

Abbey College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	131205
Local Authority	CAMBRIDGESHIRE LA
Inspection number	315750
Inspection dates	21–22 November 2007
Reporting inspector	Stephen Abbott 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	1626
6th form	243
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Madeleine Jackson
Headteacher	Mr Wayne Birks
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	Abbey Road Ramsey Cambridgeshire PE26 1DG
Telephone number	01487 812352
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Age group	11-19
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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

Abbey College, a specialist technology college, was formed in September 2006 by merging two adjacent schools, Ailwyn School (11-14) and Ramsey Abbey School (14-19). The present headteacher was previously headteacher of Ramsey Abbey School and associate headteacher at Ailwyn School, where he supported its successful work to have special measures removed in July 2006. Many of the present staff of Abbey College previously taught at one of the two predecessor schools.

The majority of students are from White British backgrounds, with very few speaking English as an additional language. The proportion entitled to free school meals is below average. Within the college's catchment, there are some areas of social and economic disadvantage. The number of students who are looked after by the local authority is very small. While the proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is below the national average, the proportion with statements of special educational need is above average. Each year group currently in the college began secondary education with above average standards.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

As it enters its second year of existence, Abbey College is providing a satisfactory and improving standard of education. The strategic decision to merge the 11–14 Ailwyn School and the 14–19 Ramsey Abbey School to form Abbey College followed several years of moderate achievement in both predecessor schools. The college's self-evaluation accurately identified some unsatisfactory aspects of the first year, such as low achievement caused by inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and behaviour management. High staff absence meant that some classes had too many different teachers, a concern raised by several parents. Leadership and management are satisfactory. The headteacher has provided a clear direction for the new college and has not been afraid to take firm action to address areas of weakness. Several teachers are new this term to replace those who left in the summer.

The college's self-evaluation accurately identifies several improvements this year. Although the college has not eradicated the earlier problems completely, students' behaviour and personal development are now satisfactory. Most students are polite, friendly and well behaved, though a significant minority continue to be disruptive. Students adopt satisfactorily healthy lifestyles, feel safe and enjoy attending college. They contribute to the community through charities, voluntary activity and student councils. Standards are broadly in line with the national average and achievement is satisfactory, though only just, because pupils have not caught up fully the earlier gaps in their learning. Teaching and learning are satisfactory and improving. The college makes accurate assessments of teaching quality which shows that lessons are rarely inadequate, but not enough are good or outstanding. Although teachers plan careful teaching sequences, they do not modify them well enough during the lesson to meet students' needs as they become apparent. The best lessons develop important attributes like initiative and inquisitiveness that will help students in their future lives, but too many lessons encourage dependence. Students know their targets and present levels but do not always know how to improve. Some subject schemes of work and many lessons fail to stretch the most able. The satisfactory curriculum allows nearly all students to gain at least five A*–G graded GCSEs, but provides a limited range of 14–19 vocational course options. Technology college status has brought several benefits. Learning support is well organised and all students receive satisfactory guidance and care. However, several parents still experience frustration when contacting the college on care and guidance matters.

College governance is a strength. Governors have played a key role in the excellent planning for change and hold the college effectively to account. The college's capacity to improve and the value for money it provides are both satisfactory. Senior leaders have made rapid progress in implementing the ambitious improvement and change-management plans. They have set challenging targets and established various systems to help meet them, including: regular monitoring of students' progress; a range of interventions; clear procedures for assessing and supporting students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities; and a programme of lesson observations to help improve teaching. The impact of these changes is now becoming apparent, but came too late to prevent the GCSE and national curriculum test results being well below expectation in 2007. The college's extensive monitoring shows that behaviour and attendance are improving, that many fewer lessons are unsatisfactory and that standards are now higher than a year ago.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

Standards in the sixth form are average and achievement is satisfactory with some variability in progress among subjects. Compared to students with similar prior attainment in other schools, grades in most AS level subjects were average or above and grades in most A2 level subjects were average or below. Teaching and learning in the sixth form have features similar to the rest of the college. The sixth form curriculum is satisfactory but it offers relatively few options for students who have not passed five or more GCSEs at grade C or above. About half of Year 11 students continue their education into the sixth form, fewer than in comparable schools.

