

Robert Blake Science College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	123878
Local Authority	Somerset
Inspection number	328009
Inspection dates	17–18 September 2008
Reporting inspector	Steffi Penny HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	672
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Richard Cheatham
Headteacher	Ann Winter
Date of previous school inspection	12 October 2005
School address	Hamp Avenue Bridgwater TA6 6AW
Telephone number	01278 456243
Fax number	01278 444987

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

The school gained its specialist science status in 2003 and serves an area of relative socio-economic disadvantage. Nearly all students are of White British heritage. Just under 4% of learners, mainly native speakers of Polish, are at an early stage of learning the English language. The proportion of students identified as having either learning difficulties and/or disabilities is 40%, which is double the national figure. Of these students, nearly 40% have behavioural, emotional and social difficulties, 37% moderate learning difficulties and 13% dyslexia. A small number of children are in the care of the local authority.

The school is a full service school and is part of an Excellence Cluster, the Behaviour Improvement Programme and Bridgwater 14–19 Consortium. It is also a member of the Sedgemoor Learning Alliance, a Community Learning Partnership. It has achieved The Gold Respect Award for its young people's health, accreditation as a Healthy School and Dyslexia Friendly status. It was designated a National Challenge school in July 2007.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Parents are rightly proud of this outstanding school that is looking forward to its new buildings. 'If you can look beyond the tatty and dated buildings of Robert Blake you will find a very caring school with a team of really dedicated staff', wrote a parent, reflecting the views of the whole school and its local community. The exceptional leadership of the headteacher and the determination of all staff to improve the lives of the students they serve are evident in all that they do. Through its partnerships and specialist science status, it provides its students with a safe, caring, friendly and challenging learning environment. The school's self-evaluation is particularly strong and this has led to significant improvements since the last inspection, particularly in the use of information and communication technology (ICT).

Students start at the school with a wide range of abilities but overall standards, particularly in literacy, are well below those seen nationally. In 2007 the proportion of students gaining five A*- C grades at GCSE, including English and mathematics, was below 30%. Because of this, the school was designated a National Challenge school. The school knows what it needs to do to improve. It has adjusted the curriculum to ensure that more students can gain five or more higher grade GCSEs (or the equivalent) and increases have already been made in the proportion of students gaining higher grades, by 13% in mathematics and by 17% in science. In most subjects standards are improving, but throughout the school literacy standards remain low, and teachers have to work extra hard to overcome this key barrier to learning. During the inspection, many teachers were driving improvements by making lesson activities particularly relevant to the lives of the students and relating work well to other subjects, and some outstanding examples of this were seen in mathematics. The progress that students made in these lessons was particularly impressive.

Students achieve well. Most make good, and sometimes very good, progress because of high quality teaching and the outstanding support that the school provides for them and their families. When students do not achieve as well, in addition to low levels of literacy, it is mainly due to turbulent home circumstances and poor levels of sustained attendance. In spite of all the efforts of the school and home liaison teams, a small number of students do not attend regularly enough and this hinders their learning and future life chances. For students with complex social and emotional needs, this school provides an oasis of calm and nurture so that they are able to be in a position to learn. Staff and learning mentors ensure the best education for all the students at Robert Blake and are sensitive to any difficulties that might arise in their homes. Through the warmth of a caring community that extends well beyond the school, all students are challenged to work hard and do their best, even when they are reluctant to do so. Consequently, most students thoroughly enjoy school.

Those students who have a learning difficulty and/or disability achieve as well as their peers. This is because the behaviour policy ensures that staff and students treat each other with fairness, trust and respect. It is also because the school's rigorous monitoring systems track individual students' performance against frequently reviewed, realistic but challenging targets, supported by programmes that raise aspirations. Experienced and well-qualified support staff use their specific expertise to provide tailored intervention for individuals or groups of students when needed. Likewise, students who are gifted and/or talented receive expert advice, tuition and horizon-opening opportunities related to their needs. As a consequence, they make outstanding progress and do exceedingly well.

