

Dorcan Technology College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	126450
Local Authority	Swindon
Inspection number	328500
Inspection dates	4–5 February 2009
Reporting inspector	Anne Feltham HMI

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1253
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Stuart Bray
Headteacher	Scott Sissons
Date of previous school inspection	31 October 2007
School address	St Paul's Drive Covingham Swindon SN3 5DA
Telephone number	01793 525231
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Introduction

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

Description of the school

Dorcan Technology College is a larger-than-average comprehensive school, which is closely linked to six feeder primary schools. The great majority of students are of White British heritage, with around 10% from minority ethnic backgrounds. Fewer-than-average students speak English as an additional language. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is higher than average. More students than average have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The school became a specialist technology college in 1999. When Dorcan Technology College was inspected in November 2007, it was issued with a Notice to Improve. Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools subsequently monitored its progress and judged progress towards improvement targets in June 2008 to be good.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

Dorcan Technology College has made rapid improvements in all key areas since the last inspection and is now providing a satisfactory education overall for its students. There are many good features in the work of the school and its curriculum is outstanding. In accordance with section 13 (5) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that the school no longer requires significant improvement. A clear focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning has resulted in carefully planned, and more challenging, lessons; students now enjoy their learning and consequently, they make better progress. In response to the previous inspection report, the school has introduced robust monitoring systems. These ensure that students' progress is checked regularly and, where needed, additional help and support are given. Challenging targets are now set and both staff and students have a clear understanding of these. As a result, students are this year making at least satisfactory progress overall, and this represents significant improvement since the last inspection. A small number of older students work off site, and the school currently has insufficient information about their progress.

Students take a pride in their school and feel happy and safe. A particular strength is its council, with students making a strong contribution to decision-making in key areas of the school. They have influenced recent developments in food served within the canteen and in students' well-being in toilet areas. Students demonstrate a respect for differences: the growing numbers of students from diverse backgrounds, often speaking other first languages, are made welcome. One student spoke movingly of ways in which his tutor group had helped a student who had recently arrived from abroad to integrate successfully into the school.

Whilst a small number of parents who returned questionnaires raised concerns about behaviour, inspectors found that students behaved well overall, particularly in lessons. Students reported substantial improvements since the last inspection, with clear structures now in place to ensure that they know exactly what is expected of them in terms of both behaviour and application to learning. As one student said, speaking for many, 'I feel so safe here. It's the best!' The school works hard to engender a sense of shared identity and pride amongst its community and teachers remind students of their responsibilities when things occasionally go wrong. For example, when students do not manage their behaviour well, teachers are quick to respond. Attendance is satisfactory and the school knows that there is still room for improvement.

Teaching and learning have become increasingly effective since the last inspection. The improved quality of lesson planning has been a major factor in ensuring that students understand learning targets and increase their knowledge and skills in every lesson. One subject director described how the improved procedures for lesson planning and review have led to a faster pace in lessons, with particular gains by lower-attaining students. Lessons visited during the inspection confirmed that the overall quality is now good. School leaders know that they now need to sustain these improvements and disseminate good practice amongst all subject areas.

The school's curriculum – already judged good in the previous inspection – is now outstanding. There is a clear focus on providing a coherent programme of study for students in Years 7 to 9 and older students are offered an increasingly wide range of subjects and courses to meet their needs. Specialist status in technology has a strong impact on students' learning. The new 14–19 diploma courses are giving students opportunities to develop skills for their future working lives in challenging and varied contexts. The school's pastoral care is good and students feel well supported. Whilst continuing to ensure that vulnerable students are looked after well,

the school has made rapid strides in improving its academic guidance for all. Teachers identify quickly when a student is underachieving and successful intervention is leading to greater success.

