

Bassingbourn Village College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	110895
Local Authority	CAMBRIDGESHIRE
Inspection number	302340
Inspection dates	2–3 May 2007
Reporting inspector	Rhona Seviour 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	656
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Tim Longworth
Headteacher	Mr Scott Hudson
Date of previous school inspection	6 October 2003
School address	South End Bassingbourn Royston Hertfordshire SG8 5NJ
Telephone number	01763 242344
Fax number	01763 248122

Age group	11–16
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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

Bassingbourn College has grown steadily since its last inspection. It remains relatively small and serves a mainly rural area, including a nearby army barracks. Students enter the college with standards that are above average. There are very few from ethnic minority backgrounds and the percentage from socially and economically advantaged homes is above the national average. The percentage with learning difficulties and disabilities is higher than average. None of the students are at an early stage of learning the English language and there are very few looked after children. The college works closely with two others to provide a range of education programmes for the wider community. It has specialist technology and vocational status and is the lead member of a Leading Edge partnership. It is recognised as high performing by the Specialist Colleges and Academies Trust.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

Bassingbourn Village College provides a satisfactory education. It has some good features and some areas requiring improvement. The principal, ably supported by the deputy principal, leads the college well and has a clear vision for its future development. In the relatively short time he has been in post, the systems for monitoring the quality of teaching and for judging the college's effectiveness have improved but these are not yet robust or consistent enough in practice across the college. As one student perceptively identified when talking about the way things are implemented, 'It only works if everyone does it.' The college's own view of its strengths and weaknesses, although broadly accurate, is more favourable than that of inspectors about achievement and standards, the quality of teaching and learning and aspects of its leadership and management.

Most students enjoy their time at the college and feel safe and secure within its environment. Attendance rates are above average. The college rightly prides itself on its caring ethos and the good support it provides for the students. There is a good curriculum, which offers a very varied range of opportunities to support students' personal and social development and their awareness of other cultures. There is very strong provision for foreign language learning and for students to develop an understanding of workplace skills and practices. By the time they reach the end of Year 11, students are well prepared to take next step into further education or employment.

Students are articulate, confident and interested learners. They willingly contribute in lessons and work well together. They respond enthusiastically when given opportunities to take an active part in lessons but this does not happen often enough. Teaching is variable in quality and not all students experience consistently high quality learning experiences. The very best teaching in the college is outstanding. It challenges students to move at a fast pace and to think for themselves. However, some of the teaching makes insufficient demands of the students and this contributes to the slower progress they make in some lessons and, on occasions, to poor behaviour.

Results in the national tests at the end of Year 9 and the GCSE examinations are above average. Given students' high starting points, this represents satisfactory progress. GCSE results fell in 2006, particularly in mathematics, where there was significant underachievement. Students did not perform as well in some of the subjects for which the college has specialist status as they did in others. Since the last inspection the college has faced severe staffing and financial difficulties and these have had an impact on students' achievement in some areas. In addition, middle managers have not always monitored and evaluated the work of their departments with sufficient rigour or taken effective action to ensure that all students make good progress. Senior leaders are now taking steps to reverse the decline but it is too soon to judge the impact of many of their actions.

Governors have given guidance and support to the college to help it overcome its financial difficulties and to develop its curriculum. They recognise the need for improvement in aspects of the college's work and are supportive of the new senior leadership team's work. The college's specialist status has made a satisfactory impact on its effectiveness. It has sufficient capacity to improve further and provides satisfactory value for money.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve students' standards and achievement in mathematics.
- Ensure that students are appropriately challenged in lessons and become more actively involved in all of their learning.
- Increase the rigour with which lessons are monitored and evaluated in order to improve the quality of teaching.
- Improve the effectiveness of middle managers and leaders by ensuring that they have the expertise to raise students' standards and achievement in their subjects and year groups.

A small proportion of the colleges 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

Students join the college with attainment that is above average and achieve satisfactorily to reach above average standards by the time they leave.

Standards at the end of Key Stage 3 are above average and students make satisfactory progress in Years 7 to 9, with good progress in some lessons, including modern foreign languages and science. In recent years, results in National Curriculum tests in English, mathematics and science at the end of Key Stage 3 have been consistently above average. Results in the 2006 tests declined slightly and fell short of the college's challenging targets. Nonetheless, the college did well by its most able students, and boys and girls achieved equally well.

