

Thomas Bennett Community College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	126075
Local Authority	West Sussex
Inspection number	315421
Inspection dates	27–28 March 2008
Reporting inspector	Christine Jones 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	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1133
6th form	189
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Reg Bates
Headteacher	Yasmin Maskatiya
Date of previous school inspection	10 November 2004
School address	Ashdown Drive Tilgate Crawley RH10 5AD
Telephone number	01293 526255
Fax number	01293 866877

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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

Thomas Bennett Community College is much larger than average. The number of students with statements of special educational need is higher than that found nationally. The college provides a special unit for students with autism. The overall number of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, particularly those with behavioural, emotional and social needs and moderate learning difficulties, is very high. An average proportion of students come from minority ethnic groups or have English as an additional language. The college moved to a new purpose built site in September 2005 and is a specialist sports college.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

This satisfactory and improving college puts significant effort into strengthening students' attitudes to education and raising their aspirations. As one parent commented, 'The college has helped my child to mature and develop into a fantastic person.' This is typical of the opinions held by many parents who acknowledge the positive impact of the college on their children. Outcomes are clear, especially for older students. GCSE results in 2007, although below national levels, were the highest ever achieved and targets relating to the specialist status were met. The impact is less consistent in Key Stage 3, where standards declined in 2007, having risen up to that year. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities achieve at least as well as other students and some groups make better progress, especially those with less severe needs.

The inclusive ethos of the college warmly welcomes students regardless of their age on entry, backgrounds or specific learning needs. Additional provision is very successful in meeting individual learning needs and students thrive in the supportive environment. This approach produces confident and mostly well behaved young people who appreciate and are committed to improving the community of the college, as is illustrated by supportive relationships and increasingly positive attitudes to learning. The improving attendance of most students shows increasing enjoyment of their education, although too many parents still condone absences and this has a negative effect on achievement for these students.

The good curriculum offers students appropriate courses. The range available has been extended to provide greater flexibility and choice. This is helping to motivate students and provide pathways to further education, training and employment. Specialist sports status is a strength and defines the character of the college through raising students' ambition and the status of learning. It contributes strongly to reducing exclusions through initiatives such as the 'living for sport' course. Many students have low literacy skills when they enter the college and this hinders the progress they can make, especially in Key Stage 3. The 'thinktime' initiative in Year 7 is helping to improve literacy levels but there is limited coordination of literacy development across all subject areas.

Teaching is satisfactory overall with good relationships creating a positive learning atmosphere where many teachers know and understand the needs of their students. However, too often, teachers do not make enough use of what students already know and the level they are working at to plan the next steps in learning. Some lessons are over-directed by teachers and do not enable students to gain appropriate skills to become independent learners. Assessment information is used effectively to set subject targets for students to work towards. However, they receive inconsistent advice and guidance in their day-to-day lessons on how to improve the quality of their work.

The good leadership and management are securing a steady improvement in the college's performance. The key to this is the devoted leadership of the headteacher. Past difficulties in recruiting staff are easing and some key strengths, such as the impact of sports college status, now characterise the school. The college has an accurate, although sometimes over-optimistic, view of its performance, although the evidence it collects is extensive. Effective teamwork, including governors, is creating good capacity for continuous improvement.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

'I've seen the rest and chosen what I think is the best,' was the comment from a Year 11 student who has decided to stay on into the college sixth form. This confidence is justified as overall achievement is good. Students enter the sixth form with below average standards and make good progress in Year 12, particularly on vocational courses. A small number of students stay on into Year 13 to continue with A-level studies and they make satisfactory progress. Students say they find the step up to sixth form work challenging, but feel well supported by feedback and monitoring of their work and personal development by the staff. Staff use their detailed knowledge of the students to set challenging targets that go beyond predictions based on GCSE performance alone. Students feel their time in the sixth form builds their confidence and maturity to take decisions about the future. The sixth form works well as a social unit with its own identity, whilst contributing strongly to the whole community through work with younger students, support for charities, and music and drama performances. Teaching and learning are good. In classes with small numbers, good planning by teachers and use of a variety of resources lead to varied learning experiences. They welcome the individual attention they get. All students receive very good assessment feedback that makes clear at what level they are achieving and how to improve. As part of the good curriculum, a wide choice of subjects at different levels is offered to meet students' needs and courses are well supported by good resources. Many students use Year 12 to boost their qualifications prior to moving on to further training or employment; for those who stay on to Year 13, the college provides a good range of courses. The good leadership of the sixth form is held in high regard by students and has created a positive learning climate based on high expectations.