For those students for whom English is not their first language, the school takes great care to assess their proficiency and literacy in their first language and establish what prior knowledge and experience they have in other subjects. The exceptional support provided is demonstrated by the way in which these students socialise and interact with their peers who speak English fluently. The celebration of different heritages and cultural identities is something that the school does very well. Polish speaking parents greatly appreciate the ability to speak with staff in their home language and the opportunity for their children to take Polish as a GCSE. This is just one of the creative and flexible strategies that the school uses to engage parents/carers, so that they are not only well informed about the progress their child makes but also part of the learning process. This enables them to help their children make informed decisions about the future. A consequence of this has been the significant increase in the number of students who continue in education or training when they leave the school.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure, with the local authority and other agencies, that students who are persistently absent from school receive the education to which they are entitled.
- Focus teaching even more on raising literacy levels right from Year 7, so that more students can gain five grades A*– C, including mathematics and especially English, when they leave the school.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

The students' ability on entry is rising annually but is still well below the national average. In particular, a significant proportion of students do not have a clear understanding of how to learn and have very weak literacy skills when they start school. The achievement and progress that the vast majority of students make are good in relation to their capabilities and starting points. Students of Polish heritage and those who are gifted or talented make outstanding progress.

School monitoring and tracking data show that throughout the school students are making good progress. At Key Stage 3, the 2008 unvalidated school data show that standards in mathematics improved, and more students reached the higher levels than expected. Nevertheless, standards in English, mathematics and science remain below those seen nationally.

At GCSE, the 2008 unvalidated school data show that the initiatives to enhance learning resulted in standards improving in most subjects from those previously seen. These results show that the proportion of students gaining grades A*– C rose to 48% in mathematics and to 49% in science. The majority of other subjects reached their most challenging targets. Although improving slightly, standards in English are still significantly lower than those seen nationally.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Because of the school's strong commitment to each individual, students' personal development and well-being, including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, are outstanding. They are justifiably proud of their school, where, in the words of one student, 'Education is the first priority.' They have good relationships with each other and with the 'polite and hard-working' staff, who give them unstinting support to enable them to achieve. Because of the high expectations for behaviour and strong structures for behaviour management, most

behave well and the rate of fixed term exclusions is steadily falling. Students attend lessons with a willingness to learn, and are keen to participate in the wide range of enrichment activities on offer. As a result, they show a high level of enjoyment of school. Due to the robust systems and incentives in place, attendance is broadly average and improving. Nevertheless, a small number of students do not attend regularly enough.

Students report that bullying is rare, and they have confidence that any reported incidents will be dealt with promptly and successfully. They always have someone to turn to if they have any problems, and are pleased with the quick and effective response from staff. As a result of improvements to the school's catering arrangements, students now make healthier choices of food at lunchtime. They have a high level of participation in sport as part of the school's drive to help them to adopt healthier lifestyles. They contribute very well to the school community through their roles as peer mediators, prefects and members of the school council. Through very good opportunities to use ICT and the development of business and enterprise skills, they are developing a good understanding of the world of work, although this is held back by their limited literacy skills. The school's specialist status in science has been used well to raise standards and support work in other schools.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teaching and learning are good. This is because lessons are well planned, teachers have good subject knowledge, and they are able to adapt well to teaching outside their own specialism. Students say that they find the lessons enjoyable, their teachers are friendly and helpful, they are challenged, and feel they are provided with a good education.

Students generally have a good awareness of how well they are progressing, and are given every encouragement to meet their potential. Homework is used effectively to support learning, and is bolstered by extra-curricular provision. The specific needs of students of differing ability are met well through setting, in a system which permits students to move up to higher ability sets if their progress merits such a move.

The inspection team found many examples of good teaching and some was outstanding, particularly in mathematics. In the few satisfactory lessons, students continue to work steadily but the pace of learning is slower than that seen in the best lessons. Teaching in these lessons develops students' independent learning skills, their ability to work in a group and as a team, and their expertise in discussion and analysis.

Thorough assessment processes are well supported by the innovative Robert Blake School schemes of work system, which provides an excellent facility linking grade requirements with resources. Students' progress is very carefully monitored.

Teachers set very high expectations of how students should behave and learn, right from the beginning of Year 7, and students respond very positively. Students are encouraged to think for themselves and discuss complex issues. Relationships between staff and students are very positive.

Gifted and talented students are given much encouragement and are provided with stimulating activities to match their needs.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The curriculum is outstanding because of its flexibility, the process of continuous review, and the way it is adapted to meet the needs of all students.

Partnership work with Bridgwater College provides a wide range of both academic and vocational opportunities, and a good mix of both, to ensure that the curriculum is tailored to students' individual abilities, potential and interest. It provides, for instance, Latin, with critical thinking courses for more able students leading to some notable success at AS level. Opportunities in Spanish, Polish and German meet the current range of language interests of the students.