Standards at the end of Key Stage 4 are above average and students make satisfactory progress in Years 10 and 11. Results at GCSE improved steadily to 2005 when they were exceptionally high. They declined in 2006 and the college fell short of meeting its target for the percentage of students achieving 5 or more A* to C grades. There was a significant fall in the percentage of students whose five or more A* to C grades included English and mathematics. This is because results in English dipped and those in mathematics declined significantly. The percentage of students gaining five or more A* to G grades and those gaining one or more A* to G grades have been consistently above average in recent years. Students with learning difficulties and disabilities and the very small number of students of minority ethnic heritage performed much better than similar groups nationally.

The college has introduced a number of initiatives in response to the decline in GCSE results in 2006. It has improved the way it tracks students' progress and has begun to strengthen the way senior managers and heads of subject departments check the quality of teaching and learning. It has also implemented appropriate strategies to improve students' progress, particularly in mathematics. These initiatives have not yet had time to make a measurable impact on achievement.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Students' personal development and well-being, including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, are good. Students are self-confident and articulate, have good relationships with their peers and adults, and work well in groups of different sizes. They show a good understanding of different cultures within Europe and the wider world, including Japan

and the Caribbean. Most enjoy college and have good attitudes to work especially when lessons actively involve them in the learning process and set them realistic, challenging tasks. Their behaviour is predominantly good in lessons and around the college although there are occasional instances of unsatisfactory behaviour, some of which are linked to weaknesses in teaching. Attendance rates are above average, and students are normally punctual for lessons.

Students understand what they need to do to keep themselves healthy. Many are involved in sports clubs in addition to their physical education lessons, and they appreciate the healthy food now provided by the cafeteria. They feel safe in the college and trust the staff to deal effectively with isolated instances of bullying. They adopt safe practices in lessons such as science and technology, and many understand how to manage risk in their own lives. Students take on many responsibilities through a wide range of activities, including the year group and student forums and the researchers' group that investigates aspects of the college's work.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory although it varies across the college. Over the last year, the monitoring of teaching and learning within subject departments has improved but this is not yet ensuring that students have consistently good learning experiences in all lessons. As a result, students make good progress in some areas, for example in modern foreign languages, and underachieve in others, notably in mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT).

The very best teaching inspires the students. It challenges them to think for themselves and ensures their active participation in the lesson. Questioning is used well by most teachers and explanations are clear and well informed. The emphasis on students' acquiring subject-specific vocabulary is particularly strong. The good relationship between teachers and students provides a sound basis for the learning but too much teaching relies on a limited range of approaches and is not always matched well enough to the full range of students' needs and abilities.

Students approach their studies very positively and have the confidence and interest to question their teachers and contribute during lessons. Most respond enthusiastically to challenges whenever these are offered, and make every effort to achieve the targets they are set. For instance, students following the early entry GCSE mathematics course in Year 10 are motivated by the high expectations and the fast pace of the course.

Marking is inconsistent, and although there are exceptions, students are not always given sufficient and regular subject-specific guidance to improve their work. The college knows that homework is not always set and marked regularly and is taking steps to remedy this. Students are not given enough opportunities to develop their ICT skills progressively and apply these to learning within other subjects.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum is good and meets the learning needs and interests of the students, particularly those with learning difficulties and disabilities. In Key Stage 3, there are effective catch-up programmes for students who enter the college with key skills below the expected standards. Following the award of vocational specialist status, the college has revised the Key Stage 4

curriculum and substantially increased the vocational options for students starting courses in September. There are particularly good opportunities for students' cultural development. These include activities within religious education and the programme for personal, social, health and citizenship education, as well as journeys to Iceland and China, and exchanges with students in France, Germany and the Netherlands. The provision for almost all students to study a foreign language at GCSE is a strength of the college. The curriculum for ICT has improved since the last inspection although weaknesses remain, and insufficient account is taken of national guidance. The college knows that tutorial time after lunch is not always used effectively and has plans to introduce a new system. Many students attend the wide range of lunchtime and after-college clubs. There is a good range of activities to enrich the curriculum including enterprise days and visits to places such as Ely and Duxford.

