independent learning skills and ability to engage in discussion or debate. The college is aware of this as a longer-term target through which it can increase the proportion of outstanding lessons.

Curriculum

The college's good curriculum has been further refined as a result of continuous evaluation of its work. The success of the Years 7 and 8 foundation groups and the Year 11 achievement group bear testimony to the college's determination to ensure that all students achieve as well as they can. There is already evidence that these groups are making rapid progress. The curriculum has been further enhanced by the successful implementation of strategies to improve students' general literacy skills across other subjects. This has been supported by well planned training utilising the expertise of the college's own teachers as well as external consultants. The positive impact of this work is already evident in the improved quality of, for example, students' evaluative writing in some curriculum areas. Initiatives targeting more vulnerable older students through the "IN2gr8" programme of vocational education are currently being implemented. The college is keen to maximise individual achievement, one feature of which is the innovative introduction of a strategy of early entry for selected GCSE courses.

Care, guidance and support

The role of the learning coordinators has expanded over the past year and they now play a pivotal role in the college's pastoral system. They work closely with families and outside agencies to provide the care and support vulnerable students need if they are to make the most of their education. They also carry out routine but essential tasks like following up on absences, thus freeing up the time of teachers to concentrate on their lessons.

Academic guidance has improved through effective assessment and this is one reason why standards are rising. Students know how well they are doing, they are

clear about their targets and they receive regular guidance on how to reach them. This is also communicated to parents in learning review reports. The college has formal and informal methods for checking on students' personal development but wants to refine the former to make them more rigorous and reliable indicators of progress.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in June 2006:

- Provide students with more frequent opportunities to improve their literacy and communication skills across all subjects. – good progress

Leadership and management

The good leadership which has been evident since the first monitoring visit in November 2005 continues to go from strength to strength as the senior leadership team has expanded. The headteacher and governors have made very positive and carefully considered appointments to key posts in order to benefit from a wide range of experience and skills, including those of the relatively small number of staff who were also employed in the predecessor school. The roles and responsibilities of senior leaders complement one another very well and make best use of individual strengths in building a very effective team. They set high standards and are a good example to others, so that the skills of middle managers are being well developed and supported. This teamwork permeates the college as staff and students share its vision of 'Effort, Achievement and Success'.

Senior leaders know the college well and accurately identify its strengths and areas for development. The college improvement plan has recently been updated to reflect its four key values which were created and agreed by all staff and students earlier this year. Action plans are clearly focused on the college's key priorities for improvement and the criteria by which its success can be judged. The college has recently completed a draft self evaluation document which is developing a clear and concise analysis of its performance. This is based on evidence gathered as a result of monitoring and evaluation activities such as lesson observations; work scrutiny; analysis of assessment and attendance data; consultation with students, staff and parents.

Since the last monitoring visit, the college has improved further its assessment and marking procedures to track students' progress and set them challenging targets. As a result, effective use of assessment for learning was seen in virtually every lesson observed on this visit. Electronic systems are being used and managed effectively to record and track the progress of individuals or groups of students and take action where intervention is needed. As a result, underachievement is identified and additional support given to some students. Similarly, others exceed their targets due to raised expectations and additional challenge where appropriate. Individual teachers are realising the importance of making good use of this assessment information, so that it is becoming more consistent across all subjects.

The college's SIPB (School Improvement Partnership Board) and its governors are involved in careful monitoring of the college's performance. Performance management systems are being used effectively to raise teachers' expectations of what students can achieve and, as a result, raise standards and achievement across the college.

A positive ethos and air of optimism and excitement were seen during the first monitoring visit a year ago. This continues to be at the heart of the college and is an important ingredient of its success along with the commitment of all staff to doing the best for their students even when circumstances are sometimes difficult. The fruits of its labour are now being reflected in the much improved examination results, but more importantly in students' sense of pride and their individual achievements and improving self belief.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in June 2006:

- 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. – good progress

External support

The college continues to benefit from additional support provided by its School Improvement Partner (SIP) and LA consultants and advisers.

Main Judgements

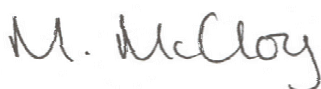
The school's overall progress since opening in April 2005 is outstanding.

Priorities for further improvement

- Further develop students' confidence and self esteem by improving their ability to speak and listen in a variety of situations
- Build upon improvements already made in the quality of teaching and learning and personal development by increasing opportunities for students to work independently and develop self-discipline.

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