

Alexandra House  
33 Kingsway  
London  
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404045  
F 020 7421 6855  
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Dr N Jepson  
Executive Headteacher  
Carlton Bolling College  
Undercliffe Lane  
Bradford  
West Yorkshire  
BD3 0DU

Dear Dr Jepson

Ofsted survey inspection programme – schools formerly in special measures now judged to be good or better

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit with Mark Sims HMI, on 04 December, to look at work done to improve the school's overall effectiveness since it was placed in special measures in September 2002.

As outlined in my initial letter, the visit focused on the successful actions taken by the school to build capacity and significantly improve provision, particularly in relation to: the impact of external support; the involvement of parents in school improvement; issues around staffing and leadership and management.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the outcomes of the visit included interviews with the executive headteacher, the acting headteacher, other key managers, teachers, students, a representative of the local authority and a representative of the governing body. Other relevant documentation was scrutinised.

Shortly after the designation of special measures the substantive headteacher left the college and was succeeded by two short-tenure, temporary appointments. The current substantive headteacher was appointed in January 2004. The college was removed from special measures twelve months later. In March 2007 the college was graded as outstanding for its overall effectiveness.

The current substantive headteacher has taken on the role of executive headteacher to include another 11-18 school in the local authority. Two of Carlton Bolling's deputy headteachers have taken the roles of acting headteacher, one in each of the two partner schools.

During discussions with many staff and other stakeholders, a number of factors emerged as having been particularly influential in securing the rapid and sustained improvement in provision and outcomes for young people.

The executive headteacher immediately sought to engender a sense of urgency and a need to focus on the key issues. His initial leadership style gave little room for negotiation, although this directive stance was tempered with the sharing of the rationale behind decisions. The initial leadership style, though principally directive, was used to engage the staff in honest debate around the actions required for improvement. Regular briefings to the whole-college staff were delivered by the headteacher, to ensure that the message was received unequivocally and not lost in translation through a third party. Staff say that they respected this approach; it helped to build confidence and trust in their leader and ensured clear communication and understanding of the actions that were required.

The executive headteacher's view is that the significant external support placed in the college in the very early weeks of special measures, proved largely ineffective. Principally this was because this support was insufficiently well targeted to the key issues. Also it necessitated the involvement of college staff in numerous meetings, a distraction, often of little tangible benefit. However, the support of consultants at subject level was more positively received. Middle managers report the impact of external subject specialists was demonstrable in helping to improve the overall quality of provision.

The appointment of two deputy headteachers new to the school, with proven track records added to the college's capacity to drive improvement at a senior level. Collectively, senior leaders were able to identify areas of weakness not previously recognised, but that needed to be addressed. Further, the recognition of untapped potential and skills within the college's existing staff, became the focus of effective training and development. The number of highly effective practitioners in key roles, who have been developed and promoted internally, is notable.

The success in identifying and unlocking potential at Carlton Bolling College has been a key feature contributing to the rapid improvements in teaching and learning and in the students' achievements. The proportion of students achieving five A\* to C grades has doubled since the time of special measures. In a college where a very high proportion of students speak English as an additional language, their progress in English by the age of 16, placed the college within the top 3% of schools nationally in 2006 and 2007.

There are numerous examples of individual staff who have grown to become skilled practitioners, through both accredited and in-house training. Internal

promotion and delegation of additional responsibilities have provided an internal career pathway that has motivated several of the senior and middle leaders and managers. Whilst their contributions have undoubtedly had a beneficial impact on provision and outcomes for students, their experiences have engendered a strong sense of loyalty and corporate belonging. The stability in staffing reaps additional benefits.

Expectations of staff and in turn, of students, are high. The culture is one of continuous improvement. As was one teacher remarked: 'complacency has no place here'. The directive style has relaxed over time, as middle leaders and teachers have honed their skills and become more confident and competent practitioners. Staff use the term 'ownership' to explain their sense of being able to influence the work and direction of their curriculum areas. They feel valued and respected as professionals. However, they are quick to point out that a slowing of the pace is not on the executive headteacher's agenda. 'We can't afford to relax' one teacher explained. Rather, their talk is of new ideas and strategies, with an eye to the future. Staff echo the executive headteacher's view, that this was never just about getting out of special measures. That was but one point on a much longer journey, during which satisfactory has never been good enough.

The school has created a learning ethos which is underpinned by a commitment that all students should be given the opportunity to achieve their potential. The introduction of setting and target groups has enabled teachers to plan lessons and target specialist support to better meet the needs of all learners. The headteacher quickly moved the focus from an over-concentration on the headline 5 A\* to C figure, to the achievement of all students. In 2007 the college was judged to be outstanding in relation to 'how well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners'.

Much work has been done to build constructive relationships between staff and students. Students speak highly of their school which has created a timetable to accommodate the religious practice of many within the college community. Student engagement with college life and learning is strong. It stems from teaching and learning which meets individual learning needs well and also through staffing appointments that reflect the ethnic profile in college and the wider community. A significant proportion of staff are from Asian heritage backgrounds and many live locally. This is in a college where over 80% of pupils speak English as an additional language and 90% are from minority ethnic backgrounds. Staff and students are convinced that this has done a huge amount to raise students' aspirations, through the high visibility of positive role models. It has helped too, in establishing constructive relationships between the college and local community. Greater parental involvement has been evidenced through attendance at college events.

Thank you again for sharing your thoughts on the many ways in which the college has improved. I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop the college.

A copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Cathy Kirby  
Her Majesty's Inspector