

St Neots Community College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	110878
Local Authority	Cambridgeshire
Inspection number	325248
Inspection dates	11–12 March 2009
Reporting inspector	Jennifer Brown HMI

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 under pilot arrangements; it was also deemed a Section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1003
Sixth Form	128
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr John Duley
Principal	Mr Eueth Forrester
Date of previous school inspection	8–9 February 2006
School address	Barford Road St Neots PE19 2SH
Telephone number	01480374748
Fax number	01480375150
Email address	office@stneotscc.cambs.sch.uk

Age group	11–18
Inspection dates	11–12 March 2009
Inspection number	325248

© Crown copyright 2009

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

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.

Further copies of this report are obtainable from the school. Under the Education Act 2005, the school must provide a copy of this report free of charge to certain categories of people. A charge not exceeding the full cost of reproduction may be made for any other copies supplied.

Introduction

This pilot inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three additional inspectors. The inspectors visited 39 lessons and held meetings with governors, staff and groups of students. They observed the school's work, and looked at: the work students were doing in their books; tracking and monitoring information; internal and external evaluations of the performance of the school; minutes of governor and senior managers' meetings and questionnaires completed by 130 parents.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at the following:

- how effectively the school is setting and meeting challenging targets for raising standards and achievement throughout the school
- whether appropriate action has been taken to address the fall in 2008 examination results and to ensure students are developing appropriate workplace skills
- how well students behave in lessons and around the school and the effectiveness of actions to improve behaviour
- the sufficiency and consistency of good teaching and learning throughout the college
- the relevance of the curriculum to meeting the needs of all students and how effectively it contributes to their well-being and development
- the effectiveness with which managers at all levels are using the college's monitoring and evaluation systems to identify and address underachievement and bring about and sustain improvements.

Information about the school

St Neots Community College is a slightly larger than average sized college specialising in performing arts and communications technology. The number of students at the college has fallen by approximately 10% since the previous inspection. There are more students at the college with learning difficulties than is typical nationally, the largest groups having moderate or behavioural, social and emotional difficulties. The proportion of students with a statement of special educational need is more than twice the national average. Since the previous inspection there has been a slight increase in the proportion of students eligible for free school meals which is now broadly in line with the national average. Most students are from White British backgrounds and among those from other minority ethnic groups few speak English as an additional language. Attainment on entry is broadly average. The college achieved the Artsmark gold award in 2007 and recently was awarded the Sportsmark award. The current principal took up post in September 2007.

There is an independently controlled nursery on the same site as the college, which will come under the control of the governing body in April 2009. This provision was inspected separately.

Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness

4

Capacity for sustained improvement

4

Main findings

In accordance with section 13 (3) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires special measures because it is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the school are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement.

Despite the best efforts of the principal in difficult circumstances, collectively, leadership and management at the college are inadequate and have not been successful in ensuring students receive a satisfactory standard of education. Since the previous inspection students' behaviour has improved and there is now better consultation with students and parents. However, achievement is too low, student attendance overall has deteriorated and levels of persistent absence are high. Attendance in Years 10 and 11 is much lower than in the rest of the college. A lack of stability in leadership and management at all levels is limiting the rate at which managers are able to drive forward improvement. The principal is working hard to establish a culture of high expectations and together with senior managers has introduced new assessment systems for tracking and monitoring the progress students make, enabling a sharper focus on student achievement. However, it is too early to determine the effectiveness of these new systems. The recent creation of heads of faculty is providing valuable additional support for subject leaders, many of whom are either new to their role or, as is the case in science and mathematics, have significant staffing issues to manage.

Teaching and learning are regularly evaluated, as are other aspects of the college's performance, but managers are often generous in their assessment and do not sufficiently acknowledge the significance of inadequacies in performance. College and departmental plans identify appropriate areas for improvement, but lack sufficiently clear success criteria to enable managers to effectively evaluate the impact of these actions on raising achievement.

Difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff have resulted in a high proportion of temporary teachers being employed by the college, frequent changes of teachers and an increase in the amount of inadequate teaching. Some teaching is good or outstanding and effectively challenges and engages students, but the college has not been effective in ensuring this good practice is widely shared. Too much of the teaching experienced by students is inadequate, or barely satisfactory. In these

lessons, the pace of learning is too slow and teachers are not using assessment information to plan varied activities which will interest and challenge all students and ensure they make good progress. The quality of marking is variable, both in its frequency and the extent to which it informs students about how to improve their work.