The curriculum is enriched by an extensive and well supported range of clubs and sporting activities, with a wide variety of local and residential trips and visits. Students have very good opportunities to develop skills which will be of use to them in their adult lives. For example, the school's environment project, where students grow their own food and also create their own Kenyan Shamba (a domestic garden plot), supports enterprise, health awareness, food technology and geographic skills.

Excellent transition support prepares students very well for the next stages of their educational development, helping them to succeed by building their confidence and self-esteem. The school has used its specialist science status to build on its extensive links with other schools and colleges, both locally and internationally through its involvement in 'Science Across the World', to the evident benefit of its students.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

The school provides outstanding care, support and guidance. Staff know all students very well; their welfare and safety are given a very high priority. The school bases its support on the needs of each individual student. Students arrive in Year 7 with a wide range of needs and the school is very effective at diagnosing particular difficulties and responding with the best form of help. Additional support for students is provided through the constructive links with external agencies. A clearly planned induction programme prepares students well for the transition to secondary school. Students who join throughout the school year are helped to settle in quickly. Parents value the level of care and guidance given and many students expressed appreciation for the way in which staff go the extra mile to help them achieve. In the words of one student, 'When our behaviour falls short, teachers are still nice to us.'

Arrangements for safeguarding students are secure and meet current requirements. The school takes all reasonable steps to ensure that child protection arrangements are secure, including training for all staff. The school tracks students' progress closely, setting realistic targets and reinforcing high expectations for all. Students know their targets in each subject and are involved in the actions that should be taken to reach them. Potential underachievement is identified and tackled through the rigorous analysis of data. Strategies are promptly put in place to help avoid the likelihood of students falling short of their challenging targets, as identified through the school tracking and monitoring systems.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Whilst leaders and managers accurately identify and rigorously monitor the progress and achievements of different groups of students, they never lose sight of the individual. Outstanding partnership work with a wide range of agencies provides social, emotional, educational and practical support for students and their families. Work with a local special school, including a shared classroom, allows students in both schools to benefit from specialist teaching whilst also gaining understanding about each other. Students from other schools and those new to the English education system are seamlessly integrated because of the assiduous planning of leaders and managers at all levels.

Governors are active members of the school and local community. They provide just the right amount of support and challenge. They have rightly ensured that senior leaders in the school play to their strengths. For example, changing the role of the business manager to support the headteacher in preparing for the new school building project.

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Annex A

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall
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Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	1
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well being?	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	4
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	2

¹Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average to below average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Personal development and well-being

How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	1
The attendance of learners	3
The behaviour of learners	2
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	1
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	1
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

19 September 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Robert Blake Science College, Bridgwater, TA6 6AW

We would like to thank you for the very warm welcome that you gave us recently when we inspected your outstanding school. We particularly appreciated the discussions that we had with many of you and are grateful to you for helping us with our work. Please could you thank your parents/carers for the many helpful comments they made on the questionnaires. In return, I want to let you know of the inspection findings so that you can see for yourselves what we thought, although you can always read the full report yourselves at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Your personal development is outstanding in many respects. Your behaviour is generally good and this, along with your very positive attitudes to school and to each other, makes a real difference to how well you can learn in lessons. Those of you who need extra help with your learning or controlling your behaviour are given exceedingly good support from the school and its partners. You and your parents really appreciate how all staff work hard to ensure you are well cared for and happy in school. An increasingly wide range of options at Key Stage 4 enables you to follow academic or vocational courses as well as helping you to get to know Bridgwater College and other students in other schools. You have excellent opportunities to take part in other activities that support your learning in lessons, which you told us you really enjoyed and we could see helped you.

We noticed that some of you do not do as well as you could in your learning because you do not come to school often enough. We have asked the school to work with its partners to make sure that these students learn more. In class you are taught well and make good progress in your learning. To help more of you get five GCSEs at grades A* - C (including mathematics and English) we have also asked the school to focus teaching even more on improving your literacy skills, right from the start in Year 7. Perhaps you and your parents/carers can think of ways to help them make these improvements.

Thank you again for being so polite and helpful during the visit. We hope that you continue to enjoy your learning and do your best. Wishing you all a happy and successful future.

Steffi Penny Her Majesty's Inspector