

Bicester Community College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	123233
Local Authority	Oxfordshire
Inspection number	314548
Inspection dates	16–17 October 2007
Reporting inspector	Nick Green HMI

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	1185
6th form	191
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr R Dyson
Headteacher	Mrs C Bartlett
Date of previous school inspection	19 January 2004
School address	Queen's Avenue Bicester OX26 2NS
Telephone number	01869 243331
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Age group	11–18
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Introduction

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

Description of the school

The school is larger than average. It is a specialist technology college and a lead institution in the increased flexibility programme for students aged 14–19. Most students are of White British heritage, with around 5% coming from a variety of minority ethnic backgrounds. The percentage of students entitled to free school meals is below average though the socio-economic background of many students is relatively disadvantaged. Just over half of the students come from areas where the number of adults with higher education is below average. The percentage of students with learning difficulties and disabilities is above average as is the number with a formal statement of special educational need. Students' attainment on entry to the college is broadly average.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

The college declares itself a learning school, a family school and a community school. In many respects, it reflects all three aspirations. The quality of education provided by the college in Years 7 to 11 and in the sixth form is satisfactory with good and outstanding features. Standards are broadly average by the end of Years 9 and 11 and the sixth form. In relation to students' starting points when they enter the school, their progress and achievement are satisfactory. However, too few students achieve the higher grades in national tests and examinations. Standards are not yet consistent across the core subjects of English, mathematics and science. This is because teaching and learning, whilst improving, have yet to achieve a consistently good standard across the college.

There are many barriers to raising performance; poor reading ages of a significant proportion of students on entry to the school; disaffection and low expectations of a minority of students; difficulties in teacher recruitment and retention and some parents' low aspirations for their children. However, the clear direction of the headteacher and the effectiveness of the relatively new senior leadership team have set staff and students clear expectations for improvement. These are focused firmly on raising achievement and standards while strengthening the partnerships with parents and the community. The college's accurate self-evaluation accurately identifies its key areas for development and effective action has been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection. A gradual rise in results over several years and the ability to reverse quickly any significant decline in standards show the college has satisfactory capacity to improve. However, some middle managers are not making enough use of data to set targets, monitoring their subjects with sufficient rigour, or doing enough to share good practice.

The great majority of parents are supportive of the college, as one parent wrote to inspectors, 'I cannot speak highly enough of the opportunities my children have been offered and the encouragement they have received'. Students' personal development and well-being are good. They enjoy school, adopt healthy lifestyles and make significant contributions to college life, the local community and beyond. Their behaviour is satisfactory and attendance is good. Students also develop secure competence in workplace and enterprise skills. The school provides a good level of care, guidance and support for all students, particularly the most vulnerable and those with learning difficulties and disabilities. Suitable arrangements are in place for safeguarding students.

Teaching and learning are satisfactory and often good. Teachers communicate clearly to students what they intend them to learn and, generally, use their secure subject expertise well in their thorough planning and teaching. However, students are not always challenged sufficiently and poor behaviour is very occasionally allowed to disrupt learning. Academic guidance is improving, though the use of assessment to inform teaching and learning, particularly the use of marking, is not yet sufficiently thorough across the college to ensure that students always know what they need to do to improve. The college's curriculum is good in the sixth form and outstanding in Years 7 to 11 because a very wide variety of courses is offered which meet the full range of students' needs and capabilities. The college's specialist status also assists in doing this. An excellent range of extra-curricular activities enriches students' learning and makes a significant contribution to their enjoyment, to their personal development and to their achievement.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

Standards attained by students are broadly average though there are variations in quality between subjects, and attainment in mathematics is better than in English. The overall number of students gaining grades A to E at A level improved this year but the number attaining higher grades reduced. Good improvement continued to be made in vocational subjects as in the previous year. In respect to their attainment on entry to the sixth form, students make satisfactory progress and achieve satisfactorily. Their personal development and well-being are good because of the good care, guidance and support they receive. For example, Year 12 students were seen making significant progress in their understanding of leadership, planning and teamwork through effective activities undertaken in an enrichment day.