These shortfalls in management capacity and weaknesses in teaching have had an adverse effect on student achievement and enjoyment, which are inadequate. Standards at the end of Key Stage 4 have been consistently well below average and fell significantly in 2008. The college's specialist status has had a variable impact on standards, with targets being met in some specialist areas, but not in others. In 2008 too many students did not make the progress expected, given their starting points. This is in contrast to previous years, where most made satisfactory progress.

Most students feel safe at the college and have a good understanding of how to live healthily. Staff have worked hard to encourage more students to walk or cycle to college. Behaviour is satisfactory. The majority of students are well behaved in lessons and around the college, chatting sociably at lunchtimes and breaks and moving sensibly around the building. However, as found in the previous inspection, students' behaviour in lessons deteriorates when the teaching does not motivate and engage them. Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is satisfactory. Most students are thoughtful and considerate to others and have a well adjusted sense of right and wrong. Relationships between students are generally positive and when they have opportunities to work together they do so collaboratively.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise standards and achievement by ensuring realistic, but challenging targets are used effectively by all staff to secure rapid improvement.
- Improve the quality of teaching by ensuring teachers consistently:
 - use a range of activities which challenge and motivate and meet the needs of all students
 - provide students with clear information on how well they are achieving and what they need to do to improve for example through the marking of books.
 - Improve overall attendance and reduce the level of persistent absence by targeting strategies particularly in Years 10 and 11.
- Improve the accuracy and effectiveness of the evaluation of the college's performance by managers at all levels by:
 - ensuring inadequacies are clearly identified and eliminated
 - making effective use of clear success criteria for evaluating the impact of interventions on improving students' standards, achievement and well-being.

How good is the overall outcome for individuals and groups of pupils?

4

Standards at the end of Key Stage 4, although slowly improving until 2008 are well below average. Standards fell sharply in 2008, when only a quarter of students obtained five or more higher grade GCSEs including English and mathematics. Success in meeting targets for the specialist subjects is variable. In 2006 they were exceeded in music and outcomes in drama were close to the target, but they were not met in media studies. Since then standards in music and drama have fallen significantly, but have risen rapidly in media, where standards were high in 2008. In 2008 test results suggest that students between the ages of 11 and 16 made insufficient progress in relation to their capabilities. This was in contrast to previous years, when their progress appeared to be satisfactory overall. The inspection focus on whether appropriate actions had been taken to address the fall in 2008 found, in a high proportion of lessons observed, students did not make sufficient progress in relation to their starting points. This is because teachers do not make sufficient use of assessment information to set work which is sufficiently challenging, particularly for middle and higher attaining students. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make similar progress to other students, except in English where their progress is good because of the high quality of support they receive.

Most students feel safe at college and parental questionnaire responses largely support this view. Many are confident they can turn to an adult in the college for help if they have a problem, such as bullying. Students have a good understanding of how to live healthily. Many say they try to eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. Most students enjoy taking exercise through sports clubs and physical education lessons. The contribution of older students to the college and the wider community is good. Members of the student council work with college leaders and through them the collective views of students have influenced decisions about college life related to uniform and the new vertical tutor system. Younger students also have opportunities to contribute to the community, but these are fewer and some know little about the work of the college council.

The curriculum provides a variety of opportunities for students to increase their understanding of the world of work. However, too few are developing the literacy and numeracy skills they need to be able to succeed in the next phase of their lives. Attendance, particularly in Years 10 and 11 is poor, and well below that of similar schools. Punctuality has improved, but the college still has some persistent latecomers.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' attainment ¹	4
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	4
The quality of learning for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and their progress	4
How well do pupils achieve and enjoy their learning?	4
To what extent do pupils feel safe?	2
How well do pupils behave?	3
To what extent do pupils adopt healthy lifestyles?	2
To what extent do pupils contribute to the school and wider community?	3
Pupils' attendance	4
How well do pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being?	4
What is the extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development?	3

The quality of the school's work

Inspectors found insufficient good or better teaching and too much that was inadequate or barely satisfactory. Where learning was the most effective, teachers had high expectations of students and carefully chose activities that would engage and challenge them. In these lessons the pace of learning was brisk, questioning probed understanding and sufficient opportunities were built in to remind students of the learning objectives and success criteria. However, in too many lessons learning objectives specified an activity not a learning outcome. The pace of learning was slow, either because of poor planning, or because teachers became distracted by background chatter. In some lessons the activities selected were inappropriate to consolidate learning, or were insufficiently challenging for too many students. Introductions to tasks were unclear, so students did not understand their purpose, questioning was superficial, did not probe understanding and failed to emphasise key aspects of learning necessary to improve student achievement.

