

Prospects Learning Services Ltd
132-138 High Street
Bromley
Kent
BR1 1EZ

T 020 8313 7760
F 020 8464 3393

Ofsted helpline
08456 404045



12 March 2007

Mrs Krys Marshall
The Headteacher
The Ash Technology College
Stanwell Road
Ashford
TW15 3DU

Dear Mrs Marshall

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF THE ASH TECHNOLOGY COLLEGE

Introduction

Following my visit with David Williams, Additional Inspector, to your college on 27 and 28 February 2007, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the fifth monitoring inspection since the college became subject to special measures in February 2005.

This letter will be posted 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 10 lessons across a few departments in the college, scrutinised documents, and met with the headteacher and a number of senior managers, and representatives from the local authority (LA).

Context

Since the last visit, four teachers have left and four have been appointed, some on a temporary basis. There are 715 students on roll; a high percentage of students have special educational needs.

Achievement and standards

Test results at the end of Year 9 in 2006 have now been validated. They show an improvement on 2005. Results at GCSE have been more variable. The college's targets for Key Stage 3 were met. Test results in English were high with 82% of students obtaining Level 5 or above. In mathematics 76% of students attained Level 5 or above and 50% obtained Level 6 or above. Results in science, however, were lower with 65% attaining Level 5 or above.

Progress from Key Stage 2 to 3 has improved, but progress from Key Stage 2 to 4 remains slow. The contextual value added measure (CVA) shows that students' progress from Year 7 to Year 11 is exceptionally low. This is partly because of limited progress in science.

The attainment of Year 11 students in GCSE examinations in 2006 improved from 2005 but remained below national averages: 38% of students attained at least five higher grades, below the target of 43%. Results were satisfactory in mathematics and English where over half the students achieved a higher grade in at least one of the subjects. However, GCSE results in science were exceptionally low with only a fifth of students achieving a higher grade. The college's predictions for results in 2007 suggest that results in science will remain significantly lower than those in English and mathematics.

Scrutiny of internal data shows evidence of some improvement in the progress made by students in science by the end of Year 9 but not by the end of Year 11. Current estimates are that a low proportion of students will attain higher grades in science, and especially in the single science option taken by the majority of students.

In music and religious education, which were judged poor in 2005, students in Year 7 are working within levels that are below national expectations. As they move through Key Stage 3 they are beginning to make progress in their work and the targets for attainment at the end of Year 9 approach national expectations. Although there remains some inconsistency there has been satisfactory improvement in music and religious education. Overall, students made satisfactory progress in seven of the lessons observed and inadequate progress in three.

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

- Urgently raise standards in science, music and religious education – inadequate progress

Personal development and well-being

Students' personal development and well being are satisfactory. Their attitudes were satisfactory in most of the lessons. They usually worked with good concentration. However, in the three inadequate lessons, which were all with groups with low attainment, low level disruptive behaviour impeded the learning of the whole class. This was sometimes because the work was not well matched to their needs.

Behaviour in the college is usually good, though there is occasional boisterous behaviour outside classrooms. Teachers use the sanctions policy effectively to manage behaviour. Internal evidence shows that there has been a reduction in the number of students who are given detentions.

The college produces useful information on the rate of exclusions this year compared to the previous year. A more detailed analysis is also undertaken to compare figures for each term. The current picture for the autumn term this year shows a marked reduction in exclusions, especially for girls. The average length of exclusion time has also been reduced to less than three days.

Attendance has improved but remains low at 89.7% for the first half of this year. In the lessons observed the attendance was just under 85% and only one lesson had all the students in the class. This remains an area of concern.

The college is working effectively with the education, welfare, inclusion and achievement team; a helpful evaluation of the impact of this partnership has been undertaken and shows the good progress which has been made in improving behaviour and attendance. A good range of strategies has been used: college packages, a wider range of options at KS4; intervention work with vulnerable students; involvement of parents; and a new attendance policy.

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

- Review the behaviour policy, with students, and make sure all teachers apply it consistently – good progress

Quality of provision

This visit focused specifically on science, music and religious education which were cited as weaknesses in the inspection report of February 2005. Lessons were also seen in English, mathematics, and information and communication technology (ICT). The ten lessons seen on this visit are not representative of the teaching in the college as a whole. One lesson was good, six were satisfactory and three were inadequate. A recent review of teaching and learning undertaken by the LA found a relatively high proportion of inadequate lessons across the college as a whole.

Positive features of teaching and learning included well focused and planned lessons with precise objectives and outcomes for students' learning. Most lessons were reasonably well-paced and students remained attentive and involved. Constructive discussion, combined with question and answer sessions encouraged students to play an active part.

In other instances work was not always well matched to students' needs. As a result, when writing without additional support, some students with limited literacy skills made less progress than when they communicated their ideas verbally. In a few lessons explanations given by the teacher were too long or complex, leading to inattentiveness.