These impressive improvements in all areas have not happened by chance. The senior team has been restructured and now works very effectively to ensure students and staff are well led. School leaders have worked hard to secure the necessary improvements. They have kept a sharp focus on giving students the best possible quality teaching and on monitoring their progress closely. The school has welcomed external support through the local authority and consultants. Teachers have shown an exceptional readiness to embrace change and 'go the extra mile' to make teaching better. Subject directors, working under the direction of the senior team, monitor the work of their own teaching teams closely; they discuss lesson plans and assessment information with each teacher to ensure that individual students and groups are working to their full potential. The restructured governing body is providing increasing challenge to the school and Dorcan now shows good overall capacity for further improvement.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that recent rapid improvements in the quality of teaching and learning are sustained and effective strategies are applied to all classrooms and subject areas.
- Communicate fully with the wider school community, including parents, to consolidate the upward trend in student outcomes, including rates of attendance.
- Liaise more closely with the local authority and external providers to monitor the progress of students working off site to ensure that they achieve as well as they can.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Students come into the school with below, or slightly below, average attainment and GCSE results in the past have often been below average. There have been significant improvements in students' achievement this year. Current Year 11 students have made satisfactory progress over the five years since they started in Year 7, and progress is good for the current Years 9 and 10. The current Year 11 students are on track to reach average standards in their GCSEs, and on track to meet most of their very challenging targets. Students no longer underachieve in mathematics and science, where previously results were too low. All student groups make progress similar to their peers, including lower-attaining students and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

The significant improvements for current students are the result of better teaching and closer monitoring. Students are making good progress in lessons and this is enabling them to make up ground lost in previous years. Their progress is not yet good overall, because of this backlog. The monitoring system ensures that where individuals are starting to fall back, close and frequent checks bring swift intervention. Around 8% of final year students work off site and, despite efforts, the school has not been able to monitor their progress sufficiently closely.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Students' personal development and well-being are good. They value the one-to-one support given by mentors to help them in both their academic and personal lives. As a result, they make the right choice of courses to study and prepare well to transfer to further and higher education.

Students enjoy their learning. They report that behaviour has greatly improved, both in lessons and around school, and inspectors agree that this is now good. Students are courteous and care well for each other. For example, students described how they help new arrivals settle in to school. Attendance is satisfactory, although there are too many persistent absentees. The school council has been closely involved with new building developments in school, and has been exceptionally effective in ensuring that there is a choice of healthy food served every day. Students have an excellent understanding of how to develop healthy lifestyles. They contribute well to the life of the school and the wider community. For example, prefects help with ensuring that lunchtimes run smoothly. Many students get involved in fund raising for charities and organising events, such as shows and talent contests.

Students have a good understanding of the cultures of others around the world and growing numbers choose to study a foreign language in Years 10 and 11, sometimes in after-school lessons. They enjoy a range of clubs, from girls' football, which is exceptionally popular and successful, to chess and engineering. Students are confident that their school provides them with a good grounding for their future economic lives, for example, through working with local employers.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

The quality of teaching and learning is now good. The school has rightly made this its key priority since the last inspection and leadership of this area is excellent. There has been significant investment in professional development and teachers now set clear expectations for learning. The school has introduced robust monitoring processes and the majority of lessons are now good or better. Lessons are characterised by very effective planning, a strong pace and a range of approaches to help students understand what they have achieved and how to improve their own learning. More effective teaching has led to improved student behaviour and to more rapid progress and overall achievement.

In the great majority of lessons, students understand their target and teachers usually provide explicit individual guidance to students on how to improve further. There are some examples of outstanding practice in students' assessing their own, and each other's, work against grade criteria. The school's specialism has had a positive impact on the use of new technologies to support learning across the school, for example, in the use of interactive whiteboards. Senior and subject leaders are working together to ensure that teaching and learning are effectively monitored and that information gained is used to inform future developments and bring about further consistency of good practice.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The curriculum has undergone a period of recent rapid development from a strong base, and this has resulted in a very wide range of courses on offer. These include BTEC science, Young Apprenticeships and the new Creative and Media Diploma. Personalisation is a strong feature of the curriculum and the school meets students' varied needs exceptionally well. There is a rich vocational pathway and specific courses provided for vulnerable students. Students who speak English as an additional language often gain a GCSE in their home language. Year 9

students now gain an interim qualification in their foreign language learning, and numbers continuing to GCSE are increasing.

