

Stafford Sports College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	124467
Local Authority	Staffordshire
Inspection number	328147
Inspection dates	8–9 October 2008
Reporting inspector	Kevin Sheldrick HMI

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

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	449
Sixth form	87
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	P Rowlands
Headteacher	Rowena Blencowe
Date of previous school inspection	7 March 2005
School address	Wolverhampton Road Stafford ST17 9DJ
Telephone number	01785 258383
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Introduction

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

Description of the school

This college is well below the size of the average school. It serves students largely from the Manor and Penside areas of Stafford. Increasing numbers stay on beyond 16 and are taught as part of a collegiate involving six other providers. Slightly above average numbers of students are eligible for free school meals. The vast majority of students are of White British heritage and about 5% come from a range of ethnic backgrounds. The college has about double the national average proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The proportion of students with a statement of special educational need is about a third above the national average. The college gained specialist status for sport in 2005. St Peter's Pre-School is on the college site, although the college's governors do not manage this provision.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

The college is improving rapidly and its overall effectiveness is now satisfactory. In accordance with section 13 (5) of the Education Act 2005, HMCI is of the opinion that this college no longer requires significant improvement. This good progress was also recognised when HMI undertook a monitoring visit in May 2008. An important indicator of this improvement is the rise in achievement so that it is now satisfactory. Staff morale is high and there is a noticeable buzz around the college. Unvalidated 2008 results provide further evidence of improvement. Provisional 2008 results at GCSE and in the Year 9 tests in English, mathematics and science point to broadly average standards. This is in sharp contrast to the previous year when results were well below the average. The improved outcomes include personal development and well-being. Twelve months ago this aspect was satisfactory; it is now good. There is much better behaviour across the college and improved attitudes to learning, particularly in Years 7 to 9. Students feel safer, live more healthily and contribute more to the community.

The reasons for this transformation are very clear. The headteacher has led the school extremely well. Across the board there are now consistent strengths in leadership. Overall, leadership has improved from satisfactory to good. The college has worked very hard to address a clear set of priorities. Aspirations amongst staff are universally high and this is beginning to spread to students and their parents. Ambitious targets have been set. Decisive and astute leadership has made the most of existing strengths and brought in additional expertise. The college is exploiting to the full its sports specialist status in the effort to raise standards.

Teaching and learning are now good. The majority of lessons are taught with an appropriate pace and involve a variety of learning strategies that maintain good levels of engagement. Teachers' questioning is effective, assistants are deployed well and there is judicious use of group work. However, in rather too many lessons the latter stages of lessons are taught less effectively because teachers do not check students are on track to achieve short-term targets. The curriculum is good, with students in every year group expressing positive comments about the courses they are undertaking and the wider range of extra-curricular activities in which they are encouraged to participate. The curriculum promotes information and communication technology skills well but there is scope for reinforcing the development of key literacy and numeracy skills further. Care, support and guidance have also improved and are now good. Strengths in this area are increasing following a comprehensive overhaul of all support services. The college is making effective use of external agencies and support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is going from strength to strength. Academic guidance is improving but the college recognises that there is still some way to go in ensuring more short-term targets and early interventions. The progress of improving the sixth form is more limited because the college has concentrated on the very urgent main college priorities. For this reason, the capacity to improve in the sixth form is satisfactory and in the main college, it is good.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

The overall effectiveness of the sixth form is satisfactory. Standards in the sixth form are below average but in view of students' starting points on joining the sixth form, achievement is satisfactory. Improvement has resulted in a small rise in attainment and achievement since the last inspection. Students undertaking Levels 2 and 3 BTEC courses make good progress. The numbers opting to continue in the sixth form are rising steadily. Students' personal development

and well-being are good. Inspectors observed the good communication and group work skills of students. Sixth formers make a strong contribution to the college community by, for instance, facilitating group work in Year 7 lessons. They value the efforts the college makes to communicate decisions and to involve sixth formers in making improvements. Students cope well with the challenge of moving between a range of centres within the collegiate.

Overall, teaching is satisfactory and this largely explains the average progress students make. Students like the active learning experienced in some lessons but they are less enthusiastic about lessons in which they are overly passive. The teaching observed reflected this range and was satisfactory overall. The curriculum is good because students have a very wide range of choices, and there are ample opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities. The college's sports specialism ensures access to a wide range of activities that promote physical exercise and relaxation, for instance a popular well-equipped gym. Care, support and guidance are satisfactory. Students really value the fact that teachers in the college are prepared to help them, even though they may be taking a subject in another part of the collegiate. There is good careers guidance, including effective support for applying to university. However, weaknesses in academic guidance remain, so students are not always aware of their targets and the progress they are making. There is a new system for keeping a check on students' progress but it is too soon to evaluate the impact of this. Leadership and management are satisfactory. Effective and consistent quality assurance is yet to be fully established.

