

Abbey College

Independent School

Inspection report

DCSF Registration Number	330/6092
Unique Reference Number	103599
Inspection number	316891
Inspection dates	24-25 September 2007
Reporting inspector	Marianick Ellender-Gelé HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 162A of the Education Act 2002 (as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005).

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London WC2B 6SE
T 08456 404040

www.ofsted.gov.uk

Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by Ofsted under section 162A of the Education Act 2002, as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005, in order to advise the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

Information about the college

Abbey College opened in 1994 and is situated at the heart of Birmingham's historical and business quarters. The college's aim is to unlock the potential of each student in a secure learning environment where the atmosphere is relaxed and yet purposeful. Abbey College seeks to provide a bespoke educational experience, recognising and respecting the needs of individual students. There is no uniform, all members of the college community are known by their first names, and rules are kept to the necessary minimum in order to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and friendliness. Students aged 14 to 19 come to Abbey mostly from Birmingham and its surroundings urban areas, with some students coming from more distant counties. Although many students are from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds only a very small number are at the early stages of learning English. There is a strong expectation that students are at the college to achieve their academic potential and to develop into confident, responsible and independent young adults by the time they move on to university. A new principal was appointed in August 2007.

Evaluation of the college

The quality of education provided by Abbey College is good. The curriculum allows students to select courses from a wide range of subjects and is planned well to ensure thorough acquisition of examination knowledge and techniques. Teaching is good. Students receive very effective individual help and this, combined with their excellent attitudes to learning, leads to good progress and meticulous preparation for further studies or work. The provision for the welfare, health and safety of students is also good. The college does not comply with several regulations.

Quality of education

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory. There are strengths in the way the college individualises and tailors the subjects around the needs of individual students. The curriculum prepares students well for the next steps in their education or working life. There is excellent support for university applications and staff have significant expertise in this area. Students praised their teachers for giving so much of their time with strong mentoring outside timetabled lessons. The college is aware of its weaknesses. These include the insufficient use of information and communication technology (ICT) to support learning and limited opportunities to address the ethical dimensions of subjects, drawn from the real world. As a result

some courses are functional and lack those aspects that develop students' personal responses to the subject.

A carefully constructed personal, social, health and citizenship education programme covers relevant topics, although the way issues are taught does not always engage younger students quickly enough, and as a result some lack confidence.

Improvements are in hand and the debating society, which was seen as playing an important part in college life last year, is currently being rekindled. The provision for teaching students about the importance of adopting a healthy lifestyle is satisfactory. The college makes good use of local specialist facilities for physical education and there is access to extra-curricular sporting opportunities. Overall, the extra-curricular programme is satisfactory with some educational visits enhancing subjects well, for example in history.

Teaching is good and shows very good specialist knowledge in all subjects. The very small classes result in focused teaching, often one-to-one, and this has a positive impact on students' learning with good levels of challenge and guidance. For example, teachers take great care over the level of specialist and technical language they use, they frame questions effectively to challenge students and to ensure that guidance matches examination requirements. Relationships are excellent, helping students' motivation and diligence. Despite these strengths, the quality of the teaching is not consistently high in all subjects. Where teaching is only satisfactory, the teachers' subject knowledge is secure but the lesson is over-controlled giving insufficient opportunities for students to think for themselves and gain confidence to participate actively. In all subjects, the use of ICT as a teaching and learning tool is underdeveloped.

Assessment has many good features. There are helpful testing sessions and good use of grading and comments on effort and attainment. Many teachers are examiners themselves and use their knowledge effectively to assess students' work. The tracking of each student's progress is thorough, although not consistent across all subjects. The college has good records of examination results, but not enough use is made of this centralised data to improve teaching and learning further and represent accurately the college's provision and students' achievement.

The progress of students is good. Over time, they acquire the necessary skills, technical vocabulary and key concepts needed to achieve their targeted grades. If they encounter difficulties, teachers provide very good academic and welfare support. Lessons are planned carefully. This, along with small, and when necessary one-to-one, teaching groups, encourages progress. Students try hard, show respect for the learning needs of others and demonstrate high levels of commitment in their lessons. There are often more boys than girls in teaching groups and not all teaching is skilful enough to ensure that girls who lack confidence make sufficient progress orally. The few students who are at the early stages of learning English make very good progress thanks to the peer support and intensive English tuition that they receive.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the pupils

Provision for students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. Cultural development is only satisfactory because there is insufficient use in lessons of the students' rich diversity of backgrounds and infrequent visits to places of interest. Students have a very mature understanding of why they are at the college and what they want out of it. Attendance is good. The college targets students who are often late or absent and the link between attendance and achievement is monitored well. Excellent behaviour and attitudes reflect the fact that the great majority of students enjoy being at the college. Relationships are excellent and there is a very strong mutual respect between staff and students. Consequently, students feel valued. The college provides a very secure physical and emotional environment, along with a strong work ethic, which supports students' academic progress and personal development. The college takes appropriate steps to deal with the infrequent incidents of bullying and students confirm that bullying is not tolerated.

Students rapidly acquire the essential skills they need for their future lives and economic well-being as young adults and for further studies. They are encouraged to contribute to the college community through the college council, peer-mentoring schemes and charity events. They respond readily to responsibility when given the opportunity. However, many students said that they would like to contribute more to decision-making and have a say about provision at the college. Inspection findings confirm that students have limited real influence on decisions which affect them. The college is aware of the need to ensure that all have a voice. The citizenship programme gives younger students a broad awareness of how society works, its main institutions and public services.

Welfare, health and safety of the pupils

Provision for the welfare, health and safety of students is good. The college has a good range of policies and practices and the new principal is currently ensuring that all are updated as required. Teachers are diligent about the safety of all students and risk assessments are made carefully. The college is very well equipped, with a lift and toilet facilities, to provide for students who have mobility issues. Students feel safe and well cared for.

Suitability of the proprietor and staff

Checks with the Criminal Records Bureau on the suitability of staff to work with children are carried out for all staff employed in the college and all long serving members of staff have been subject to the appropriate checks. Procedures for appointing staff are appropriate and include the take up of professional references and checks on qualifications. The college maintains a single central register of staff checks.

College's premises and accommodation

The college is an attractive and fully accessible building. Classrooms, sited around a central atrium, have an office feel and students feel secure and respond very well to this adult working environment which makes a significant contribution to establishing the college's work ethic. There are some specialist facilities, such as those for science, ICT and art, but many students, in their response to the inspection questionnaire, said that they did not have enough access to ICT and resources to support their study. Inspection findings confirm these views and the college has recognised the need to improve resources further. A number of classrooms have been given a subject identity but some are not attractive enough and parts of the building lack refurbishment, particularly the students' common room. Not all regulations are met because there is no facility for students who are ill and no outdoor social area.

Provision of information for parents, carers and others

The college sends out appropriate materials to inform parents and prospective parents of the college's ethos, aims and policies. However, the right to request particular documentation is not clear enough and some of the required information is not currently provided to parents, carers and others. The college does not inform parents that they can request the details of the number of complaints registered under the formal procedure during the previous college year.

Procedures for handling complaints

The procedures for handling complaints do not comply with the regulations in several respects and not all parents are clear about how to proceed if they wish to complain.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The college meets all of the Education (Independent College Standards) (England) Regulations 2003 as amended January 2005, with the exception of those listed below.

The college does not meet all requirements in respect of the curriculum (standard 1) and must:

- provide resources of an adequate quality, quantity and range, particularly for ICT (paragraph 1(3)(f)).

The college does not meet all requirements in respect of the premises and accommodation (standard 5) and must:

- provide appropriate facilities for those students who are ill, in accordance with the Education (School Premises) Regulations 1999 (paragraph 5(l))
- provide outdoor space for students (paragraph 5(t)).

The college does not meet all requirements in respect of the provision of information for parents, carers and others (standard 6) and must:

- provide in the information for parents the name of the principal (paragraph 6(2)(a))
- provide particulars of the educational provision for students for whom English is an additional language (paragraph 6(2)(f))
- make clear to parents that they can request details of the complaints procedure adopted by the college together with the number of complaints registered under the formal procedure during the preceding college year (paragraph 6(2)(j))
- make clear to parents that they can request a summary of the qualifications of staff employed at the college (paragraph 6(2)(k)).

The college does not meet all requirements in respect of procedures for handling complaints (standard 7) and must:

- provide clear timescales for the management of complaints (paragraph 7(c))
- explain that a formal complaint can be made in writing if parents are not satisfied with the response to an informal complaint (paragraph 7(e))
- explain that if parents are not satisfied with the response to a written complaint there is provision of a hearing before a panel appointed by the proprietor of at least three people who have not been directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint (paragraph 7(f))
- ensure that one person on the panel is independent of the management and running of the college (paragraph 7(g))
- make clear to parents that they may attend the panel hearing, and, if they wish, be accompanied (paragraph 7(h))
- ensure that the complaints procedure provides for the panel to make findings and recommendations and stipulates that the complainant, proprietors and principal, and, where relevant, the person complained about, will be given a copy of any findings and recommendations (paragraph 7(i))
- clarify that written records will be kept of all complaints indicating whether they were resolved at the preliminary stage, or whether they proceeded to a panel hearing (paragraph 7(j))
- clarify that correspondence, statements and records of complaints are to be kept confidential (paragraph 7(k)).

What the college could do to improve further

While not required by the regulations, the college might wish to consider the following points for development:

- improve access to and use of ICT
- improve consistency in the quality of teaching and learning so that all students achieve their potential in all subjects
- ensure that students have a voice and contribute more fully to decision-making and to improving provision at the college.

College details

Name of college	Abbey College		
DCSF number	3306092		
Unique reference number	103599		
Type of college	Tutorial College		
Status	Independent		
Date college opened	October 1994		
Age range of students	14-19		
Gender of students	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time students)	Boys: 80	Girls: 48	Total: 128
Number of students with a statement of special educational need	Boys: 0	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Number of students who are looked after	Boys: 0	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Annual fees (day students)	£8,985-£14,685		
Address of college	10 St Paul's Square Birmingham West Midlands B3 1QU		
Telephone number	01212 367474		
Fax number	01212 363937		
Email address	andrew.jedras@abbeybirmingham.co.uk		
Principal	Mr Andrew Jedras		
Proprietor	Alpha Plus Group		
Reporting inspector	Marianick Ellender-Gelé HMI		
Dates of inspection	24-25 September 2007		