Students are well prepared for their future economic well-being because they have good key skills of literacy and numeracy, and opportunities, for instance during 'collapsed timetable days', to use their initiative and work collaboratively. Strong links with other colleges, the local community and the college's own community education provision are used well to enhance the curriculum and incorporate activities such as work experience to prepare students for their future education and employment.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

The college is very supportive of all its students, including those with particular needs. Vulnerable students are identified early and tracked effectively. Students with personal difficulties are supported very well as are those with specific learning needs. The college rightly identifies this support for individuals as one of its strengths. The central collation of data on assessment is good and the use of this information, particularly in setting individual academic targets, has improved since the last inspection. The college works well with other specialist agencies and there are very close working relationships with the parents of children with learning difficulties and disabilities.

The college prepares students very well for the future through its careers education and guidance provision and also through its teaching about the diverse ethnic nature of Britain. It monitors the effectiveness of its provision for students' healthy lifestyles and their awareness of safety matters through surveys of their views and experiences. The college has robust arrangements for safeguarding the students and meeting health and safety requirements.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

The principal provides effective leadership for the college and has a clear vision for its future development. The leadership group, strengthened by the new deputy principal, is working very well with the staff to improve the quality of the college's teaching and other provision. Senior leaders have a broadly accurate view of the college's strengths and its main areas for development. They are aware that the processes supporting self-evaluation are not sufficiently robust and have taken action to strengthen these. The monitoring of teaching and learning is improving and is leading to more precision in identifying areas for improvement but practice is not consistent across the college. As a result, development planning does not always focus

sharply enough on raising standards and lacks measurable criteria to enable the college to judge the success of its actions.

Middle management is satisfactory across the college as a whole although its quality in individual departments varies. Senior leaders know this and are taking appropriate action, including strengthening the accountability and expectations of middle managers. There are also training opportunities and support for those wishing to develop as leaders and managers. Nonetheless, the inconsistencies across subject departments, particularly in the rigour with which college policies and practices are implemented and the quality of teaching and learning, are a barrier to improvement.

The college works hard to recruit and retain good teachers. During the last two years it has faced a number of long term absences and difficulties in recruiting replacement teachers. Although senior leaders have worked hard to minimise the impact, these difficulties have had an adverse effect on achievement in some areas. Since the last inspection communication with parents has improved and most are positive about the college's work. Inspectors agree with parents that the quality of teaching is sometimes not good enough.

The college works successfully with a wide range of external agencies and partners and has ambitious plans to develop these further in response to the government's extended schools and 14-19 agendas and its recent re-designation as a technology and vocational specialist college. Governors know the college's strengths and areas of weakness and review its progress regularly through scrutiny in committees. Together with the principal, they have helped resolve the serious budget deficit which has existed for the last three years. This has placed severe constraints on the college's capacity to purchase equipment and improve the learning environment. Priority has been given to investment in ICT resources but the college still lags behind many others in the availability of technology to support teaching and learning. The college provides satisfactory value for money.

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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?	3
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	3
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3
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
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2
The behaviour of learners	2
The attendance of learners	2
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
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?	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	2
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
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

4 May 2007

Dear Students

Inspection of Bassingbourn Village College, Bassingbourn, SG8 5NJ

As you know, we recently visited your college. We would like to thank you for the positive way in which you responded to our inspection and for all the help you gave us. We were impressed by your confidence when answering our questions and by your politeness.

There are many things which we think your college does well. Most of you enjoy your education there and appreciate the good range of opportunities which the college offers you, both in and out of lessons, such as the Year 10 enterprise day which we saw when we visited. You spoke enthusiastically about the subjects you enjoy and the good relationships you feel you have with your teachers. You are obviously keen to do well. In lessons you contribute positively and question your teachers when something is unclear or when you want to find out more about a topic. We think the college is doing a great deal to inform you about what you need to do to stay healthy and to help you understand other cultures, particularly through your foreign language lessons and the programme of personal, social, health and citizenship education. Your teachers give you a great deal of support, particularly when you face difficulties and need extra help with your learning. It is a credit to the college that the older students feel so well prepared for their future education or employment.

We agree with many of the comments you and your parents made about the areas the college needs to improve. We recognise that staff absences have disrupted some of the normal teaching arrangements and want the college to check the quality of the teaching and learning more thoroughly. Although the results in the national tests and exams are above average, we think you are capable of making more progress in some subjects. To help with this we would like you to be challenged and actively involved in more of your lessons. The principal and the staff had begun to make changes to improve the college before our visit and we agree with the direction in which it is moving. We know that they want to listen to your views and involve you, and your parents, in the improvements. We hope that you will do all you can to help and, above all, continue to be ambitious for yourselves. We wish you well in the future.

Yours sincerely

Rhona Seviour

Her Majesty's Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills