

Sandwell College

Monitoring visit report

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Monitoring visit: main findings

Context and focus of visit

On 1 November 2018, Sandwell College merged with Cadbury Sixth Form College. At their previous inspections, Sandwell College was judged as good and Cadbury Sixth Form College as 'requires improvement'. All key judgements were good at Sandwell College in May 2014. In November 2017, a short inspection confirmed that the college continued to be a good provider. At the inspection of Cadbury College in March 2018, all key judgements were 'requires improvement'. The themes for this monitoring visit are selected from the areas for improvement identified from the previous report of Cadbury Sixth Form College.

Themes

What progress have governors of the merged college made in holding senior managers fully to account for making improvements recommended in previous inspection reports, and ensuring that all learners receive high-quality education and training, regardless of where they are studying?

Reasonable progress

Governors were fully involved in all stages of the merger process. They set up a sub-committee of the governing body to evaluate rigorously the impact of the merger before making the final decision.

Governors are committed to preserving the character and ethos of Cadbury College to meet the needs of local learners. Governors have set up a local Cadbury board that has good local representation. Its aim is to ensure that the college responds to the city's priorities and meets the needs of local employers and students. Overall responsibility for quality improvement remains with the main board. This is to ensure that all provision is subject to the same levels of scrutiny, and that managers and staff implement quality improvements consistently across the organisation.

Governors receive very detailed reports on the performance of courses across the college. They also receive information on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment for the whole college. They have requested separate reports on the performance of the Cadbury site, so that they have a clear idea of how well its performance is improving.

Governors have a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the college, including for the Cadbury site. They are aware of the actions being taken to ensure high standards across the institution. Governors challenge senior leaders and managers and hold them to account well.

What progress have leaders and managers made in strengthening the process for monitoring the progress of level 3 learners, to ensure that they make the progress of which they are capable, given their qualifications on entry. Reasonable progress

Senior leaders and managers have a good understanding of the progress of students at the Cadbury College site. They are aware that outcomes and students' progress at the Cadbury site require improvement. Their immediate goal is to introduce the strategies that have led to improvements at Sandwell College's sixth form to the Cadbury site.

At the point of merger, teachers had undertaken the first assessment to gauge students' progress. This identified that two thirds of students were below their expected target. At the second assessment point, just over half of the students were below their target. Although this is an improvement, the proportion is significantly higher than the proportion of students who are below their target at the Sandwell College sixth form.

Managers are right to be concerned that teachers were too optimistic in grading students' progress at these assessment points. As a result, managers plan to have staff from an external body mark the next assessments, which are mock exams. This is to ensure that they have an objective measure of the progress of each student.

Since the merger, managers have implemented the Sandwell College model of weekly team meetings. At these meetings, teachers discuss the progress that each student is making and identify interventions. Teachers are adopting a range of appropriate strategies to support students, such as providing additional one-to-one sessions which direct students to additional workshops, and setting them additional work. It is too early to gauge the impact of these strategies.

What progress have leaders and managers made in improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, especially in planning learning, checking learning and setting challenging targets, so that students make strong progress? Reasonable progress

Leaders and managers have implemented a range of appropriate actions to help teachers make improvements to the planning and delivery of learning activities. This includes taking better account of students' individual needs and starting points.

Managers have reviewed and revised the different lesson observation processes that existed in the two colleges. They have developed a consistent approach to lesson observations across all campuses. Staff who observe lessons have received training to help them make more accurate evaluations about the quality and impact of teachers' planning on students' learning. Continuing professional development for teachers is frequent and varied. Teachers benefit from sharing best practice with their peers across the college.

In the small sample of joint lessons observed, the quality of teaching is not consistently good. In the most effective lessons, teachers are adept at using a range of techniques to provide interesting and challenging work for students. They challenge students to learn, remember, and apply new knowledge. They use questions well to check that students understand. Practical and vocational sessions are particularly effective in engaging students in learning and in helping them to make progress and achieve. The standard of practical work is high, particularly in A-level art.

In the least effective lessons, teachers do not plan lessons well enough to meet the needs of all students. Assessment of learning is weak. Teachers move on to new activities too quickly, before checking that their students have understood the current activity. As a result, students do not make the progress of which they are capable.

Most teachers provide students with precise feedback on their assessed work. This helps students to improve the standard of their work and aim for higher grades.

