

30 January 2009

Mrs M McCorry
Headteacher
Sir Thomas Wharton Community College
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Dear Mrs McCorry

Ofsted monitoring of schools with a notice to improve

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your college on 29 January 2009, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. I would also like to thank the students for being so welcoming and speaking with me so openly, articulately and enthusiastically.

Since the time of the inspection in May 2008, the college has experienced major changes to the physical environment. The college moved into a brand new purpose-built building in January 2009. Several staffing changes have taken place including new appointments to key subject leadership posts. The senior leadership team has been restructured and now has clearer specific responsibilities.

As a result of the inspection on 30 April and 1 May 2008, the college was asked to:

- improve students' achievement, especially at Key Stage 3, and ensure greater consistency across subjects.
- improve the quality and consistency of teaching and provide students of all ages with more opportunities for them to be actively involved in their learning.
- make more use of information about how students are progressing to plan work that meets their individual needs and to give them more specific guidance on how to improve it.
- improve the attendance of students, especially those in Years 9 to 13.

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 students' achievement.

Standards and achievement are improving, but not quickly enough. The college's most recent data indicate a slight improvement in Key Stage 3 and 4 results in 2008 from those of 2007. In particular, the proportion of Key Stage 3 students attaining the highest levels in English rose significantly and exceeded targets. Nevertheless, all other targets were missed and standards overall remain significantly lower than the national average and broadly similar to those at the time of the last inspection. Although 2008 results show that the proportion of students gaining five or more GCSE grades A* to C and also those gaining five or more grades A* to C including English and mathematics improved, the gap between the college's results and the national average widened. Standards still vary across subjects and remain too low in most. Many strategies are being employed to address this, such as evening booster sessions in mathematics and two 'Super Learning Days'. These have provided more structured opportunities for Year 10 and 11 students to complete coursework.

There remains too much underachievement, particularly in Key Stage 3. The college is involved in the National Low Attainers Pilot (LEAP) and this is improving the performance of those students participating. As a result of more accurate tracking procedures, specific groups of underachievers have been identified in each year group and targeted for intervention work. The college put much effort into ensuring that students at the GCSE grade D/C borderline did better in 2008. While this was reasonably successful, leaders took their 'eye off the ball' in relation to the higher attaining students. Consequently, these students did not do as well as they should have and underachieved. The college's data suggest that current students are on track to gain better results and make satisfactory progress in 2009.

The quality of teaching is becoming stronger and more consistent. Leaders regularly monitor and evaluate the quality of teaching and learning and this rigour is bringing about some improvement to lessons. The college has an accurate view of the strengths and weaknesses in teaching and a suitable plan for further improvement. Most middle leaders accept accountability for the quality of teaching in their departments and are taking a more active role in monitoring the quality and consistency of teaching and learning. However, this is not yet permeating all departments.

Good use is being made of some advanced skills teachers and external consultants and this is helping teachers to develop a better understanding of what constitutes a good lesson. There is now an appropriate whole-college planning structure for lessons which, when used, ensures that students receive well prepared tasks and activities that better meet their individual needs and engage them in their learning. Teachers' very secure subject knowledge is shared more consistently and is helping to prepare students better for examinations. Better use is being made of the increasing amount of data the college holds on students' progress. Nevertheless, there is still some way to go to ensure that all teaching is of a good enough standard to eradicate the prior weaknesses in students' learning. Too many lessons are dominated by teachers' talk with teachers on occasions working harder than their students. Whilst improving, not enough teachers allow students to take responsibility for their own learning and work things out for themselves. Not enough

focus is given to explaining what students will learn in a lesson and whether they actually achieved this by the end. Students know their target levels and grades but this information is not yet used to full effect in encouraging students to greater achievement. Written guidance, such as the marking of work, remains variable, ranging from detailed subject-specific actions to bland, generic comments such as 'concentrate more'.

Students show great respect for and speak proudly of their new college and are excited by what it has to offer. They say that behaviour has improved so that lessons are rarely disrupted. The college council is strong and influential in the life of the college and this is evident from its work in improving the uniform and some facilities.

Despite the introduction of robust systems and policies, the college has not been wholly successful in improving attendance or punctuality. The importance of regular attendance has been stressed to students and parents/carers. Persistent absence is now closely monitored and attendance data are analysed and acted upon weekly. New electronic registration systems are in place but have yet to bear fruit. Some initiatives go beyond strategies that are commonly used in colleges; for example, a 'jingle' on the local radio encouraging college attendance. This and other approaches to dealing with different levels of poor attendance, such as employing a full-time inclusion officer, are all steps in the right direction but have yet to demonstrate a marked increase in the attendance of a core of persistent absentees.

Since the previous inspection the contribution of specialist business and enterprise status to college improvement has shown only limited impact. A governor with specific responsibility for the specialist status has been appointed to give more focus to the specialism and strengthen its management. The benefits of specialist status remain strongest in business studies subjects with less impact on standards in the other specialist subjects of mathematics, and information and communication technology. All students follow a business and enterprise specialist subject, and results in business and the other applied subjects have improved. Nevertheless, the impact of the specialism is not strong enough in terms of raising students' achievement. While enterprise learning across subjects, which encourages active participation, enables students to extend their thinking and acquire the confidence to work independently, not enough teachers are incorporating this approach into their regular classroom teaching. Performance of the specialist subjects in relation to their agreed targets has not improved enough to make them examples of best practice.

The local authority (LA) produced a good quality detailed plan of action to guide the college's progress. The LA has given valuable support, notably in helping to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Comprehensive reviews have been undertaken using high quality external consultants and practical help has been provided to key subject areas, particularly mathematics. The LA is aware that there needs to be more urgency given to the speed of progress. Nevertheless, the headteacher, governors and senior managers deserve praise for the way they have engineered

the transition to a brand new school building while maintaining satisfactory progress on the areas identified at the last inspection.

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

Yours sincerely

Anthony Briggs
Additional Inspector