Students are confident, communicate well and make valuable contributions to the running of the college. Their personal development and well-being are satisfactory. Sixth formers' support helps Year 7 newcomers to settle into the college and to improve their reading skills. Links with the local community include visits to elderly people and support for charities. Care, support and guidance are satisfactory but students do not learn enough about the diversity of beliefs and cultures.

The new head of sixth form has had a considerable impact since September. The college now monitors students' progress closely and has a range of strategies to extend and support learning which are beginning to make a positive impact.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise standards and achievement, especially for the most able, by improving the quality of teaching and learning.
- Improve the behaviour of a minority of students who disrupt others' learning.
- Increase the range of vocational courses to meet the needs of a wider range of students aged 14-19.
- Strengthen the quality of communication with parents, especially the reliability of arrangements to respond to contacts initiated by them.

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

The standards of work are broadly in line with the national average, with some variations among year groups. Students with learning difficulties make satisfactory progress. So far, the college has had only one set of examination results. However, results at Key Stage 3 and GCSE were well below the college's targets. Standards were below average and indicated inadequate progress because the same year groups had attained above average standards at the end of primary school. Results in the national tests at age 14 showed that progress in English was inadequate for the most able students. At GCSE just over half of students obtained five or more passes at grade C or higher in 2007. The results reflected the significant upheaval of the merger and the inadequate quality of education that had caused Ailwyn School to be in special measures from October 2004 to July 2006. Students were not able to catch up their gaps in earlier learning.

The college has clear evidence that demonstrates recent improvements in standards and achievement, particularly in Year 11 where students are much better prepared for GCSE than their predecessors. This is due to improved teaching, better classroom management, a stricter approach to coursework and closer monitoring of students' progress. With these very recent improvements achievement is satisfactory, but only just. Achievement in Key Stage 3 English is still below expectation for the highest attaining students.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Students' personal development, including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, is satisfactory. Attendance is broadly average and improving. Most students are polite and friendly, but a significant minority lack social skills and respect for others. Students behave well in most, but not all, lessons and their attitudes to learning are positive, although not always enthusiastic. Students and staff report that behaviour has improved recently, helped by the 'iBehave' system which has been piloted this term. The number of exclusions has fallen. However, behaviour in college remains a concern of a third of parents who responded to the inspection questionnaire. Through the supportive learning environment in 'RAP', students at risk of exclusion or underachieving are successfully developing strategies for controlling their behaviour and improving attainment.

Students know how to lead healthy lives and many choose to eat healthy foods and take regular exercise. They usually move around the large site in a safe and sensible manner. Most work cooperatively in lessons and help each other willingly. School Council members take their responsibilities seriously although they do not feel the college listens to their views as much as it could. Students are adequately prepared for their future economic well-being, for example through work experience and enterprise education days. They show consideration for others by raising substantial amounts of money each year. Older students make a sound contribution to the college and local community. Some develop leadership skills through their support for sports in primary schools.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Although during the inspection, nearly all lessons seen were at least satisfactory and many were good, teaching is satisfactory, in both the main college and in the sixth form. This is in line with the school's own judgements. Clear guidance, regular monitoring linked to training and accurate judgements on the quality of classroom practice underpin the college's progress in improving teaching. Most teachers demonstrate good subject knowledge and plan lessons thoroughly. Good use is made of information and communication technology (ICT) in many lessons to enhance learning. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are well supported.

In the best lessons, teachers use a variety of teaching styles, set clear learning objectives and match work carefully to students' needs. They have high expectations, encouraging them to work independently and to assess their own work. They stretch the most able through demanding

questioning. However, these good practices are evident in a minority of lessons. More often, students make satisfactory rather than good progress because the teaching does not engage their interest sufficiently. Staff are very supportive of students, but do not make work challenging enough for the most able. Most teachers manage behaviour well, but this is not consistent. A minority of students can be disruptive in some lessons.

