

Soham Village College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	110909
Local Authority	CAMBRIDGESHIRE
Inspection number	302320
Inspection dates	26–27 April 2007
Reporting inspector	Alan Alder HMI

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1342
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr John Thorogood
Headteacher	Dr Carin Taylor
Date of previous school inspection	1 April 2003
School address	Sand Street Soham Ely Cambridgeshire CB7 5AA
Telephone number	01353724100
Fax number	01353624854

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Introduction

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

Description of the school

Soham Village College is situated in a town which lies between the cities of Cambridge and Ely. It has specialist status for both technology and languages. The great majority of pupils at the school are from White British backgrounds. Very few pupils speak English as an additional language, though the number is increasing. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties or disabilities, including those with statements of special educational need is greater than the national average. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is half that of the national average. The principal joined the school in September 2006.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

This is a good school with some outstanding features. Students reach good standards and make good progress in their academic work because they are taught well, have good attitudes to learning and behave well. The quality of teaching is enhanced by teachers' often imaginative use of electronic white boards. Good behaviour is encouraged by a strong personal development programme. The ethos of the school is a caring one. Students are well cared for and there are particularly high expectations of what students with learning difficulties or disabilities can achieve. The support they receive is often outstanding. This, together with a curriculum which offers a reasonable amount of choice and flexibility for older students helps all students to achieve five or more GCSE passes. The work to help them to achieve economic well-being is good, though there is at present insufficient opportunity for students to study vocational or work related courses.

The school's leaders have aspirations for it to become an outstanding school. It is prevented from being so currently because while much that the school does is good and sometimes outstanding, in some aspects of the school's work there is too much variability in quality. In teaching, for example, the marking of students work and the setting of challenging homework are too variable. This is the result of insufficiently effective monitoring by those with responsibility to ensure good practice. While most students do well and make good progress, a few fall behind and underachieve. There is not a sufficiently good means of preventing this. Students are often not aware of the levels or grades they should be able to achieve and are not clear enough about how well they are doing. Those with an oversight of students' progress do not have an adequate means of tracking their progress towards these targets. Nevertheless, the proportion who achieve five or more higher grade GCSEs including English and mathematics is higher than the national average, though the proportion of girls achieving this is notably greater than that of boys.

Students say that they enjoy school, and this is confirmed by inspectors' observations. Their attendance is however only satisfactory although significant efforts are being made to improve it.

The very popular extra curricular provision for sports and physical activity, together with a greater emphasis on healthy eating, has encouraged students to adopt healthy lifestyles. Students have substantial involvement in an extensive range of school activities and in the wider community, both local and international; for example with the school's active links with some schools in other continents. The school is a positive and cohesive community and the strength of interpersonal relationships is a notable feature. Students are well looked after and the school is a safe environment.

Specialist status in technology has been used to good effect. The approach has been well considered and well planned. The deployment of electronic whiteboards has had a strong influence on teaching. Although targets have not been achieved, there have been improvements in the progress which students make in both mathematics and science. The school's new additional specialism, in languages, is recent and its impact is yet to become established.

What the school should do to improve further

- Increase the effectiveness of monitoring so that the good and outstanding practice in teaching is more widespread and weaker aspects improved, leading to greater consistency of practice.

- Ensure that all students know their targets and that their progress towards them is carefully monitored so that intervention can occur where necessary.
- Improve attendance.
- Increase the opportunities for students who wish to develop vocational or work related skills.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Achievement and standards are good. Students who took the national tests in 2006 showed above average standards, even though when they entered the school in Year 7 the standards they had reached were average. This shows that they made good progress. In mathematics their progress is particularly good. The GCSE results for 2006 showed that standards were also above average. This again represents good progress since students joined the school. All students achieved five or more passes at GCSE or equivalent. All groups of students made at least good progress, including those who have English as an additional language. Students with learning difficulties or disabilities made exceptional progress. The picture presented by these examination and test results is confirmed by the progress students are currently making.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

The personal development of students is good, and in some respects it is outstanding.

Behaviour is good, particularly in public areas where many strong friendship groups together with students' respect for each other help create a strong sense of community. Both parents and students rightly view the school as a safe and secure place in which to learn. Bullying and intimidation are infrequent and resolved effectively. The school council and year councils are active, but it is through the many fundraising and support activities that students demonstrate considerable personal initiative and social responsibility. Students' awareness of other cultures is enhanced well through overseas links such as those with a school in Sri Lanka.

Students' attendance is satisfactory. The school is seeking to improve it through, for example, not approving holidays taken during term time. There is however a hard core of students whose attendance is a cause for concern and strong action is being taken to remedy this.