Assessment systems have been introduced which are regularly and rigorously interrogated. This is enabling staff to identify where students are failing to meet their targets and to appropriately direct intervention activities. However, because the system has just been in operation for this academic year, managers are not in a position yet to judge the accuracy of information being collected by departments and whether students are making sufficient progress towards their targets. Students are informed about how well they are doing, but they are not consistently involved in assessing their progress. The impact of assessment in raising achievement is currently limited.

The curriculum has recently undergone a number of changes to ensure it meets the needs of all students more effectively. Approximately a third of students in Year 7, who join the college with low literacy and numeracy skills, are benefiting from the

¹ Grades for attainment are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; 4 is low

Open Minds programme. This is effective in helping students make the transition between primary and secondary education and in improving their motivation. The attendance of this group of Year 7 students is higher than that of similar groups in previous years. At Key Stage 4 students now have a guided choice from a wide range of options, which include a number of vocational courses and the creative and media diploma. The college's performing arts status provides students with a range of cultural experiences, through drama, music and media studies, although they are not as developed as the college would like.

Vulnerable groups of students receive good pastoral care because of the close working relationship the college has with external agencies which offer the appropriate support these students need. Appropriate arrangements are in place to enable students to settle into their courses as they join and move through the college. Careers guidance, offered through the personal, social and health education programme and conference days, enables students to plan for the next stage in their education. Actions to improve attendance have recently been improved and are beginning to have an impact on reducing persistent absence. Changes to the provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have resulted in delays in the reviewing of the personal targets identified in their individual education plans, which has made it more difficult to track the progress these students are making. The college is making new appointments to the support team to address this situation.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

High quality teaching and purposeful learning	4
Effective assessment	4
An appropriate curriculum which meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, provision through partnership with other organisations	3
Support, guidance and care	3

How effective are leadership and management?

The principal has correctly identified what actions need to be taken to raise student achievement. Together with senior colleagues he is working hard to reverse a culture where expectations of students were too low. However, in 2008 standards and achievement fell significantly, and too many weaknesses remain in the quality of teaching and learning. Girls' achievement has declined more rapidly than that of the boys over the last three years and the achievement of the different groups of students who find learning more difficult is very variable. While managers are committed to reversing these declines, they cannot yet demonstrate they are being successful in doing so. Monitoring and evaluation are improving but are not yet leading to sustained improvement. The implementation of new systems for regularly tracking student progress is enabling managers at all levels to ask pertinent questions about the progress of all groups of students. However, as the systems are in their first year of operation, college managers are not yet in a position to evaluate the accuracy and robustness of the information they are collecting. The principal has placed a greater focus on monitoring the quality of teaching and learning, but inspectors did not confirm the college's view that the amount of inadequate teaching

is falling. There has been some improvement in the standard of behaviour since the previous inspection and the number of days of education lost as the result of fixed term exclusions has fallen significantly. Managers have addressed weaknesses in the curriculum, which were affecting student motivation and achievement, but it is too early to see the impact of these changes.

At the time of the inspection, arrangements for safeguarding students were secure. Staff regularly undertake child protection training and visitors are checked in by the vigilant office staff. The college's contribution to community cohesion is satisfactory and it is meeting its duties in relation to equalities. It is well informed about the context of the community it serves and works with appropriate external agencies to meet the needs of particular groups, for example, young people from Gypsy or Romany families. While the curriculum provides students with experiences and insights into the diversity of cultures in Britain, the amount of direct contact with people from different cultures with different beliefs is limited.

Secondments of senior managers over the last four years have reduced the capacity of senior and middle managers. Difficulties in teacher recruitment have resulted in the use of a high proportion of temporary teaching staff and have placed a severe strain on the budget, which is now in deficit. Group sizes in many subjects in the sixth form are very small, and, consequently the deployment of staff in this part of the college is inefficient.

Governors know the challenges the college faces through their links with departments. However, lack of accurate and robust information about student progress has limited their ability to hold managers sufficiently to account for the recent fall in achievement.

