

Rainford High Technology College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	104826
Local Authority	St Helens
Inspection number	308681
Inspection dates	30 April –1 May 2008
Reporting inspector	John Ashton

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1597
6th form	233
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr John Bromilow
Headteacher	Mrs Ruth Halsall
Date of previous school inspection	11 October 2004
School address	Higher Lane Rainford St Helens Merseyside WA11 8NY
Telephone number	01744 885914
Fax number	01744 884842

Age group	11-18
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by five Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Rainford High Technology College is much larger than other secondary schools. Students are drawn from generally advantaged areas. Fewer students than average are eligible for free school meals. The college has slightly more boys than girls in most year groups. Numbers in the sixth form are healthy again after a dip in recent years. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is below average. There are few students from minority ethnic backgrounds and very few at an early stage of learning English. Stability is high; the number of students who join or leave the college other than at the usual times is very low. A new principal took up post in April 2006 after a short period as acting principal.

The college has specialist status in technology, awarded for the second time in 2004. It gained the Sportsmark award for the second time in 2007. It achieved the Investors in People Award in 2008 and is working towards the Healthy Schools Award.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

Rainford High Technology College provides a satisfactory and improving quality of education. It has a number of strengths among which are the quality of education students receive in the sixth form and the personal development, care, support and guidance students experience throughout the college.

Standards are significantly above the national average from entry into Year 7 through to GCSE examinations at the end of Year 11. Students' progress across Years 7 to 9 is satisfactory overall but better in mathematics than in English or science. Overall progress in Years 10 and 11 is also satisfactory. Standards in English catch up with those for mathematics at this stage, but those in science still lag behind and students do not achieve as well as they could in this subject. A variation in the quality of teaching across these three core subjects is a significant factor. Teaching is more effective in mathematics than in English and better in both of these subjects than it is in science. The quality of science teaching is gradually improving, however, owing to support from the local authority. The college's systems for monitoring teaching and learning are not as rigorous or regular as they should be to ensure that students do not underachieve in some subjects. The wealth of assessment data the college collects on its students is not used well enough to support their progress.

Students' personal development and well-being are good throughout the college. They enjoy being there, as the above average attendance levels show. They feel safe and well cared for and say that they are listened to more than they used to be. Students' knowledge of healthy lifestyle choices is good. They are heavily involved in sport and conscious of the need for a healthy diet. Their contribution to the wider community remains strong. On the whole, they are well prepared for the next stage of their education.

Parents say that they are consulted more than they used to be and because of this the college knows that they are particularly happy with college security, examination results and computer access for students. The inspection survey of parents' views confirmed that most are supportive of the college. However, it also found that significant numbers have some concerns about students' behaviour and the quality of some of the teaching and learning, particularly its lack of continuity in some areas, and the related issues of homework and marking. Inspectors found behaviour to be good during the inspection but did find some inconsistency in the quality of marking in some subjects. The college curriculum is satisfactory overall. It is good in the sixth form but has weaknesses in the main school; for example, there are too few alternatively accredited courses for students in Years 10 and 11.

Leadership and management are developing after a period of transition. The relatively recently appointed principal works well with her senior team. Together with a very experienced and supportive governing body, they have overcome some testing challenges – a recent budget deficit, for example. The leadership team is well aware of what it needs to do to sustain the college's high attainment while ensuring more consistency of achievement across the college. The impact of the college's specialism has enhanced to good effect the provision of information and communication technology (ICT) resources and the related non-teaching support across the school. Links with neighbouring colleges and with local industry are

stronger, and innovative approaches to teaching and learning are permeating more and more into the life of the school from positions of strength in mathematics and technology.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Sixth form provision is good. The majority of students enter with above average results at GCSE and, because of effective teaching, they usually make good progress and attain above average standards by the time they leave college. There are fluctuations and differences between the results in different subjects, which generally reflect students' different starting points. Students taking mathematics, for instance, usually begin with higher overall grades than those studying sociology.

The sixth form's increasingly effective system for keeping track of students' progress indicates that the current group of students is progressing better than students in the previous year. There is a good system for mentoring all students, which ensures that those who are less motivated or underachieving are spotted quickly and either challenged or helped. Consequently, the great majority of students complete their courses and most go on to higher education.