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development are outstanding. Social and moral development are strongly promoted throughout the school. Tutor work and assemblies provide significant cultural and spiritual insights and opportunities for discussion and reflection. Lessons in many subjects successfully encourage students to express themselves and listen to and respect others' ideas. Good relationships and the sense of community are further strengthened by prefects and older students mentoring and supporting younger students, including new entrants to the school.

Careers education, timetabled business education and appropriate work placements help students better understand the world of work, though the school recognises there is more to be done in terms of enterprise education.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teaching and learning are good. Lessons are well planned, with teachers taking into account the needs of individuals. Teachers know their subjects well. They explain points clearly and challenge students to think deeply. Learning is often enlivened by interesting resources. Electronic whiteboards in particular are used to involve students and stimulate their imagination and teachers include a variety of activities in their planning so that all students are engaged. Students develop good levels of self confidence and are able to express their views articulately. Very good relationships among students and adults underpin good learning. Students with learning difficulties are encouraged to shine and make outstanding progress as a result. When present, teaching assistants support individuals and groups effectively. Teachers manage occasional challenging behaviour well and lessons are calm and orderly. There is an atmosphere of mutual concern and respect.

In some aspects of teaching there is too much variability, for example in marking students' work. Students often do not know their targets, or what they need to do to improve. In some lessons questions are only asked of those who volunteer to answer, and this means that some are insufficiently challenged or engaged. The final part of lessons is not routinely used to sum up and reinforce key learning points.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum is good. It plays a very significant part in enhancing students' personal development. The opportunities for enrichment through extra curricular activities are very good and many students participate in them. There is also some flexibility and choice in the curriculum for younger students. Older students are well catered for and there are good opportunities to take additional subjects at GCSE for the more able. However, the extent of both vocational and work based courses is too limited.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

The quality of care, guidance and support provided is good. Day to day health and safety procedures are effective, as are those relating to child protection and the care of looked after children. The school enjoys close links with specialist agencies within the wider community and these help to ensure that appropriate support is available for vulnerable or disaffected students. The use of tutorial time to provide guidance and support to all students is good.

The academic guidance provided for students is satisfactory. The tracking of students' progress takes place within the individual faculties but there is no central overview of students' progress across the whole curriculum.

Students receive comprehensive information about the options available in Years 10 and 11 and a high proportion of leavers go on to attend colleges of further education or sixth form colleges.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The leadership and management of the school are good.

The new principal has provided a clear vision for the future development of the school. Her evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses is accurate. With the support of senior colleagues, she is bringing about good improvement, for example through new behaviour management procedures. These have proved effective in supporting teachers and drastically reducing the use of student exclusions. This demonstrates that there is good capacity for improvement.

Monitoring and review procedures are being established alongside a clear system of accountability for those with leadership responsibilities. These arrangements include closer, regular meetings between senior leaders and those with responsibility for subject departments. They have yet to sufficiently reduce the extent of inconsistent and less effective practice in the school. The already good student care and support arrangements have also been strengthened.

The governors are supportive and know the school well. Recent changes have now strengthened governors' role in critically evaluating the school's provision and their participation in its strategic development.

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Annex A

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall
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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
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes

Achievement and standards

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

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1
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	1
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
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	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?	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	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	1
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
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

30 April 2007

Dear Students

Inspection of Soham Village College, Soham, CB7 5AA

Thank you for the help you gave us when we inspected your school. We enjoyed meeting you and speaking with many of you, whether in meetings, in lessons or around the school.

We found that your school is a good school and has some outstanding features. You make good progress in your learning. This is not only because you are taught well, but also because you are keen to learn and you behave well. Teachers work hard to help everyone to learn. Those of you who have learning difficulties are very well supported and make outstanding progress.

You make a very positive commitment to the community, both in your school and locality, but also further afield - this is helped by the link your school has with other schools overseas. This is one aspect of your very strong spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Another is the very good relationships you have with each other and with your teachers. Your school is a harmonious place.

We have also found some areas where your school should improve. You should be better informed about your targets for the Year 9 national tests and your GCSE examinations, and there should be more careful checking to make sure you are all doing as well as you should be. There should be more consistency in teaching, for example in homework setting, marking and the way the work is summarised at the end of the lesson. The curriculum is good, but there is not enough opportunity for those of you who want to study subjects more closely related to the world of work. Finally, most of you attend school regularly, but there are some who are absent more than they should be. We are recommending that more is done to reduce this.

Best wishes for your future,

Alan Alder

Her Majesty's Inspector