There were several weaknesses in science. Some teachers found it hard to fit experimental work into a single lesson. A number of students did not record the results of experiments carefully or accurately. A demonstration was given in one science lesson because the bunsen burners were not fully functional.

In music and religious education lessons, the content was usually relevant to students' interests. In music, however, the practical tasks were sometimes too complex or difficult because of the students' limited technical skills on keyboards. Their learning was held back by this. They were not able to develop their critical listening skills because of the high sound levels in the room. Though some shortcomings remain, provision in music and religious education has improved since the last inspection and is no longer poor.

In order to improve the quality of teaching and learning the college has put in place a range of strategies. These include mentoring and support for weaker teachers and an in-service programme to develop teachers' skills in, for example, managing behaviour and effective planning and teaching strategies. These have yet to be fully effective across the college and the proportion of inadequate teaching is too high. Evidence from this visit combined with previous monitoring visits confirms that teaching and learning remain inadequate.

Leadership and management

Over the last two years, there have been notable improvements in some areas of the college including the management of behaviour and attendance. However, more needs to be done with regards to some departments, as well as on strategic planning, finance and governance, which were judged inadequate at the last monitoring visit. A consequence of continuing weaknesses is that the specialist status of the college in technology was removed in January 2007.

The college has completed a self evaluation form and also provided reports on progress since the last visit. These documents are useful and informative, but need to be more sharply focused to show the impact on key areas, as well as including evaluative comment. One good report showed the progress being made and the underlying reasons in relation to the work done on improving behaviour and attendance. Similar evaluative commentary should be given to show progress being made in other key areas such as achievement and standards, or teaching and learning.

The under-performance of science, noted as a key area for urgent attention, remains. Internal data shows modest improvements in Key Stage 4 after the decline of GCSE results in 2006. The current head of science has resigned and there are interim plans for next term. A recovery plan has been written by an external consultant but with limited input or interaction with teachers in the department: it is a fairly general plan and does not include dates for some of the planned actions. Some teaching in science is also undertaken by unqualified staff.

There is no designated head of music and lines of responsibility are unclear. Recent notes of visit from a consultant, who only started visiting recently, have been helpful and give pointers to the department to plan improvements. The picture is similar in religious education, where support has been provided over a longer time.

The quality of teaching and learning across the college has weaknesses, especially in science. A recent LA inspection also identified a relatively high proportion of inadequate teaching. The inspection would have been more valuable if it had included some joint observations with senior staff, thereby giving training in lesson observation and helping to make internal monitoring more rigorous.

The college has made some progress on meeting requirements with regards to collective worship. A policy has been developed and parents have been consulted. The implementation now needs to be embedded securely.

Strategic and financial planning for the longer term has not improved since the last two visits and continues to require urgent action. Further planning is needed to take account of the increased pressure caused by falling rolls. These issues have not been fully discussed within the leadership team or with governors. A recent report by the LA highlighted some shortcomings and errors in financial information.

A deficit of about £60,000 was accrued in 2005-06 which was not anticipated by the governing body; current estimates indicate that the deficit for 2006-07 will grow to over £300,000. A recovery plan has been put in place, but has not been formally approved by the LA. Indeed a letter has been sent to the college raising the possibility of a warning notice for the removal of delegated status.

The governing body has voted to be dissolved and an application has been made for an interim executive board (IEB). This has yet to be approved and no governor or member of the planned IEB was available during this inspection. In view of the major issues over finance, governance and the slow pace of improvement, leadership in the college is inadequate.

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

- Persevere with all efforts to appoint heads of departments for science, music and religious education and to appoint enough qualified, specialist teachers to match the curriculum – inadequate progress and, to meet statutory requirements:
- Introduce a daily act of collective worship, control technology and more use of ICT in all subjects and by students in Years 10 and 11 – good progress on ICT and control technology, where statutory requirements are met and satisfactory progress on collective worship.

External support

The local authority has provided extensive support from a range of consultants, with varying degrees of impact and success. A consultant has been working in the college on a regular basis, as well as other advisers. A school improvement partner has also visited several times.

Good support has been provided for attendance and the management of behaviour. The support for finance and governance has not always been

utilised. Whilst there has been positive impact on improving behaviour, the impact on improving financial controls and governance has yet to be realised.

Consultants have given much support in science; the coaching has been helpful, but has not led to sufficiently raised standards. There has been some support in religious education and, more recently, in music, with some impact. The school improvement partner has made a number of visits which have led to perceptive comments on actions which the college needs to implement.

The college and the LA have not fully evaluated the impact of external support in tackling the key issues and have not met their target of removing the college from special measures within two years.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – inadequate

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – inadequate

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed in English, mathematics, ICT and modern foreign languages.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise standards by setting higher expectations of students' progress.
- Enhance the quality of teaching and learning by improving the quantity and quality of work completed by students in each lesson.
- Document and implement more systematic long-term strategic and financial planning.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Executive Director for Children and Young People for Surrey.

Yours sincerely

R Kapadia
H M Inspector