What the school should do to improve further

- Adopt more short-term individualised targets and ensure lessons refer to these more frequently to aid student progress.
- Improve provision in the sixth form by ensuring greater consistency of teaching and establishing a more rigorous approach to the monitoring of students' progress.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Achievement is satisfactory and standards are now broadly in line with national averages. This represents good progress from the situation in the three years until 2007, when achievement was inadequate and standards were well below average. The most recent un-validated examination results point to a rise of 14% in the numbers of students gaining five grade A*-Cs, including English and mathematics. The numbers of students gaining at least one qualification have risen sharply, largely reflecting the much better progress made by students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. In Years 7 to 9 there have been comparable improvements in English, mathematics and science. All students are now making satisfactory progress. Largely because of effective targeted interventions, the gap between girls' and boys' attainment has reduced and is now negligible. Recent examination results also point to the college's strengths in sport and expressive arts.

In lessons, inspectors found evidence of good achievement but this was not sufficient to overcome a long legacy of previous underperformance. The college has improved its collection of assessment information and this provided further evidence of a continuing upward trend in achievement. The most marked change is that students with a wider range of special needs are now making satisfactory progress, following quite a long period in which their achievement was below that of others in the college.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Students speak enthusiastically about the benefits of being in a college that has specialist sports status. They enjoy the additional sporting facilities, are happy to share them with the wider community and are proud to be in a college that is gaining the respect of local people. Ending the practice of allowing older students to access fast food from local shops at lunchtimes is improving students' physical well-being because there is a greater uptake of the college's healthy meals.

Sports status has made a significant contribution to students' personal and social development and their motivation for learning. Steps to tackle a poor record of attendance are working very well and have been successful in reducing absences year on year. The college has worked closely with outside agencies to achieve current, above average levels of attendance. A factor in this improvement is that students enjoy most of their lessons and like participating in a good range of extra-curricular activities associated with a well-organised extended day.

Improvements to teaching and the curriculum are enhancing students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development so that this is now good. Students positively contribute well through an impressive range of charity events and an active college council. The success of the council has led some students to say they would like even more opportunities to express their views and share in decision making. This desire indicates students are becoming confident and responsible citizens.

Inspectors found good evidence that bullying and racism are dealt with swiftly and effectively. The large campus includes an outdoor play area where younger students feel particularly safe and comfortable. There is also a nurture area where more vulnerable students can go when feeling anxious. Relationships between students and staff are good. Students say staff are approachable and listen to their concerns. Systems to ensure students' safety at all times are effective.

Behaviour in lessons and around college is good. Students have learnt to work collaboratively, in groups and teams and in practical lessons, which in turn has led to improvements in achievement and standards. A relatively weaker aspect of students' personal development is their readiness for further study and employment because they are not yet attaining above average standards.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teachers have high expectations. Lessons are well organised, often into smaller chunks so good levels of engagement can be maintained. In all lessons, there are clear objectives and outcomes. There is often effective use of questioning which challenges and strengthens students' understanding. Active learning is emphasised with students working effectively individually, in pairs and in groups. Students clearly enjoy working on practical type based activities. Teachers have developed good relationships with the students and this promotes good attitudes to learning. Teachers manage the students' behaviour consistently well in lessons. Often the pace of the lesson is appropriate, so students are engaged and stimulated resulting in good progress. Support staff are utilised well in the classroom. The innovative practice of having the term's

homework on the Internet has strengthened the students' ability to complete more extended projects.

Weaknesses in teaching are characterised by the teacher talking too much so students become passive and less engaged. Some lessons are also less effective because individualised targets are not used to plan appropriate activities to help students reach them.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The good curriculum is broad and balanced and effectively meets the local needs of the students. The new 'Opening Minds' course in Year 7 has enabled a more cross-curricular approach to teaching but the college has recognised the need to monitor this carefully to ensure it continues to meet the needs of students. A particular strength is the Year 9 curriculum. Students praised the range of opportunities, which included early entry examination courses in modern foreign languages and BTEC sport. In Years 10 and 11, there are academic and vocational pathways that cater for all learners. The curriculum is further enhanced by the 'Wise up' days where students are taken off timetable and develop their personal, social and health education, and the skills required for enterprise and in the workplace.