New assessment systems are a growing strength and are thoroughly monitored. Most teachers set clear and challenging targets, which students know and understand. The quality of the marking is improving, but does not always give students enough advice on how to improve.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

The curriculum satisfactorily meets the needs of most students. Its positive features include three modern foreign languages and separate sciences at GCSE. The college has begun to review its curricular provision because there are not enough vocational opportunities and not enough flexibility in the curriculum to permit extended learning opportunities. Work experience contributes to personal development and understanding of employment. Work-related learning enterprise education are enhanced by the specialist status. Additional support sessions are available for literacy and numeracy but these skills are not promoted consistently through other subjects. Students' personal and social development are well supported through the curriculum. For example, physical education allows students to develop leadership skills as well as fitness.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Care, guidance and support are satisfactory. The college works hard to meet the needs of vulnerable students and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Safeguarding arrangements meet government requirements and there are good links with a wide range of external support agencies. Good transition arrangements help students to settle quickly into Year 7. They feel safe and say there is someone to turn to if they need help. They particularly value the support of sixth formers in this respect. New systems for monitoring and promoting attendance and behaviour are having a positive impact. Most students appreciate the new 'iBehave' system but say some teachers rarely use it. Appropriate guidance is available on option choices and careers. The college now has good procedures for tracking students' progress, although teachers vary in how well they use this information to improve achievement. Additional funding from specialist status supports the intervention programme. Students know their learning targets, and appreciate the 'catch up' classes, but they do not always know what they need to do to improve.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Leadership and management are satisfactory. The college runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis and staff and other resources are deployed appropriately. In 2006-07, there were significant

staffing issues, but decisive action and a number of new appointments have established a greater sense of common purpose amongst the staff. The headteacher and senior staff understand the college's strengths and weaknesses and know that they have much work ahead of them, first to sustain and then to build on the schools' satisfactory effectiveness. They intend to improve standards further by enhancing the role of directors of learning; by revising the curriculum and programmes of study; and by improving teaching and learning to make lessons more enjoyable and engaging. Specialist equipment is adequate. The large site presents both problems and opportunities. Some of the accommodation is very good, but some needs refurbishment.

Governance is good. The governing body has played a leading role in planning change and its sub-committees support and challenge senior managers well. Support from the local authority and other outside agencies contributes to the satisfactory capacity to improve.

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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	NA	NA
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	3	3
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?	3	3
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	3	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	3	
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	3	
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	3	

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?	3	3
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	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	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

23 November 2007

Dear Students

Inspection of Abbey College, Ramsey PE26 1DG

I am writing to tell you about your school's recent inspection. I would like to thank you on behalf of the inspection team for all the help you gave us and for your willingness to talk frankly about the college.

Many of you will realise that the college had a difficult first year. Your parents were rightly critical of the quality of your education. Mr Birks and the senior team were very honest with the inspection team. They told us that some of the teaching was not good enough last year and that this affected your behaviour and progress. However, they also told us that things have improved this term; nearly all lessons are taught to a satisfactory standard and there are fewer disruptions. We checked this out through our own observations, by looking at the assessment records and by talking to students, staff and governors. We also observed two lessons alongside Mr Digby and Mrs Peacock to see how good they were at judging the quality of a lesson and suggesting improvements. We found that their judgements and advice were good. Overall, the inspection convinced us that college is on the right track and we judged it to be providing a satisfactory standard of education.

It is a very complicated task to bring together the teachers from two separate schools and get them to work together as a team. The college has sorted out most of the initial problems and you are beginning to feel the benefit. Most of you are responding to the better teaching and guidance, but a few are still tempted to mess around. Recent results were not good enough because you had been making slow progress. Now that you are starting to catch up, most of you are learning and achieving satisfactorily. Remember that your attitudes and behaviour can make a big difference to the progress you make.

We have suggested that the school should try to improve:

- examination results by improving the quality of teaching and learning
- the behaviour of students who disrupt others' learning
- the range of 14-19 vocational courses.
- the reliability of systems to respond to parents' questions.

On behalf of the inspection team, I wish you all the best for the future.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Abbott HMI