Students speak highly of the guidance they receive about their progress against targets and the support for preparing for higher education. The good sixth form curriculum provides them with a broad and balanced education. The provision for vocational courses, general studies, critical thinking and a wide range of enrichment activities are a strength. Teaching is satisfactory and often good. However, given the wide range of abilities in some groups, the challenge of the work does not always match individual needs or provide students with sufficient opportunities to work independently. Leadership and management in the sixth form are effective and efficient though recent innovations, for example in target setting, have yet to make their full impact on students' achievement and standards.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise achievement and standards, particularly the number of students attaining higher grades, in English, mathematics and science, through more consistent teaching that engages and challenges students more effectively.
- Ensure teachers use assessment and marking more consistently in their planning and teaching to give students clear guidance on what they need to do to improve.
- Raise the quality of middle managers' practice to meet that of the best.

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: 3

Standards in Year 9 are broadly average though the number of students achieving the higher levels in national tests is below the national figure. In science, the percentage of students gaining higher levels is well below average. The school has introduced suitable strategies to address this. Given the starting points of Year 9 students when they join the college, their progress and achievement are satisfactory. Standards in GCSE examinations have been rising gradually over several years, from a low base in 2002, and this year were broadly average. A decline in the number of students attaining 5 A*–C GCSE in 2006 was quickly reversed this year. In relation to students' attainment when they enter the college, their progress and achievement are satisfactory by the time they leave. Most groups of students, including those with learning difficulties or disabilities, make satisfactory progress and both boys' and girls'

performance improved considerably this year because of the continuing support and academic guidance they received. There is still room for improvement in higher ability Year 11 students' standards, particularly in English and mathematics, and in students' standards in Modern Foreign Languages.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Students' enjoyment of education is shown by the steady improvement in their attendance over a number of years that is now above average. They adopt safe practices and feel safe. They feel secure in the prompt and effective way the small amount of bullying in the school is resolved. Most students behave well, participate in lessons with interest and express appreciation of the good relationships they enjoy with adults and with each other. However, behaviour is satisfactory overall because a minority of students occasionally disrupt the learning of others and do not show sufficient respect for the school environment. Students maintain a healthy lifestyle through physical exercise; about two thirds choose to walk or cycle to college and many participate in sport. They understand the importance of a healthy diet but this is not always reflected in the food choices they make, for example in packed lunches. However, the purchase of fruit from the canteen is increasing.

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good as shown by their informative and moving writing about their response to a visit to the Holocaust Museum. The contribution they make to the life of the college and the wider community is good. Through the college council, they participate in key activities, for example, setting up healthier eating options. As Junior and Community Sports Leaders they assist local primary schools. They regularly raise money for local and international charities. Students develop secure skills for their future economic well-being through work experience, through enterprise activities and through the college's increasing efforts to improve their basic skills, for example in literacy.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Most lessons are clearly planned. Teachers generally share the aims of the lesson fully with students and communicate effectively what they are looking for in the students' responses. Examples of ambitious and challenging work was seen where students were encouraged to work independently and to make choices about the ways in which they learn best. These lessons proceeded at a good pace and teachers used their specialist skills and knowledge well. In most lessons, relationships between teachers and students are conducive to effective and enjoyable learning. However, this good teaching and learning is not yet consistent. In a few lessons, a minority of students are not sufficiently engaged in learning and their disruptive behaviour demands the attention of the teacher, which affects the learning of others. Additionally, students are not always sufficiently challenged or encouraged to work as independently as they could.

The increasingly robust assessment and tracking systems the college has established have made many teachers more aware of students' capabilities and, as a result, expectations in lessons

have been raised. These improvements are at an early stage and have not yet been sufficiently embedded to ensure that all students achieve as well as they can. In some lessons, students are not clear about what they are expected to learn or what they need to do to improve. The quality of marking is similarly inconsistent and specific guidance on how to reach the next level is not always given.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 2