The good impact of the sports status has enabled a richer variety of curriculum opportunities across the college. There is a wide range of extra-curricular activities and high participation rates most noticeably in sport and performing arts. There are increasing opportunities for students to take on leadership roles within the college, for instance through the junior sports leadership scheme. The provision for information and communication technology has significantly improved, and students now complete an accredited course. The impact of the curriculum on the development of students' literacy and numeracy is more limited.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

The college provides a safe and caring environment. The college has quickly sought support from a wide range of external agencies to improve the quality of care it provides. The inclusion team is a real asset and has been instrumental in dramatically improving behaviour. Support and guidance for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is also becoming strong. The records are now up to date, include important achievement data, are accessible to teachers and aid the monitoring of provision.

Higher achievement is increasingly well promoted, for instance through the process of agreeing more ambitious academic targets. Tracking, monitoring of progress and target setting are key priorities for improvement. There has been good progress in collecting information and alerting staff to where there is underachievement and planning effective intervention. Nevertheless, the college recognises that further improvement is possible by making better use of the information to intervene at an earlier stage. Marking has improved and examples of good practice were seen where extended written and verbal feedback gave students clear guidance on how to improve their work. In some lessons however the follow-up work did not always take account of these points or check that students had acted on the advice they were given. The use of diaries is very effectively cementing the partnership between the college and home. Parents receive regular updates on the curriculum and how well students are progressing towards their academic and personal goals. The college actively encourages students to be aware and

conscious of their health, for example, by providing fresh and healthy food at breaks and lunchtime and encouraging regular exercise.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The vision of a successful college, closely linked to the community it serves, is shared by all. The college's efforts to involve parents are bearing fruit, so virtually all attend review and target setting events. There are strong links with external agencies through the sports specialist status and in order to ensure all students, whatever their needs, receive the support needed to succeed. A culture is developing in which all staff hold high aspirations but there is some way to go in convincing all parents and students that they can achieve well. At a local level the college's support for community cohesion is very strong but there is scope for increasing awareness of the broader UK society through links with other communities.

The college is adopting appropriately challenging targets and is beginning to use these to measure progress. The college self-review is accurate and systems for monitoring the quality of provision are systematic and identify the right improvement priorities. The record of developing staff in response to the outcomes of monitoring is good. However, some evaluations are a little generous because there is insufficient focus on the extent to which lessons enable students to achieve their individual targets. The college is improving the use of test and assessment information in order to address this weakness. The college has worked hard to ensure it now has more consistent and effective middle leadership. This group is becoming an important engine of change.

Governors bring substantial expertise, for instance a governor with good knowledge of the local community, including hard to reach students and their families, is helping build bridges. Crucially, governors receive regular high quality information that allows them to interrogate the work of the college and identify priorities. The college is creative in its use of staff and resources in order to bring about improvement.

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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	16-19
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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?	3	3
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well being?	2	3
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	3

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3	3
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	3	

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?	2	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	2	
The attendance of learners	2	
The behaviour of learners	2	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2	
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	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	3

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2	3
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	2	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	2	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	2	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	2	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2	
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes	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**

10 October 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Stafford Sports College, Stafford, ST17 9DJ

We enjoyed our visit to your college because, like you, we recognised the rapid progress. In just twelve months, many aspects have improved and are now good. Behaviour and teaching have improved so that you are enjoying lessons more. Crucially, results have dramatically improved and your achievement is satisfactory. We think that the school has also improved the support and guidance it provides, particularly for those students with learning difficulties. Specifically, the college now monitors your progress much more effectively so that it can do more if you are not going to achieve your ambitious targets. You appreciate the choice of courses you have and the extra opportunities associated with your sports specialist status. We think your headteacher is leading your college very well and making sure everyone can be more effective in making improvements.

We would like to thank those of you we interviewed for the important insights you provided. Interestingly, students in Years 7 to 9 were most enthusiastic about recent changes but we think this will spread to everyone before very long. To improve further we are suggesting that developing the sixth form becomes more of a priority because there has been less improvement here. In addition, you could have shorter-term targets and lessons could be tweaked further so you have more opportunity to achieve these. The good news is that your college's leadership are 100% committed to making these improvements. You can help by asking teachers what you need to do in order to achieve your targets more quickly.

We wish you all the best for the future.

Yours sincerely

Kevin Sheldrick Her Majesty's Inspector