Year 7 students build very well upon their excellent primary induction to Dorcan and their curriculum allows them to pursue longer-term projects, alongside the main subjects. In Years 8 and 9, students acquire personal, learning and thinking skills through their subject learning. Students pursue a designated course in information and communication technology (ICT) across Years 7 to 9 and this foundation in ICT provides an outstanding preparation for courses further up the school. There is a very wide range of enrichment activities at Dorcan. The many sports and arts clubs generate a lively and popular student scene.

The school uses its specialist status in technology very well to engender a wide range of courses and to raise achievement. Engineering is a focus of many activities, such as robotics and the new diploma. Students' work is showcased via on-site television screens, and this feature is very popular amongst learners. ICT has helped the school forge close links with other education providers locally and further afield, including a two-dimensional technology project with schools abroad.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Care, guidance and support are good. Teaching and non-teaching staff work together very effectively to provide a safe and encouraging environment in which students can achieve. Students feel very positive about the improvements the school has made in behaviour, anti-bullying and guidance. One student, for example, talked enthusiastically about how the school had acted upon suggestions for more dedicated social space for the youngest learners. All appropriate safeguarding arrangements are in place. Vulnerable students, and those with additional educational needs, are supported very well by the school and there are strong links with partner agencies.

Students now receive full information about their progress. There are robust processes in place to plan interventions that help them reach their targets. There has been a significant investment in mentoring since the last inspection and all students have access to individual review meetings at regular intervals during the year. The school generally works closely with other partners to provide very good advice and guidance on future options.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Leadership and management are now good. The restructured senior team has focused clearly on improving teaching and learning, with significant work undertaken in developing middle leaders, particularly subject directors. These subject leaders have benefited from learning how to observe lessons and feed back to colleagues, in order to raise the quality of teaching in their teams. They have also taken part in a '360 degree assessment' to improve their leadership skills. Directors have found these processes helpful in developing their management skills and demonstrating their accountability. One director spoke of how recent professional development had helped him establish a culture of greater openness within his team.

School leaders know their school well and self-evaluation is accurate and honest. They also know their local community well, have partnerships with a range of educational providers and

make a strong contribution to the local community. Specialist status has been used effectively to support learning in the local area, for example, in primary schools. School staff are highly committed to the town's initial teacher education provision, which has helped resolve previous staffing shortfalls in key areas. Links with national organisations and schools elsewhere in the country and abroad, enable students to develop both a sense of identity and a respect for cultural differences. These partnerships provide valuable opportunities to develop students' understanding of the world beyond their home and school.

Recognising that communication with parents needed to be improved, the school established the parents' forum and is now seeking to develop this further by changing meeting venues to engage a greater number of parents. Governors have supported the school through this period of rapid improvement and are now developing new structures to hold the school to account. Dorcan has made great strides forward in a short period of time and has good capacity for further 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
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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
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?	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	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
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	2
The attendance of learners	3
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	2

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?	2

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2
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
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	3
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**

9 February 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Dorcan Technology College, Swindon SN3 5DA

I am writing on behalf of the inspection team to let you know the judgements we made. First, I should like to thank you for your warm welcome. We enjoyed meeting many of you, listening to your views and watching you at work. Here are our most important findings.

- Your school has improved rapidly, after a period when students did not achieve as well as they should have done. It now provides a satisfactory overall education, with good teaching and an outstanding curriculum.
- The school's leaders and your teachers are ensuring that you know how well you are doing and that you have clear targets for improvement.
- We were impressed by how well you behave in lessons, although some of your parents feel that behaviour is not always good enough.
- The school's technology specialism enables it to offer some very exciting courses, which prepare you well for the future.

We have asked your school to ensure that recent improvements in teaching and learning are maintained; that your parents are kept informed about how they can help you make even better progress, particularly through improving attendance; and that the school keeps track of older students who work outside the school premises.

We wish you well with your future learning: keep working hard and aiming high!

Yours faithfully

Anne Feltham

Her Majesty's Inspector