

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway T 08456 404040
London F 020 7421 6855
WC2B 6SE www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr J Howells
Headteacher
Leasowes Community College
Kent Road
Halesowen
West Midlands
B62 8PJ

Dear Mr Howells

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Curriculum Innovation

Thank you for your assistance and hospitality, and that of your staff, during my visit on 3-4 May 2007 to look at your school's curriculum and how innovation contributes to standards and achievement. The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting.

Context

Leasowes Community College has a long history of using curriculum time in different ways. Every Friday is organised into a five-hour, continuous learning block, allocated to subjects in proportion to their overall curriculum time. In addition, Year 10 students are offered week-long blocks in two options, leading eventually to early entry to GCSE. The whole college utilises longer blocks of time at three points in the year. Students experience consecutive two and three day curriculum events. The overall effectiveness of the curriculum in terms of this flexible use of time is good.

Achievement and Standards

Students start school with average attainment and achieve well. At the end of Key Stage 3 standards are in line with those found nationally and are better in English and science than in mathematics. Students make satisfactory progress.

In 2006, standards at GCSE improved significantly, with particularly good improvement in English. This reflects the significant emphasis the school places on outcomes at Key Stage 4 where students have made better

progress. The proportion of students gaining five or more higher grades overall improved, as did the proportion including English and mathematics.

Personal development and well-being

Students are very positive about the impact of these longer blocks of time on their learning. They feel that the extra time helps improve relationships and they work together better. Students acknowledge that a few get bored too easily and may start to disrupt extended sessions but they feel this is no worse than might happen in short lessons and that most teachers deal with the problem appropriately.

Early entry to GCSE gives students experience of success that motivates them in their other subjects and eases pressure in Year 11. Students are certain that they gain a great deal from extended time on one subject as they 'get a lot of work done'. In particular, Year 10 business studies students felt the week-long block allocated to this subject was very good preparation for the world of work. Examination success in year 10 opens up opportunities for students in year 11, so that, for example, they might study some AS levels, additional GCSEs and also have time for private study.

Students are cooperative learners and organise themselves very well. The curriculum arrangements have improved their engagement with their learning.

Quality of provision

The involvement of all teachers and students is a strength of this innovation and the arrangements are embedded in teaching practices. The 'flexible Friday' time and 'fast track' weeks are used to good effect by the teachers for a range of activities, such as completing discrete units of work or finishing course work. The blocks of time need considerable planning and a very different approach from usual practice. However, teachers feel that this is worthwhile as they can make particularly effective use of the long blocks. Teachers fully realise that they need to work with their students in very different ways and establish new relationships.

The innovation is well established and integrated into everyday activities and planning. The time blocks are used effectively to enhance curriculum provision through a flexible and adaptable approach. Some innovative courses, such as 'Mediaonics', are being introduced. These are popular with the students.

Pastoral support officers give good support both to the implementation of the innovation and to the students. They make sure that students know where they are going and deal with arrangements for the different days.

Leadership and Management of the curriculum

The curriculum innovation has been led expertly and enthusiastically over many years. Thorough planning and continuous evaluation are supported by regular consultation as staff and other participants are encouraged to make an input and give their opinions, although students could be more involved. As a result, the curriculum model is continually evolving and being adapted to the changing needs of students.

Inclusion

This is a very inclusive school where students are happy and achieve well. The school gives good support to vulnerable students. The varied use of curriculum time enables students of all abilities to focus on and complete their work.

Areas for development, which we discussed included:

- greater use of students' views of the curriculum to evaluate impact
- identifying areas of overlap in content between core and option blocks to avoid repetition
- future development of time-blocking arrangements in order to maximise the impact of the longer time allocations in all subjects.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop the curriculum in the school.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Christine Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector