

7 November 2007

Mr K Prytherch
Headteacher
Whitby Community College
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Whitby
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Dear Mr Prytherch

Ofsted monitoring of schools with a Notice to Improve

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave me when I inspected your college on 6 November 2007, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. Please also pass on my particular thanks to the vice chair of governors for giving his time to meet with me and to staff and students for talking to me so openly and candidly.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

As a result of the inspection in March 2007, the college was asked to:

- raise achievement, particularly for those students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- use data more precisely to identify and tackle variations in achievement and standards between subjects and different groups of learners
- improve the proportion of teaching and learning that is good or better
- embed and improve senior leadership skills further to secure a strategic and cohesive plan for sustainable college improvement in the future.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the college is making satisfactory progress in addressing the issues for improvement. However, there is still much more to do on all the issues identified at the last inspection.

Since the last inspection there have been major changes in senior personnel. At the end of the summer term 2007 the headteacher left the college. She was replaced by an interim headteacher who has now been appointed as substantive headteacher from 1 January 2008. At present the new headteacher is also continuing in his previous post, namely headteacher of one of the two 11–14 feeder schools to the college. An interim deputy headteacher has also been appointed for one term until Christmas 2007. He has been seconded from the other 14–19 college in North Yorkshire.

Senior leaders are focused upon tackling the areas for improvement. The headteacher has a clear sense of direction in how to take the college forward. He is well supported by a close and determined leadership team and together they have galvanised the staff. There is a commitment across the college to supporting and working with the new headteacher and his senior colleagues in addressing the areas for improvement. There is a unity of purpose and the staff act in a cohesive and positive manner with enthusiasm and conviction to make the improvements necessary to raise achievement for all students. In the words of one sixth-form student, the new headteacher has brought 'a breath of fresh air' to the college, and her view was overwhelmingly echoed by staff and fellow students.

Although there were some pleasing improvements in the results gained by students in 2007, the proportion of students achieving five GCSEs at grades A* to C, for example, hardly improved and targets were not reached. However, this term there has been much activity in identifying underachievement and establishing monitoring systems to help all students to achieve their targets. Data is being closely analysed and students identified as underachieving, or at risk of underachieving, are being regularly mentored. The progress of different groups of learners, including those who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities, is being carefully monitored, with appropriate strategies being adopted to help individual students achieve. The collation and review of attendance, behaviour and attainment data are particularly positive moves in trying to eradicate barriers to learning. There is a clear focus on raising achievement in all subject areas; evidence presented indicates that underachievement is being tackled and that more students are on track to meet their targets. Current estimates are that as many as 70% of students in Year 11 are on target to achieve five GCSEs at grades A* to C in 2008. Nevertheless, there is no room for complacency if the college is to achieve the challenging targets it has set itself.

The quality of teaching and learning is improving. Staff want to know how they can improve, meetings are being devoted to improving teaching and learning, and good practice is being shared between teachers and across subjects. Teachers are starting to use more effectively the data they have on each student to inform their planning and the activities they set in lessons. Weak teaching has been tackled through well-conceived support plans. Teachers plan thoroughly and learning outcomes are shared with students but sufficient time is not always devoted at the end of lessons to review and reinforce what had been covered in the lesson.

Students generally enjoy lessons, as seen in their good behaviour and in the positive relationships between students and between students and staff. All lessons seen on this inspection were satisfactory or better, and just over half were good or better. In the best lessons there was effective and probing questioning, a good pace, and a vitality about the learning which engaged the students. On the other hand, lessons were seen in which questioning elicited short answers, the opportunity to develop ideas through fruitful discussion was missed, and the students were passive learners. Nevertheless, senior and middle leaders are focused upon improving teaching and learning, training is refining the strategies used in the classroom and current monitoring indicates that the quality of teaching and learning is rising. However, it is not yet overwhelmingly good or better.

The commitment and dedication of the new headteacher and the interim deputy headteacher have done much to improve and embed senior leadership in the college. A business manager who sits on the senior leadership team has been appointed, and the extended leadership team has been reconstituted. Now chaired by one of the directors of learning, the extended team is being carefully developed to strengthen leadership for the future. Professional leadership training is being provided and the roles of senior leaders have been clarified to focus on the key processes of effective leadership and management. Senior leaders keep watch on the corridors and frequently visit lessons; their presence and involvement have helped to raise morale and to create a positive atmosphere throughout the college. A strategic plan for future improvement has been drafted but it does not yet include the practical details needed to turn the vision into reality.

Senior leaders are well supported by the governing body, and the local authority has contributed effectively to the college's improvement. The post-inspection action plan and the subsequent college improvement plan are well focused, and the work of the local authority's advisers and consultants is recognised by the college as playing a key role in helping it to move forward. Specialist status has brought significant benefits to the college but the impact in design technology has so far lagged behind that in science, mathematics and information and communication technology. However, there have been changes in leadership and in the curriculum for technology. Students appear to enjoy the new course at GCSE but it is too early to assess the full impact of these developments.

The headteacher and his senior colleagues know the strengths and weaknesses of the college well and what needs to be improved. Together with the local authority they have made a shrewd analysis of the immediate way forward and their work is well targeted. Some improvements are already evident but the progress made since the start of this term needs to be constantly reinforced. Teachers are dedicated and their efforts require continued support and guidance.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your college.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Maddison". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal line.

Michael Maddison
Her Majesty's Inspector