These are the grades for leadership and management

Communicating ambition and driving improvement	4
Promoting equality of opportunity and tackling discrimination	3
Ensuring that safeguarding procedures are effective	3
Ensuring that the governing body provides effective challenge and support so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities are met	4
Promoting the school's relationship with parents and carers, including their involvement in decision-making about matters relating to learning and well-being	3
Developing partnerships with other providers, organisations and services	3
Ensuring the school contributes to community cohesion	3
Deploying resources to achieve value for money	4

Sixth form

The sixth form provides a satisfactory standard of education. Standards are improving slowly, but remain below national averages. Nevertheless, students' achievements, when compared with standards on entry to the sixth form, are in line with expectations. Retention rates are good. The personal development and well-being of students are satisfactory. Students make a significant contribution to the college community through mentoring and helping younger students with their

reading. Their contribution to the wider community is more limited.

Students make satisfactory progress overall. Lessons are best when teachers encourage students to be independent and develop their own lines of enquiry when solving problems. The sixth form curriculum is satisfactory and responsive to students' individual needs and there is some integration of students from a local special school. The college provides a variety of academic and vocational courses at Levels 1, 2 and 3, but links with local post-16 providers are limited. Students are happy with the advice and guidance they receive prior to entering the sixth form. They receive appropriate academic guidance and support from their teachers to enable them to meet their targets and improve their work.

Leadership and management are satisfactory overall. The progress of students is tracked and monitored effectively and has resulted in a gradual improvement in outcomes. However, the evaluation of provision is insufficiently sharply focused on the impact it is having on improving student achievement.

Outcomes for students in the sixth form	3
The quality of provision in the sixth form	3
Leadership and management of the sixth form	3
The overall effectiveness of the sixth form	3

Views of parents and carers

Approximately a third of the responses received from parents showed they are entirely satisfied with the college; two thirds expressed one or more concerns, mainly related to student behaviour, particularly in lessons, the quality of teaching and frequent changes in staffing. Some parents complimented the principal on his communication with them and the improvements he has initiated. Others felt that communication with the college is ineffective even though there are several ways that parents can make contact, for example the website, by email, and by visiting or attending meetings. Several parents whose children find learning difficult made positive comments about the support they and their children had received.

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. In 2007-8, 15% of schools were judged to be outstanding.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well. In 2007-8, 49% of schools were judged good.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils. In 2007-8, 32% of schools were judged satisfactory.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves. In 2007-8, 5% of schools were judged inadequate.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.
Achievement:	an overall measure of the pupils' success in their academic learning. The term combines attainment and progress. Pupils might make good progress, for example, but if their attainment remains low, inspectors may judge that their achievement is only satisfactory.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.

13 March 2009

Dear Students



Inspection of St Neots Community College, St Neots, PE19 2SH

Thank you for making us so welcome during our visit, for the courtesy you showed us and for the ways in which you shared your views with us formally, informally and in lessons. I am writing to tell you the outcomes of the inspection.

Many of you talked positively about the new principal, how he listens to you and the changes he is making. You told us you feel safe at college, and know who to turn to if you need help. Most feel that bullying is dealt with quickly, although this was not the case for a few of you. You told us about the ways in which the college council enables you to make your views known to managers, but some younger students do not know enough about it. Students in the sixth form achieve satisfactorily and make a good contribution to the life of the college. However, we are concerned that the college does not enable you to make enough progress to pass your GCSEs in order for you to move successfully to the next stage of your education or career. We have therefore placed your college in special measures. This means that the college will get extra support and guidance to help it improve. There have been too many changes in managers and teachers during the last four years. Many of you have been taught by lots of different teachers, particularly in mathematics and science, and this has resulted in you losing interest in some subjects. When we observed lessons we felt there were too many in which the teaching was not good enough and you were not challenged to do your best.

We have asked the college to make the following improvements:

- rapidly raise standards and achievement
- make lessons more interesting and ensure activities are varied, matched to your needs and support you to reach challenging targets
- ensure all teachers mark books regularly and give you feedback and good advice on how you can improve your work.
- to be accurate when evaluating provision about what is good and what is not good enough
- ensure managers are clear about what they expect to happen as a result of the action taken to improve standards and achievement.

You need to play your part by respecting your teachers. In some lessons some of you misbehave and this stops others from learning. Too many of you are late for college or do not attend regularly.

We are confident that you will do your best to work with your teachers and inspectors will be coming back regularly to the college to make sure it is improving.

Yours faithfully

Jennifer Brown

Her Majesty's Inspector

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaining about inspections', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.