

Thorns Community College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	103853
Local Authority	Dudley
Inspection number	308439
Inspection date	9 July 2008
Reporting inspector	Kevin Sheldrick HMI

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

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1366
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Jackie Jessup
Headteacher	David Mountney
Date of previous school inspection	3 May 2005
School address	Stockwell Avenue Brierley Hill DY5 2NU
Telephone number	01384 816225
Fax number	01384 816226

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Introduction

One of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one Additional Inspector carried out the inspection. The inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the college, the achievement of students, the quality of teaching and learning, and the effectiveness of leadership and management. Evidence from published assessment data, the college's own records, parents' questionnaires, lesson observations and interviews with staff and students was gathered. Other aspects of the college's work were not investigated in detail. Inspectors found no evidence to suggest that the college's own assessments, as given in its self-evaluation, were not justified, and these have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

The college is larger than similar schools found nationally and the majority of its students are from socially deprived areas. A smaller percentage of students take free school meals and the percentage from minority ethnic groups is far smaller than national figures. The percentage of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is lower than that found nationally, as is the number of students whose first language is not English. The college population is more stable than that depicted by schools nationally.

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 college because it ensures all students make impressive progress academically and in their personal development. The college's leadership has successfully established a shared vision that has at its heart the development of rounded individuals. The college has a long record of high achievement. In the past, students have entered the college with below average attainment but current year groups are generally average. The 2007 examination results were close to the national average and reflected a temporary dip in achievement. There was, however, a rise in the number of students gaining five A* to C grades, including English and mathematics. The number of students gaining the highest A* and A grades also improved. The college is rightly proud of its record of ensuring students with a wide range of learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good progress. The colleges' tracking data, module results and inspectors observations confirm that current achievement has improved. Current achievement is good and standards are above average. The progress students make in the first two years in the college does not match that made in Years 9 to 11.

The good outcomes students achieve are largely a result of teaching that emphasises the importance of students learning for themselves. Extensive additional adult support ensures students receive high levels of individual attention. Frequently in lessons, students are actively involved in thought-provoking starter activities, which often lead to collaborative work. A particular strength is the regular active involvement of students in critically evaluating each other's work. Students are very good at offering sensitive advice to each other about how to improve. Effective questioning that encourages deeper thought is becoming widespread. In the very best lessons, these teaching strategies, combined with high levels of challenge enable students to make progress towards achieving their personal targets. Whilst lessons often provide opportunities for students to achieve more, less motivated students and those that lack confidence are allowed to take the easy option occasionally, particularly in Years 7 and 8. A new teaching programme is increasing students' enjoyment of learning. In the hands of effective teachers, this enhances achievement because there is a strong emphasis on using these strategies to ensure students achieve their targets.

There are promising signs that more effective, timely action is happening in response to any indication that students are not performing, as they should. However, this is not ensuring consistent progress in every year group. Care, support and guidance are good because students are well looked after. An impressive array of support is available that includes student mentors and a college counsellor. Students could list a range of people they would talk to if they needed support. Safeguarding meets government's requirements. Work with outside agencies ensures vulnerable students and those with a statement of special educational needs are very well catered for. Students feel safe and indicate that bullying is not an issue. Students largely know their targets but there are some inconsistencies in the guidance on how to achieve these. Students think the college does everything it can to encourage healthy living and the vast majority of students take regular exercise and eat healthily. The high levels of enjoyment and good systems for monitoring absence result in good attendance. Preparation for future economic well-being is good because students have access to extensive work-related learning and above average development of important employability skills. Students think the college has an accurate approach to their positive involvement in the community. They have good opportunities to volunteer as mentors, prefects, and art or sport ambassadors. Students are listened to well through more formal year and college councils and the principal's policy of regular meetings

with students. The only relative weakness in personal development is students' behaviour. The vast majority of students behave well and there is a calm orderly atmosphere around college. However, in a small minority of lessons, behaviour affects learning because teaching is weaker and the college's behaviour policy is not consistently applied. The vast majority of parents who responded to the questionnaire are supportive of the college although a significant minority highlighted the college's management of behaviour as a slight weakness. The college has effective arrangements to monitor parent and student views and is actively addressing the issue of how behaviour can be improved further.