A broad choice of academic courses is offered that meets students' needs well, complementing but not duplicating more vocational choices in neighbouring colleges. Students' personal development and well-being are good. Monitoring of progress and academic guidance are also strengths of the sixth form.

Students are enthusiastic about life in the sixth form. They act with a good level of responsibility, notably in the organisation of their college council and their good work with younger students for charities and for the local community. They feel safe, secure and valued because they are offered a good balance of direction and independence. 'We like it here because we are well known.' Relationships are good and this, together with students' strong community spirit, is a key strength of the sixth form. There is a good range of enrichment activities that promote well students' growing maturity and sense of responsibility.

Leadership and management are good. Procedures have been strengthened compared to last year while maintaining the very positive atmosphere and helpful informality that students say they value.

What the school should do to improve further

- The quality of teaching and learning so that it is at least good throughout the college and promotes consistently good achievement between subjects.
- Better and more consistent use of assessment data to pinpoint those students who need support to improve their achievement.
- The curriculum in Key Stages 3 and 4 to meet better the needs of all students, particularly in relation to alternative accredited courses.
- Increase the effectiveness of the monitoring of teaching and learning by making it more rigorous and regular.

A small proportion of the schools 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

Grade for sixth form: 2

Students enter the college having gained above average results in their primary school tests. Their test results at the end of Year 9 are significantly above the national average. However, students' progress through Years 7 to 9 is only satisfactory because they do not make equally good progress in all subjects. They achieve much better in mathematics than in English and science. For example, in 2007 the college met its statutory targets in mathematics but not in English and science. While the 2007 GCSE examination results were significantly above the national average, with 71% of students achieving at least five A* to C grades, this fell short of the college target because a small group of students did not do as well as they should have. A creditable 65% achieved at least five A* to C grades, including both English and mathematics, exceeding the college target. Although senior staff collect a large amount of data on students' progress and circulate it to pastoral leaders, learning managers and heads of department, these data are not always used to best effect to raise students' achievement. Achievement and standards in the sixth form are good overall.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

By the time they leave college at the end of the sixth form, the vast majority of students have matured into well informed young citizens. Relationships between students are good and they socialise well together. They have more opportunities to take on responsibilities than they did at the last inspection; for example, as sports leaders and listeners to each other. The college and class councils are well established and ensure that students have a voice and make a difference to college life.

Attendance is above average. The vast majority of students enjoy college life and most contribute well in lessons. There is good take up for activities beyond lessons. Behaviour is good in lessons and around the college. Only very occasionally is there low-level disruption in lessons when teachers do not manage the behaviour of a few students well enough.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is satisfactory overall. Social and moral provision are good; spiritual and cultural provision are satisfactory. Students have a good understanding of healthy and safe lifestyle choices. They make a good contribution to the community through the good range of activities they take part in. Students' above average standards in basic skills of literacy, numeracy and ICT prepare them well for life beyond college.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

Teaching and learning are satisfactory in Key Stages 3 and 4, but inconsistent between subjects. The quality of teaching and learning is good in the sixth form. Across the college, teachers have good subject knowledge and use questioning effectively to assess students' progress.

Students have good relationships with teachers and most show positive attitudes towards their learning. In the best lessons students are clear about what they will be learning and about their progress because teachers have clear lesson objectives which they use to monitor and review the lessons with students. Students are also given good opportunities to work independently to clarify their thinking and in pairs or groups to learn from each other. In these lessons they are challenged and enthused and their behaviour is exemplary, which creates a very positive atmosphere for learning. When teaching is less effective, teachers do not always make it clear enough what they expect students to learn. Some teachers talk for too long so that students are not actively engaged enough and lose attention. In addition, teachers do not always plan effectively enough to stretch students or meet their range of needs. As a result, some students do not progress as quickly as they ought.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

