

25 September 2008

Mrs D Farrent
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Farrent

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your college on 24 September 2008, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. In particular, I would like to thank those students who gave up their time to talk to inspectors about their positive experiences at the college and the progress being made to help them fulfil their potential.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

As a result of the inspection in June 2007, the school was asked to:

- improve standards in English
- improve students' attendance
- ensure that the setting of homework is consistent and that the work is sufficiently challenging.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the college is making satisfactory progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising the students' achievement. The rate of progress has been impeded significantly by staffing issues that are out of the college's control.

Provisional examination results for 2008 indicate that standards at the end of Key Stage 4 are below average; this represents satisfactory achievement for the majority of students given their starting points when they joined the college. The college has been particularly successful in tackling key weaknesses in relation to students' achievements in 2007. For example, boys and students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have made much better progress during 2008 and left college with

far more GCSE qualifications than in previous years. At 53%, the college exceeded its target in 2008 for the proportion of students gaining five or more good GCSE passes. In spite of a considerable improvement in GCSE mathematics results, the number of students who attain five or more good passes including English and mathematics remains too low at 26%.

Improvements to the Key Stage 4 curriculum have resulted in a higher proportion of students attaining a Level 1 qualification, which at 88% is just below average. Enhancements to the curriculum at both key stages ensure that provision is better suited to students' individual needs and aspirations. College data based on students' current performance indicate that the college still has some way to go in order to achieve the ambitious targets for 2009. However, data on students' progress are being used expertly to pinpoint underachievement and focus support and intervention where they are most needed.

College self-assessment is accurate, frank and focused. The role of subject leaders continues to develop. As a result of good quality training and support from the senior leadership team and local authority, they are bringing about improvements in subject teaching. Subject leaders take appropriate responsibility for their part in implementing monitoring, evaluation and improvement planning. As a consequence, there is a shared understanding of responsibilities and a growing consistency in meeting these. This increase in the skills of subject leaders is having a positive impact on the college's drive to raise standards.

Improvements in English are marginal. Acute staffing difficulties and a legacy of underachievement have resulted in slow progress. In spite of this, staff have been successful in maintaining standards, which is an achievement given the contextual constraints. Leadership of this area is now stable and staff are making headway on initiatives to raise achievement in English. Teaching and learning in English are satisfactory. However, some lessons lack pace and fail to capture students' interest and imagination. Consequently, they lose interest and do not make sufficient progress. A well-devised literacy strategy has resulted in a collective approach, across all subjects, to improving students' literacy.

Students' attendance has improved, although it remains below the national average. Unauthorised absence has been substantially reduced and the college continues to work with parents to improve rates of authorised absence. Attendance has been given a high priority in the college. A range of effective strategies including detailed tracking, monitoring and analysis are employed to improve attendance. Proactive heads of house work effectively with the education welfare officer and a range of external agencies to continue to improve student's attendance and punctuality further.

The college has a range of rewards and sanctions in place. These include a clear tariff system for withdrawal from lessons as well as exclusion from the college. Fixed term rates of exclusions have fallen slightly but are still very high in comparison with

other schools. This means that young people are not attending college as frequently as they should. The college has, however, reduced the number of permanent exclusions and works hard to support excluded students with their learning.

The college has a clear homework policy and the setting of homework is now consistent and planned alongside the programmes of learning. Effective homework practices are being developed for students. These are shared with parents and students on the college's website and monitored through the students' planners. Both parents and students feel that the setting of homework has improved and value the more innovative approaches taken; for example, the summer homework related to the Olympic Games. Homework is a focus in departmental improvement plans for 2008–9. Subject leaders monitor homework and are working on improving its quality and ensuring it is sufficiently challenging for different groups of students.

The specialist college has a clear vision for its future development. Recent changes to leadership in this area have led to improvements in the quality of teaching and learning and to raising standards and improving achievement in dance, drama and music. More appropriate objectives and targets have been set for specialist developments. The college is beginning to share its good range of facilities with other schools and the local community. The college provides a number of extra-curricular activities for students in the performing arts. Students benefit from their involvement in these activities which improve their levels of confidence and self-esteem. The college is aware of the need to continue to improve student participation rates.

Support from the local authority has been very effective in helping the college move forward. Support is targeted appropriately where it is needed the most and is tailored well to the particular needs of the whole-college community. Local authority advisers provide sufficient challenge to help the college improve further.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your college.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Vincent Ashworth". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized initial 'V' and a long, sweeping tail.

Vincent Ashworth
Her Majesty's Inspector