The curriculum is good. Arrangements ensure more vulnerable learners in Year 7 experience a more primary-orientated curriculum that eases their transition into the college. Students are pleased with the options process and the courses they follow in Years 10 and 11. This is an important contributory factor to the accelerated progress made in their final two years. An alternative curriculum meets the needs of a small minority. The vast majority of students participate in extra-curricular opportunities. The college's specialism contributes well to the development of students' cultural, moral and spiritual development. Students explore these themes regularly in assemblies through the performing arts. Religious education contributes well to students' understanding of different religions and cultures. History has gone beyond the National Curriculum in ensuring students are more aware of the existence of long-standing civilisations in Africa. Students in Year 9 would like more choice in the courses they take and opportunities to gain greater insight into options and pathways that go beyond their time in the college.

A major strength of leadership and management is the willingness to listen and respond to the views of others. This contributes to the college's effective approach to self-review, monitoring and evaluation. The college has an accurate picture of the strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning, although it has only recently developed the confidence to use data more effectively. The disappointing results in 2007 were because the college was less successful in meeting the needs of a particularly demanding year group. There were some staffing difficulties and weaknesses in the tracking of progress. The college has done well in ensuring improvement to prevent a reoccurrence. Staffing difficulties are less likely because the college is able to train more of its own staff. Academic guidance is improving and streamlined management structures ensure much more accountability for standards. These changes have also resulted in the college making good use of non-teaching staff. Governors provide useful expertise and have instigated action that has improved outcomes for students, for instance they have improved catering arrangements. In recent years, the college has set targets that would maintain its position as a good college rather than striving for excellence. College planning does not communicate a strong enough desire for achieving even better outcomes. Although leadership and management are good overall and there is a track record indicating significant improvement, the relatively modest ambition of recent years indicates a satisfactory capacity to improve.

What the school should do to improve further

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- Ensure outcomes in lessons link much more to students achieving their personal targets, particularly in Years 7 to 9.
- Adopt ambitious targets for improvement and ensure these permeate all of what the college does.

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

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	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 extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2
How well learners enjoy their education	2
The attendance of learners	2
The behaviour of learners	3
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?	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 leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2
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	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

10 July 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Thorns Community College, Brierley Hill, DY5 2NU

Thank you for your contribution to this inspection. I would particularly like to thank the students we interviewed, especially those in Year 10 who had to interrupt their work experience to meet with us.

The college leadership and those of you we interviewed had little doubt that Thorns is a good college. Having considered a wide range of evidence we agreed with you. The college does a good job of ensuring students develop as well-rounded individuals. Although you achieve well, the college does more than this in developing positive attitudes and a good level of social skills. In many lessons, you work collaboratively and you are particularly good at evaluating learning. These are important skills that will help you succeed in the future. The college does very well in ensuring those of you with learning difficulties and/or disabilities achieve as much as you can. In view of these positive outcomes, you will not be surprised that we judge teaching and learning and leadership and management to be good. We think you are well cared for and receive suitable guidance in most aspects. We decided that the curriculum is good, particularly for those in Years 10 and 11.

To improve further we are suggesting that the college ensures that outcomes in lessons, particularly in Years 7 to 9, help you achieve your personal targets more often. We are also suggesting that the college should communicate its intention to be outstanding by adopting ambitious targets. A strength of the college is that it listens and responds well to your views. For this reason, we think you should continue to give your views, especially about how you could achieve your targets more quickly.

We were pleased that the weather was bad on the day of our visit so that the inspection did not prevent your sports day taking place! We wish you well for the future.

Yours sincerely

Kevin Sheldrick Her Majesty's Inspector