The curriculum is satisfactory in the main college. It is good in the sixth form. Students follow mainly traditional academic courses although there are additional programmes provided for students with the weakest literacy and numeracy skills in Years 7, 8 and 9. There is also an appropriately adapted curriculum for a very small group of Year 7 students, to limit the number of different teachers they have and provide a more secure learning environment. A good vocational option is provided for small numbers of students in Years 10 and 11 as a 'skills for working life' programme. The college has recognised the need for the curriculum to be developed further, particularly with alternatively accredited courses, to meet the needs and interests of all its students more closely. As a result of its specialist status, students have the opportunity to follow a good range of courses in technology. The newly revised personal, social and health education programme includes some provision for citizenship education, albeit limited across the curriculum. There are a good number of extra-curricular activities. Sporting opportunities are a particular strength.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The vast majority of students say that they feel valued and generally free from bullying. They confirm that they trust adults and know where to turn for help. Procedures to safeguard students meet current requirements. The pastoral system ensures that students are well cared for. Channels of communication are effective so that students who are at risk or who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities are quickly identified and support put in place to help them. However, there is variation in the use of form tutor time to promote students' social and economic well-being.

Since the previous inspection the college has improved its arrangements to consult with parents. Most parents are supportive of the college and feel their children are well looked after. The inclusion room and nurture group are good examples of the college's efforts to try and engage students in learning and to support their social and emotional needs. Good quality support and guidance is provided for students in Years 9 and 11. They confirm that this helps them to decide their future courses.

Most students are clear about their learning targets and the steps they need to take to reach them. However, although the college has a wealth of data available, it is not used well enough in some subjects to raise students' achievement in Years 7 to 9. The support and guidance of students in the sixth form is good.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

The principal sets a clear direction for the college and is effectively supported by the senior leadership group. Staff morale is high and there is a shared sense of direction and purpose. The college's self-evaluation, though overgenerous in some respects, is based on a clear awareness of areas which are effective and those which require improvement. Improvement planning, however, is not sufficiently detailed and does not make lines of accountability clear so that it is difficult to assess to what extent objectives are being achieved. The management structure in which senior managers and subject leaders are paired is beginning to provide effective support and challenge but is not yet consistently implemented. Similarly, the college's systems to monitor and evaluate the quality of teaching and learning are not yet rigorous enough as lesson observations are not sufficiently frequent or focused. Subject leaders are beginning to find ways of sharing good practice. The college's specialist technology status has helped with the provision of ICT across the college to support learning. There are good examples of innovative work, particularly in the mathematics and technology departments, and promising links with other colleges and with local industries. The principal and governors, supported by the local authority, have worked hard to improve the standard of accommodation but the present buildings do not serve the interests of students well. The governing body has a clear understanding of the college's work and provides effective critical support. Financial management is strong and a deficit has now been translated into a small surplus through tight budgetary control. Overall, leadership and management and the capacity to improve are all satisfactory and improving in the main school. They are good in the sixth form.

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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	16-19
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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	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	3	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	3	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2	2
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	3	

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	3	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
How well learners enjoy their education	3	
The attendance of learners	2	
The behaviour of learners	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	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	3	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	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	2
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 leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	3	
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	3	
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No	
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No	

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

My colleagues and I enjoyed our recent inspection of your college and we would like to thank those of you who took the time to talk to and share your views with us. We were impressed with the maturity of those conversations and what you told us helped us to come to a conclusion about how well the college is doing.

Different groups of you told us, and we agree with you, that you are well looked after in the college, that academic standards are high, especially in mathematics and some of the technology subjects, and that most of the teaching in the college is good. You told us, and your parents appear to agree, that the security arrangements for ensuring your safety are good, and that students' behaviour is good for most of the time and when it isn't it is dealt with well by the college. You are less happy with the building and disappointed that it is going to take so many years to improve.

We think that your college is giving you a satisfactory standard of education but that some of you are not achieving as well as you should, especially in Years 7 to 9 in, for example, science and English compared with mathematics. We believe that all the test data the college collects from you should be used more effectively to put this right. We also feel that the curriculum you receive does not include enough opportunities for students in Years 10 and 11 to take alternative courses, which would also have a recognised certificate at the end of them. Finally, we think that monitoring of the work in the classrooms should be more regular and more systematic in order to guarantee that teaching and learning is at least good in every classroom.