The curriculum is the college's greatest strength and is successful in meeting the needs and interests of all students and national requirements. In Years 7 to 9 the curriculum is broad and well planned. Students whose literacy and numeracy skills are below average are given additional support in smaller classes. Able students are able to follow a 'fast track' in most subjects allowing them to take exams early and broaden their experiences in the remaining time. Students who are in danger of being excluded from lessons are taught in small groups and have been successful, taking GCSE English Literature early. Constant review and expansion of the curriculum in Years 10 and 11 have ensured students are able to choose from an extensive range of academic and vocational courses and pathways. The colleges' specialist status has been effective in broadening the curriculum and has ensured that it has become a focus for good practice in technology. Partnerships have been established with five local schools and these have enhanced students' choice still further, particularly in vocational options. Students are well prepared for future employment by a comprehensive programme of work-related learning and work experience. The curriculum is enriched by an exceptionally wide-ranging choice of after-school activities that include drama, music and a variety of sports.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The college staff show a high level of commitment to the care of students and to identifying and meeting their wide range of needs. This contributes well to encouraging their enjoyment and achievement and to promoting their health and safety. The college has established a thorough system to offer immediate aid to follow up all instances of students' problems and concerns. Good links with a range of outside agencies enable the college to offer comprehensive and flexible support, for example to students who are in danger of being excluded. It has introduced a well-devised progress review system, which enables students to participate in setting targets for their own improvement and to review their progress. This has resulted in some students being well informed about their progress, but it is not yet implemented consistently enough to ensure that all students receive effective guidance and support about their learning. There are thorough systems for identifying students who do not attend regularly enough and to follow up the causes of their absence and this contributes to the good attendance. The college has robust systems for safeguarding students and for early identification of vulnerable students.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

The headteacher provides clear strategic direction for the college focussed on steady improvement of students' achievement through effective care and personalised learning. She is supported in doing this by a competent leadership team that executes its responsibilities effectively. Together, they are gradually overcoming the college's many barriers to raising performance. While middle managers' effectiveness is growing, there are variations in their use of data to set targets, in the monitoring of subjects' performance and in sharing good practice and challenging weaknesses. The leadership and management skills of middle managers are being developed through additional training and guidance from senior leaders. The college's self-evaluation procedures take good account of the views of students, parents and staff and result in accurate identification of strengths and areas for development. A new subject monitoring system has been introduced this year to improve the consistency of subjects' self-evaluation and improvement planning. However, the use of challenging targets to raise standards, whilst satisfactory, has in some instances been unrealistic and some targets have been difficult to reach.

The college's leaders are effective in promoting equality of opportunity and the personal development and well-being of all students. The majority of parents are supportive of the college and feel they are consulted; a significant minority are concerned about students' behaviour. Governors are kept well informed about the college's performance and they use this information competently to both challenge and support the college. They have good opportunities to contribute to strategic planning and monitor the progress of improvements.

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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	3
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?	2	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	2
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	2
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	2
How well learners enjoy their education	2	2
The attendance of learners	2	
The behaviour of learners	3	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2	2
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3	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?	1	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	2	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	2	
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	

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

1 November 2007

Dear Students

Inspection of Bicester Community College, Bicester, OX26 2NS

Thank you for the help you provided the inspection team when we visited the college. We enjoyed meeting members of year groups and we learned a great deal from our discussions with many of you in lessons and around the college. Your school provides satisfactory education and has some good and outstanding features.

Standards are average in Year 9, Year 11 and the sixth form. In relation to students' attainment when they enter the college their progress and achievement are also satisfactory. We were pleased to see that this year results improved considerably from 2006. However, there is still room for students, particularly the most able, to achieve higher grades, and standards are not yet good enough in English, mathematics and science. Teaching is satisfactory and often good but not consistently effective in ensuring that all students achieve as well as they could. Your teachers have good subject knowledge, they plan well and most lessons are orderly. However, a minority of students' poor behaviour occasionally disrupts the learning of others.

Your personal development and well-being are good. You enjoy college and your attendance levels are high. Many of you show pride in your roles as representatives on the college council, as Junior and Community Sports Leaders and through the contributions you make to the community. The quality of the care, guidance and support you receive from staff is good, particularly for those of you who find learning difficult. The curriculum you receive is good in the sixth form and outstanding in Years 7 to 11, as it meets the full range of students' needs and there is an outstanding range of enrichment activities in which many of you participate. The guidance you receive on your progress and targets is satisfactory.

The clear direction and effective leadership and management of the headteacher and senior teachers are helping the college improve. In order to improve further, we have asked the college to raise achievement and standards through more consistently good teaching that challenges all students to do their best. We have also asked that assessment should be used more consistently by teachers in their planning and teaching to give you better guidance on what you need to do to improve your work. We are asking some subject leaders to improve their practice. This can be helped, by those of you who need to, by improving your behaviour, and by all of you striving to do your very best in tests and examinations.

Best wishes with your studies.

Nick Green

Her Majesty's Inspector