Leaders have a realistic view of the quality of provision. They aim to ensure that all students receive a good learning experience. They are aware of the above weaknesses and are taking sensible actions to make the necessary improvements. It is too soon to assess the full impact of the range of actions that the new leadership team has taken.

What progress have managers made in ensuring that quality improvement processes have been extended to all parts of the newly merged college, and are being consistently implemented to drive forward improvement? Reasonable progress

Leaders are implementing a wide range of thoughtfully considered actions to support improvement across the college. They carried out a detailed analysis and review of the college's performance prior to, and immediately following, the merger. The resulting improvement plan sets out clearly which leaders and managers are responsible for implementing each action. However, these actions are relatively new and it is too soon to judge their impact.

Since the merger, the principal and senior leaders have provided a calm oversight of the transition arrangements. They have appointed a campus principal, who is also a member of the senior leadership team. Their role is to provide stable leadership at the Cadbury campus and promote a culture of improvement. Leaders and managers are working hard to change the culture from one which focuses on the concerns of staff to one which focuses on the experience of students. Leaders and managers frequently undertake learning walks across the site. This provides a visible and reassuring presence for the benefit of both staff and students. It also enables managers to identify quickly any emerging concerns.

The post-inspection action plan is concise and appropriately structured. It focuses on quickly improving the quality and consistency of students' experiences and

outcomes. It contains a range of well-considered targets and actions to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, and the consistency and rigour of leadership and management. The improvement plan has benefited from the involvement of managers and staff across the merged college.

However, the action plan contains few milestones by which leaders and governors can measure progress. The current version of the plan contains no progress indicators beyond the current term. Leaders are aware of these shortcomings. They are now seeking to establish a set of challenging key performance indicators, against which they can monitor and evaluate performance.

Leaders have taken quick action to improve the quality of teaching across all subjects. Teachers have benefited from a wide range of professional development training. For example, recent developmental support focused on what constitutes effective starter activities, checking students' understanding, and planning extension activities for the most able students.

Staff morale is high. Joint teamworking both in curriculum teams and across the wider college is much in evidence. As a result, curriculum teams are beginning to have an impact on raising students' aspirations and eliminating inconsistencies in their subject area. In addition, middle managers from across both campuses are now benefiting from a bespoke leadership development programme called 'STEPS'. This is to equip managers with the skills, attitudes and behaviours to lead and manage their teams effectively.

Managers have recently implemented a revised system for the observation of teaching and learning, so that practices are consistent across all parts of the merged college. A team of trained observers, who are independent of the curriculum area, carry out ungraded observations. Their judgements are subject to detailed moderation by lead reviewers. Learning and development coaches provide effective support and mentoring for teachers whose lessons do not meet the college's standards. Staff appraisal and performance management are now more rigorous, and target-orientated.

What progress have senior leaders made in ensuring that the curriculum offer of the merged college addresses the skills gaps in the local and regional economy, meets the needs of local employers, and enables learners to achieve their career aspirations?

Reasonable progress

The principal and senior leaders carried out a detailed analysis and review of the college's curriculum before the merger to ensure that it will be fit for purpose. Leaders made good use of their links with key external stakeholders, including Birmingham City Council, to establish what the college needs to do to respond to, and meet, the educational needs of young people in the locality and across the city. In addition, governors and leaders have set up a local body to act as a sounding board for local organisations. For instance, they have collaborated with local schools

about career and progression opportunities at the college. They have also explored the different routes to further and higher education, and employment for local learners.

Leaders, managers and staff have worked hard in reviewing and developing their outline plans to support the development of new curriculums. Their aim is to offer courses which have clear progression routes between courses and levels of study within the college. For example, leaders are at an advanced stage of planning for the introduction of an expanded A-level honours programme at the Cadbury campus. They have earmarked health and medical, computing, humanities and English, science and mathematics as priority subjects, and these do not duplicate local provision.

Similarly, plans are in place to develop a 'Young Professional Academy'. The aim of the academy is to provide a breadth to the curriculum. In particular, it will provide a more practical and career-focused curriculum for learners aged 16 to 19. This will embrace a mixture of both academic and vocational courses, aligned to identified local and regional skills priorities. However, leaders have yet to share their outline curriculum plans and proposals, covering the 2019/20 academic year and beyond, with staff or governors.

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