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Dr Ian Johnson  
The Headteacher  
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Dear Dr Johnson

### Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your college with Dee Wheatley and George Rayner, additional inspectors, on 11 February 2010, and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. I would be grateful if you would also pass on my thanks to the students and both teaching and non-teaching staff who gave up their time to talk to us.

Since the last inspection, responsibilities for the senior team have been reorganised. The college is in the process of restructuring pastoral arrangements from a year to a house system and the new system should be fully embedded by September 2010. Three advanced skills teachers have been appointed in performing arts, English and mathematics. There has been extensive refurbishment of technology areas and physical education facilities.

The college is part of the Gaining Ground initiative and the Extra Mile project. It was redesignated as a performing arts college in 2008.

As a result of the inspection on 26 and 27 March 2008, the college was asked to:

- improve the consistency of teaching to the level of the best so that students make better progress, behaviour is improved in lessons and standards rise at both key stages
- improve attendance by ensuring recent initiatives to reduce absence become well established
- ensure marking gives students better information about how to improve.

Having considered all the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time the school has made inadequate progress in making improvements and inadequate progress in demonstrating a better capacity for sustained improvement.



Since the last inspection, the proportion of students achieving five A\* to C grades both with and without English and mathematics has risen, but is still significantly below average. The rise is largely a result of substantial improvements to the proportion of students gaining A\* to C grades in English and to a lesser extent in mathematics. Standards in dance remain high and the satisfactory achievement in other specialist subjects and vocational courses has been maintained. However, attainment in a range of other subjects remains low, and the improvements seen are largely limited to more able students. Both examination results and inspectors' lesson observations show that middle and lower ability students, and especially those with less serious special educational needs, make inadequate progress because teaching does not focus sufficiently on meeting their needs and teachers' expectations are too low.

Too much teaching across the college is still satisfactory with only a small proportion of outstanding lessons and some that are inadequate. In English and performing arts teaching is consistently good or better, and this is reflected in the progress the students make and the standards they reach. A recent focus on coaching teachers, so they set clear learning objectives and are able to use data, grade and level criteria and targets to support students, has had a limited impact. Sometimes however, the focus on targets and levels and how to reach them leads teachers to teach so tightly to the test that they overlook the key task of generating students' enthusiasm and excitement for learning. Students described their enjoyment of project-based subjects where they have a choice about what they do and learn well, for example in vocational subjects, performing arts, design technology and physical education. In these lessons they can be active and take responsibility for their own learning. However, in too many lessons, teachers talk for too long and opportunities are missed for independent learning, which leads to a lack of engagement. For example in languages, students are not given enough time to talk to one another and to develop oral skills. Students are not generally disruptive but they are often passive, and teachers' questioning is not sufficiently targeted or probing so sometimes a few vocal students can dominate the lesson.

The college currently has no teaching and learning policy and so expectations for staff are not explicit. A programme of lesson observation is in place, but the current proforma is very focused on the actions of the teacher, rather than the quality of learning for both individual students and groups. It is not clear for example, that teachers need to use assessment data to differentiate work to ensure that it is matched to individual students' needs. Students are not given personalised subject-specific targets, especially those with less serious special educational needs. If strategies are available to help support these students they are often too general to really help them tackle weaknesses and improve.

Students describe examples of good marking and feedback in English and in project-based subjects such as dance, drama, and design technology. Although there have been some improvements, in many lessons marking is not either regular or formative enough for students to really feel that their work is valued by teachers, so they take



little pride in it. Much work is left unfinished, especially by lower ability students, and students are not routinely expected and given time to respond to teachers' comments. The marking policy does not model the characteristics of good practice, nor does it explain clearly how high quality marking and feedback can have a positive impact on students' motivation and progress.

Inspectors found students articulate, friendly and happy to engage in conversation. They are generally more engaged in learning than they were at the time of the last inspection. Students say that behaviour is better in lessons and that when there are problems they are generally dealt with effectively by teachers. Exclusion rates have also fallen. During the visit, good examples were seen to demonstrate students' spiritual, moral and social development, for example in a Year 8 assembly. Students are very positive about the impact of the school's specialist status on provision at the college, and high numbers are involved both in Key Stage 4 options and in extra-curricular activities linked to dance and drama. The influence of the success of the specialist subjects is not seen in other subjects.

Students' attendance has improved and in the autumn term came close to the national average. The proportion of persistent absentees has also reduced substantially this year. Systems are not yet as rigorous as they could be, but the appointment of a new welfare officer to support the college's work in encouraging better engagement with education is already beginning to have a positive impact. The local authority has provided satisfactory support in order to help improve both behaviour and attendance.

The pace of change since the last inspection has not been fast enough and improvements are too fragile and inconsistent across the college to demonstrate an impact on students' achievement, which is currently inadequate. Some plans are in place, for example to improve provision for students with less serious special educational needs, but these have yet to make a difference. The college leadership needs to use the expertise of the recently appointed advanced skills teachers to plan much sharper and more targeted strategies which will to guide and encourage teachers to improve the quality of their teaching and marking. This will ensure that students are helped to make the maximum progress. Currently, monitoring of teachers' planning, marking and teaching is not sufficiently robust to drive and embed change which will improve students' outcomes. Planning does not show the necessary urgency or focus to tackle embedded weakness in provision quickly. The college is therefore making inadequate progress in demonstrating a better capacity for sustained improvement.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your school. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Mary Massey  
Her Majesty's Inspector

