

Sidmouth College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	113503
Local Authority	Devon
Inspection number	311300
Inspection dates	14–15 May 2008
Reporting inspector	Adrian Lyons 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	11–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	856
6th form	119
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Sylvia Martin
Headteacher	David Birch
Date of previous school inspection	4 February 2005
School address	Primley Road Sidmouth EX10 9LG
Telephone number	01395 514823
Fax number	01395 578073

Age group	11-19
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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

Sidmouth College is a specialist technology college with a rural dimension. It is a smaller than average size comprehensive college in a selective area, serving a seaside community in East Devon with a rural hinterland. The proportion of students eligible for free college meals is below average but this may disguise pockets of hardship caused by seasonal and low paid work. The student population is overwhelmingly White British and the proportion of students for whom English is not their first language is very small. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/ or disabilities is average.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 4

In accordance with section 13 (3) of the Education Act 2005, HMCI is of the opinion that this college requires significant improvement, because it is performing significantly less well than in all the circumstances it could reasonably be expected to perform. The college is therefore given a Notice to Improve. Significant improvement is required in relation to leadership and management. While the college provides an acceptable standard of education and the personal development of students is good, its overall effectiveness is inadequate. This is because the leadership has not moved the college on well enough since the last inspection and consequently improvement in students' achievement has faltered over several years. The key issues from the previous inspection, in January and February 2005, relating to effective monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning and achievement still remain. Whilst recognising the improvements in the monitoring of students' academic performance and the effectiveness of subject departments that have taken place this year, these are not embedded well enough to help drive up achievement throughout the college quickly enough.

Following several years of underachievement, students' progress is now satisfactory because there is good teaching in some parts of the college and the behaviour and attitudes of most students are very good. Academic monitoring is now being implemented and there has been an increased emphasis on the quality and submission of coursework.

The college is a happy place where relationships are friendly. Inspectors spoke to mature and thoughtful students who get on well together. However, the college has failed to keep up with the national trend of increased accountability and rigour in raising expectations and aspirations of staff and students. Typical of comments from parents were, 'My daughter is in Year 8 and is a high achiever but she has 'stood still'. 'There is very little pride encouraged in students' work' and, 'there is a lack of expectation on the part of the teachers.'

Inspectors found an unusually high level of dissatisfaction amongst parents who returned the confidential questionnaire. Parents were concerned about their children's progress and were critical of the opportunities to discuss student progress. Several parents were concerned that their children were receiving poor teaching including in the sixth form. Complaints had been ineffective. On the other hand, some questionnaires contained comments such as, 'A brilliant school! Excellent headteacher and staff.'

The college does indeed have real strengths. These strengths, together with recent improvements, led inspectors to conclude that despite being given a notice to improve, value for money is satisfactory. Relationships are generally positive and staff give their free time to support students through extra lessons and activities, such as spending the weekend before the inspection with students and the principal on Dartmoor in the 'Ten Tors challenge'.

Teaching, while satisfactory overall, is variable across the college. There are not enough opportunities for students to work independently and develop their own thinking. Teachers do not make good enough use of the college's assessment data to ensure all ability levels are suitably challenged in lessons. As a result, the pace of learning is sometimes too slow because every student is working on the same task. Many teachers work very hard, but over time, policies and systems have not been created and implemented coherently enough to turn hard work into effective work. Procedures for monitoring teaching and learning are insufficiently robust and focus too much on teaching activity rather than the quality of student learning.

The curriculum has improved but the long transition time between the resignation of the current principal and the beginning of his successor's tenure has been used as an excuse to delay developments that have been urgently required. Dramatic improvement is needed because the shortcomings identified by inspectors are similar to those identified as weaknesses during the last inspection and have not been fully remedied.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

The college operates a satisfactory sixth form. Well organised travel arrangements to neighbouring sixth forms offer students a wide range of A levels from which to choose. Students enjoy the sixth form and value the wide range of A levels and other courses on offer. The range of alternative courses to meet the different needs and abilities of students wishing to remain in the college after Year 11 is increasing. Students feel part of the wider college community and opportunities such as supporting younger students in reading, enable them to be involved in the main school. The progress of students is monitored regularly through tutorials. Students are positive about this. The sixth form leadership has canvassed students' views and has found that there is dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching, with students complaining of lessons being cancelled without work being set.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise the aspirations of students and teachers to improve the achievements and standards of students.
- Improve the quality of leadership at all levels so that leaders can more effectively monitor the quality of provision and the impact of new assessment processes on students' progress.
- Make more consistent use of assessment data to track students' progress accurately and ensure that students are helped to reach their full potential.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Students' attainment on entry to the college is broadly average. Students move through the college maintaining broadly average standards at the end of Years 9, 11 and 13. The proportion of students gaining at least five GCSE passes at grades A* to C in 2007 was exactly at the national average, as was the proportion when English and mathematics are included.