What the school should do to improve further

- Focus teaching tightly on meeting students' different learning needs in all lessons and helping them to become more independent learners.
- Give clear and consistent feedback to students on what they need to do to improve their work.
- Improve the development of literacy skills across all subject areas.

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

From below average starting points, students make satisfactory progress during Key Stage 3 in mathematics, English and science. A rising trend in the standards reached was reversed in 2007, when standards were below average, most notably in English. However, the college is remedying the situation and current students are making satisfactory progress.

GCSE results in summer 2007 improved considerably, even though a number of students attended poorly and some did not turn up for their examinations, despite the college's best efforts to encourage them. Because of this absence, overall achievement was lower than expected but represented satisfactory progress and improved performance by more able students. While

targets for the proportion of students gaining five or more A* to C grades were exceeded, these were not sufficiently challenging. Targets for current Year 11 students are more demanding and recent evidence indicates good progress toward these, assisted by better attendance.

Standards in the sixth form are below average, but with a rising trend over the past three years, which represents good progress from students' below average starting points, even though results in some subjects remain low.

Students from minority ethnic groups and with English as an additional language achieve as well as their peers. Students' improving achievement is largely due to ensuring those who are underachieving are identified quickly and given appropriate support. The effective tracking of performance particularly benefits those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Progress by those with behavioural, emotional and social needs, moderate learning difficulties and those attached to the autism unit matches that of other students due to the individual support they receive.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Students much enjoy coming to college, as reflected in their normally good behaviour and gradually improving attendance, which is now satisfactory. There has been progress in improving the attendance of some persistently absent students through the concerted efforts of college staff. In lessons, the behaviour of older students is better because teaching is better and they enjoy their lessons. Students make good use of the sports facilities to participate in physical activities and have a good understanding of how to promote a healthy lifestyle. However, although the college has greatly improved its restaurant provision and students understand the need for healthy eating, there is not yet universal acceptance – they miss their chocolate and chips! The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of students is good. They participate well in the range of opportunities available to them that help to promote community understanding. Students understand well the need for safe behaviour and put their knowledge into practice without the need for adult supervision or intervention.

Literacy is not thoroughly embedded across all aspects of the school curriculum and this hinders preparation for students' future economic well-being, which is satisfactory. There is otherwise good provision to help students prepare for working life through work-related learning, college links and personalised learning pathways. The college encourages students to voice their opinions through discussion groups such as the college forum and house councils. They make a good contribution to their community, and their actions have led to improvements in the college that are appreciated by the student body as a whole.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

As a result of the intense focus the school has placed on raising standards at GCSE, older students receive better teaching. In the most successful lessons, there are good relationships where teachers are encouraging and plan a variety of activities that interest the students, who

are given many opportunities to think for themselves. Students in these lessons are confident, willing learners, and readily tackle the work set with obvious enjoyment. Keen to volunteer answers to teachers' probing questions, they confidently share their ideas both in small group discussion and with the whole class. Teaching support assistants make a significant contribution to raising achievement through their well planned support in lessons. In some lessons, students make insufficient progress because work is not challenging for everyone, with the same tasks set for all, irrespective of their needs. The pace of lesson activities is sometimes too slow and students become inattentive when, with too much talk by the teacher, there is too little for them to do.

The college's thorough assessment and tracking systems monitor student performance closely. Students know the target grades they are expected to achieve in different subjects and can compare these to their current levels. They appreciate having something to aim for and this has a positive impact on raising achievement. Students' work is usually marked regularly but feedback on how to improve varies from the informative and helpful to a tick or cross with no guidance.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The good curriculum is driven by students' needs. Those in Year 7 appreciate the extra emphasis on literacy and thinking skills through the 'thinktime' initiative. Assessment information indicates that this is improving basic literacy skills, although opportunities to develop more complex writing and thinking are limited. The Key Stage 4 curriculum is responsive to students' needs and preferences with a wide range of subjects and qualifications on offer. Alternative courses and links with outside organizations provide well for students at risk of disaffection, for example, the 'forest schools' environment project. Option choices reflect a practical/vocational emphasis that meets many students' needs well. The innovative curriculum is well monitored and increasingly responsive to students' needs. However, it is not yet fully embedded and is only just starting to underpin improvements in standards and progress. Provision for the information and communication technology (ICT) curriculum has improved considerably in the new accommodation and students have good opportunities to develop their skills. More able students increasingly benefit from 'aim higher' and other activities which provide more challenge. The adaptable curriculum delivers a wide variety of provision appropriate to students with specific learning needs. Students value and take advantage of the extensive extra-curricula opportunities enabled by specialist sport status.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The good care, guidance and support given to students contribute significantly to the strength of their personal development. Students and parents praise what the college does in this area. There is a wealth of provision from teachers, teaching assistants and other staff that makes sure students are well cared for and have ready access to personal help and advice. The quality of the relationships in the college means that students feel listened to. College staff know their students individually and are able to track their academic and personal progress throughout the school and identify those at risk effectively. This is particularly true for students with