Whilst overall students make satisfactory progress, over the last two years their rate of progress has fallen. Progress has been significantly below average in both English and mathematics and the college's targets for GCSE were not met. Underperformance has been apparent across most groups although not amongst the least able nor looked after children. Much of the underperformance has taken place in Years 7 to 9. Performance in the 2007 English tests was inadequate. In Years 10 and 11 progress has been average.

Coursework assessments and externally assessed tests for 2008 provide strong evidence to indicate that GCSE results will be higher this year and achievement will be at least satisfactory. Results generally have improved substantially following better teaching and careful tracking of students' progress.

In the sixth form, achievement in A levels is broadly average. In 2007, there was positive achievement in some subjects but others were bordering on inadequate progress. Progress in applied A levels was average.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Inspectors spoke to thoughtful and articulate young people who were polite and courteous as they moved around the college. Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good, as seen in a thought provoking assembly and an outstanding religious education lesson. The majority of students enjoy school and attendance is broadly average. The college has had its 'Healthy Schools' status redesignated and students are aware of the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle, as evidenced by the discussions with friendly Year 10 students in the college canteen. The canteen has a good range of healthy food choices, which is appreciated by staff and students.

Students are aware of how to stay and be safe. Students, parents and the college's own research suggested that students sometimes perceive there to be bullying and opinions varied as to how effectively it was addressed. Behaviour around the college and in lessons, as witnessed by the inspectors was very good. An impromptu fire drill showed an orderly and prompt response. Students demonstrate responsibility by being prefects in Year 11 and by the Year 12 involvement in the delivery of part of the 'APAUSE' programme. Students are well prepared for the world of work through properly planned work experience which is integrated into the curriculum and enterprise activities including those in technology, reflecting the college's specialist status.

Relationships are harmonious amongst different groups of students. Students are made aware of a variety of cultural and international issues and links are being forged with a school in Tanzania.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Good relationships between teachers and students create a calm and productive atmosphere for learning. Students are willing and responsive learners who support each other well. In the most successful lessons, stimulating and lively activities challenge students to produce their best. Questioning is well focused to induce higher level thinking as seen for example in religious education, technology and music lessons observed by inspectors.

In the less effective, but still satisfactory lessons there was a lack of clarity about the expected learning outcomes, a slower pace and less opportunity for students to be involved in group work. Teachers sometimes gave too much direction and opportunities for additional challenge were missed. Some lessons were insufficiently adapted to meet the needs of all learners, particularly to adapt to the increasing numbers of students in lower year groups with learning difficulties.

There are some examples of good assessment which provide useful and constructive feedback to students on how to improve their work, but this is not consistently well developed across all subjects.

Technology college status has enabled the college to increase the number of computers. This has had a beneficial effect on learning in some subjects.

Teaching and learning in the sixth form are satisfactory. Small group sizes lead to more personalised support for students. However, the range of teaching approaches adopted is limited in some subjects and students report that teaching can lack continuity.

Overall, inspectors observed no teaching that was inadequate, but far too much was merely satisfactory and mundane. This coupled with students' compliance and good behaviour led to satisfactory learning, but not to students maximising their potential.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

This is a curriculum that while satisfactory overall, has many strengths. In Years 10 to 11, there is a good choice of GCSE subjects including different courses to meet the needs of the most and least able students. There is a good range of clubs and activities across the college although some parents expressed concerns regarding conflicts between girls' physical education and participation in external team sports. The curriculum in Years 10 and 11 includes a good range of academic options and vocational provision. The recent introduction of vocational courses is having a positive impact on students' progress. The college has successfully maintained a high proportion of students studying a modern foreign language in Years 10 and 11 and opportunities for success in this area have been increased by the introduction of a vocational course in business language. Good links with nearby schools and colleges enable students to choose from a range of vocational and academic courses in Years 10 to 11 and the sixth form; these meet their needs well and arrangements are well managed. The sixth-form curriculum has improved since the last inspection with the introduction of a programme that includes opportunities to explore issues in religion, ethics and politics. There have been visits from Exeter University and a bank to help students prepare for university life. Whilst the curriculum has significant strengths, there are some weaknesses. In the main school, the quality of academic tutoring is inconsistent. Recent improvements to the curriculum are too recent to be sure of their impact and too many lessons do not fully engage all learners. Inspectors were concerned that some aspects of personal, social and health education did not receive enough priority in Years 10 and 11. On days without assemblies, tutor time was ineffective.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

There are very good relationships between staff and students, as seen in the classrooms and around the college. As a result, pastoral care is good.