learning difficulties and/or disabilities, for whom provision is well matched to their needs. Special provision such as the 'forest school' is successful in promoting the personal and social development of students. This is being expanded to allow more students to be involved due to the success of the venture. Academic guidance is successful in keeping students up to date with their current subject levels and long-term aims. It is less informative on a day-to-day basis as marking does not indicate clearly enough how students might improve their work. There are good arrangements for safeguarding students in lessons and around the college. Child protection arrangements and health and safety checks meet requirements. The college has made good use of specialist status to forge strong partnerships with other schools and this has a good impact in the local community.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The headteacher provides strong leadership; she has a good understanding of the performance of the school at every level and makes sensitive judgements about what the school must do to continue improving. The senior leadership team and governing body give effective support to the headteacher. Together, they are developing a sense of common purpose among staff. Middle leaders ably support this vision and clearly understand their responsibilities for improving students' performance in their subject areas. Leadership in relation to the school's specialist status is good and makes a significant contribution to changing the culture of the students and improving their attitudes towards learning. Self-evaluation gives a mostly accurate, although sometimes over optimistic, picture of the college's strengths and areas for development. Monitoring of teaching, in particular, does not always focus closely enough on evaluating success in meeting students' learning needs. The college recognises the need to track achievement across the curriculum so that variation in performance is quickly identified and tackled, and there are high expectations of all staff. Governors play a strategic role in development and have a growing understanding of their responsibilities in challenging the school to improve its performance and raise standards. Financial management is good and resources used well to provide good value for money, especially where used to put extra provision in place to meet students' additional needs. The good quality of the leadership and management is demonstrated by the improvement in performance since the previous inspection. Leaders pounce quickly on any underachievement and put things right, as indicated by the action on standards in Key Stage 3 after the dip in 2007. With leadership strongly focused on raising students' progress, the school is well placed to keep moving forward.

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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	No
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3	3
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	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	3	
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	3	

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?	2	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?	2	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	2	
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	2	
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	

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

29 March 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Thomas Bennett Community College, Crawley, RH10 5AD

This letter summarises the findings of our inspection. Your parents or carers will have a copy of the full report should you wish to read it.

Thank you for welcoming us to your college. We enjoyed speaking to you and finding out your views about your education. We think your college gives you a satisfactory and improving standard of education. We were impressed by the good working relationships that many of you have with your teachers. It is clear that the school helps you develop as individuals during your studies and we agree with you that the school helps to build your confidence.

We want to congratulate your college on achieving the best ever GCSE results last summer! This improvement is due to the hard work of your headteacher and the staff in encouraging you to be more positive about your school work. In the main school, you now make the progress which is expected of you. Students in the sixth form do especially well in Year 12 and you are all better prepared for the next stages of your lives. Teaching is satisfactory overall and good in the sixth form. We were impressed with your good behaviour in and around school; however, some of you do not come to school regularly enough and last year some students missed exams. Staff have worked successfully to get the curriculum right for you and you are now able to choose from a wide range of subjects in Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form. You are given good opportunities to take part in activities out of lessons and particularly enjoy sports. Your college is a caring and supportive place and you say you feel safe and valued.

- The most important thing to concentrate on now is helping you to learn. We have asked staff to:
 - make sure teaching meets your different learning needs in all lessons and helps you to become more independent learners
 - give you clear feedback and guidance on what you need to do to improve the quality of your work
 - improve your literacy skills in all aspects of your work.

Everyone wants Thomas Bennett to keep on improving. We think if you keep working and learning together, you will do just that.

With very best wishes for the future

Christine Jones HMI

29 March 2008

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Crawley, RH10 5AD**

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