Academic guidance is satisfactory and improving with a designated period set aside for tutor mentoring. Students are given good advice about their Year 9 options. However, transfer to the sixth form is accompanied by mixed messages about the value of non-traditional courses. In the sixth form, whilst academic progress is monitored well, some students feel that support

for university applications is too generic and others feel that there is too much emphasis on traditional university courses at the expense of more vocational interests.

In the main college, academic target setting is based on prior data from national tests. Some good systems were shown to inspectors, for example through the English department's self-reviews. Data is analysed centrally and distributed to teachers, but there is inconsistency in how effectively this is used, to set challenging targets and, in the quality of monitoring and tracking of students' progress. Many students in Years 7 to 9 are unaware of their targets.

Vulnerable students and those at risk of exclusion are identified and, as a result, the number of exclusions was reduced in the spring term. Key workers and external agencies are further contributing to the inclusive care of the college.

Leadership and management

Grade: 4

Grade for sixth form: 3

Senior leaders have begun to implement strategies to improve the quality of teaching and students' achievement, but these measures are too recent to show sustained impact on the outcomes for all students. The leadership and management at all levels are not consistently strong enough to secure the rapid pace of improvement needed to raise standards. The key issues raised in the last inspection have not been fully addressed and still need improvement. There is a lack of a sense of urgency that permeates the college. There is insufficient accountability and a shared direction, and this means that the energy of all individuals and teams is not effectively harnessed.

Middle managers are now evaluating the work of their teams using a clear framework, but this work is still at an early stage and the effectiveness of their evaluations is variable. However, some question the need for this rigorous approach to self-evaluation. Inconsistencies remain in the way policies and strategies are implemented across departments, and this limits their effectiveness in bringing about improvement in students' achievement.

The targets set for the students are not sufficiently challenging, given their potential, and a significant number of parents feel that the expectations of some teachers are too low. For example, one parent said, 'The college is lagging behind current practice in supporting and enhancing learning.' Another said, 'Teachers are happy if the student makes average progress.'

Governors have recently begun to challenge the college more effectively, and have supported the introduction of better systems for self-evaluation and monitoring to promote individual progress. They now have a clear understanding of the priorities for development and of their role in holding the college to account.

The college's specialist technology status has brought welcome resources into the college, but lack of strategic leadership of this means that there has been little impact on whole college improvement. Despite better results in design and technology, targets for the specialism have not been fully met.

Whilst there is enthusiastic and energetic day-to-day leadership of the sixth form, strategic responsibility within the small senior leadership team is one of the areas where responsibilities are unclear. Sixth-form students have been involved in college leadership such as in the selection and appointment of the next principal, but there is no formal sixth-form council.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaints about school inspection', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

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?	4	3
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	No	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	3

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3	3
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	2	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	3	
How well learners enjoy their education	3	
The attendance of learners	3	
The behaviour of learners	2	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	3	
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	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	3	3
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	3	3

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?	4	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	4	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	4	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3	3
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?	Yes	

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

16 May 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Sidmouth College, Sidmouth, EX10 9LG

As you know, we have just finished inspecting your college and I am writing to tell you our findings. First of all, I would like to thank you all for welcoming us, for talking to us about your experiences in college and for letting us see your work. As a result of our inspection, we have given your college a notice to improve. I want to explain to you what this means. Your college is improving. Your principal and other teachers have recognised that for some time you have not been making as much progress as students of similar ability in other colleges. They have already put in place systems to improve the situation and we are confident that results for this Year 11 will be better than in the past. Setting your targets and monitoring your progress towards them are helping you make better progress. However, by the time of this inspection there had not been time to sort out all of the college's weaknesses.

One of the best things about your college is your behaviour. We saw very friendly and polite young people and we found that the college helps your personal development and well-being to be good. Unfortunately some of your parents had a more negative impression of behaviour. As a group of students, you can work to change that perception.

The curriculum is improving so that you have an increasing range of courses from which to choose. However, too many of your lessons treat you all the same. They do not adjust activities to meet the needs of the most and least able.

We have found that your academic achievement and standards, teaching and learning, curriculum and care, guidance and support are all satisfactory. Some aspects of the college's leadership and management are currently inadequate and need to be improved. In particular we have asked the college to help you do better by expecting more of you. Some of your parents told us that the college's expectations of what you can achieve are too low. The new systems for monitoring how well you are doing need to be used more consistently by all your teachers.

We have given your college a year to improve and then there will be another inspection. We have given the notice to improve because we are confident that staff and students can work together to make the college much better. We know that process has already begun.

Yours sincerely

Adrian Lyons Her Majesty's Inspector

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