

Unity College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	135003
Local Authority	Lancashire
Inspection number	298621
Inspection dates	28–29 November 2007
Reporting inspector	Angela M Headon 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	927
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Michael Murray
Headteacher	Mrs Sally Cryer
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	Towneley Holmes Burnley Lancashire BB11 3EN
Telephone number	01282 436311
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Age group	11-16
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Introduction

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

Description of the school

Unity College is an average size secondary school, situated in Burnley. The college opened in September 2006, following a Building Schools for the Future re-organisation programme. The college serves an area of social and economic disadvantage and the proportion of students eligible for free school meals is twice the national figure. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is also higher than the national average. Few students are from minority ethnic backgrounds. The college is host to a City Learning Centre and is part of the Behaviour for Improvement programme. The college has specialist performing arts status and has achieved the Investors in People award.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 4

In accordance with section 13(3) of the Education Act 2005, HMCI is of the opinion that this school requires significant improvement, because it is performing significantly less well than in all circumstances it could be reasonably expected to perform. The school is therefore given a Notice to Improve. Significant improvement is required in relation to students' achievement and standards in both key stages.

Achievement and standards are inadequate. The students enter the college with below-average standards. They make unsatisfactory progress and so leave with standards which are exceptionally low. This represents significant underachievement. In 2007, attainment at the end of both key stages was well below national figures, with exceptionally low standards in English and mathematics. However, examination results at Key Stage 3 did indicate some improvement since the college opened in 2006. Also, the number of students attaining one GCSE grade A* to G is above the national average, as is attainment at Key Stage 4 in French and music.

Teaching and learning are satisfactory overall. Inspectors observed both good and satisfactory lessons. However, students make insufficient progress between the ages of 11 and 16 because not enough of the teaching is good. Teachers are developing their use of assessment to plan lessons and inform students of their progress. However, this information is not always used by teachers consistently to challenge students effectively. The marking of workbooks is also variable across the college.

Students are well cared for and supported by the college, which has a strong commitment to inclusion. This is aiding the students' personal development and resulting in improved social skills and increased self-confidence. Vulnerable students and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are given good support through targeted provision and strong partnerships with other agencies. This enables them to make satisfactory progress. Students feel safe and are developing good practice in healthy living. Attendance, although below national levels, is improving as a result of effective strategies introduced by the college. Behaviour and attitudes to learning are satisfactory and students feel ownership of the improvements in this area. Parents' views of the college's effectiveness are generally positive.

The curriculum is satisfactory overall, with strengths in the range of provision at Key Stage 4. The college has used its specialist performing arts status well by: enhancing curriculum provision; raising attainment in the arts; developing community links; and providing a range of enrichment activities. Extra-curricular opportunities, particularly those linked to performing arts and sport, are wide-ranging and popular. Students are proud of the college's status and particularly the brass band and drama productions.

Leadership and management are satisfactory overall. The headteacher has established a clear sense of purpose and direction after a period of staffing instability and considerable change. There is a focused agenda for raising achievement, particularly in developing teaching and learning across the college, through a number of strategy groups. The role and accountability of middle leaders in raising attainment continue to develop. The college has systems to monitor teaching and learning and students' performance but these are not robust enough to secure consistency in practice and outcomes between and within subject departments. This has resulted in variable experiences for many students and has inhibited work to raise standards. The college, however, recognises its areas for improvement and has already effected some change. It is well placed for this trend to continue and has satisfactory capacity to improve.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise achievement and standards in both key stages, with a focus on English and mathematics.
- Improve the quality of teaching so that most is good or better.
- Ensure monitoring by senior and middle leaders is more robust and that decisive action is taken to secure rapid improvements in students' performance.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 4

Students enter the college having achieved below-average results in their primary schools. They leave with exceptionally low standards. This represents inadequate progress. In 2007 levels of attainment at Key Stage 4 were significantly below the national average and less than one in three students gained five or more GCSE grades at C or above. The proportion of students attaining a grade C or above in English and mathematics was also well below the national figure. However the proportion of students gaining one A*-G grade was above the national average. Students obtained good results in French and music.

At Key Stage 3 standards overall are exceptionally low. Although the college did not meet its targets in the 2007 national tests, levels of attainment throughout the year in all core subjects indicate that students' achievement improved at both expected and higher levels.

A range of strategies within the college has ensured that students in both key stages are now better placed to achieve the targets set by the college. Evidence from lesson observations and the college's own assessments indicates that the progress made by most students is improving. However, insufficient time has elapsed for the impact of these strategies to be fully evident. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are well supported and make satisfactory progress.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 3

Personal development and well-being, including spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, are satisfactory. Through cultural-awareness days, visits from the local clergy and mock trials, students have a growing understanding of diversity and responsibility. Students try to live healthy lifestyles and listen carefully to the advice they receive about healthy eating and fitness. Many students participate in extra sporting activities. Students say that they feel safe in college and that bullying is rare, but if it does occur the college deals with it quickly and effectively.

The majority of students enjoy coming to college: there has been some improvement in attendance due to the effective strategies that the college has introduced. Behaviour and attitudes to learning are satisfactory and continuing to improve; students form positive relationships with staff and each other.

Students make a good contribution to the college community through the student council and their responsibilities as prefects. For the wider community, students participate in charity and fundraising activities, provide entertainment for the elderly and the college's brass band performs at local and national level. Lessons in finance, enterprise and careers information all help to prepare students for their roles in later life.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Teaching and learning are satisfactory overall. In good lessons, the work is thoughtfully matched to the needs of students. Teachers give clear, succinct explanations of learning objectives and students fully understand what they need to do to succeed. Enthusiastic teaching and a variety of challenging activities ensure that students enjoy learning and make good progress. Teachers have high expectations of their students. The less successful lessons are not planned well enough to provide opportunities for students to work independently. These lessons are often slow in pace, lack challenge and are overly dominated by the teacher, leading, in some instances, to students losing interest.

The college identifies 'assessment for learning' as a priority for development and some progress has been made in recognising and sharing good practice. However, as yet, there is little impact in the classroom. Assessment does not give a clear enough steer to teachers so they can provide appropriate support when students fall behind. The marking of students' work is variable; it does not always indicate to students what they must do to improve. Homework has been successfully replaced by independent learning activities. This innovative approach has led to a considerable increase in the number of students engaging in independent study beyond the classroom, supported by well-organised library resources.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

The college provides a satisfactory curriculum for its students, using the opportunities provided through its performing arts college status well to enhance provision in both key stages. Students in Key Stage 4 are presented with a wide range of accredited courses which ensure that most aspirations and capabilities are well catered for. For example, examination courses are now started in the latter part of Year 9, which is beginning to raise achievement. However, the curriculum is not yet contributing well enough to students' overall standards and achievement. In addition some students in Key Stage 4 do not receive their full entitlement to religious education and information and communication technology; the college has already taken steps to ensure this will be resolved.

The needs of students for whom a traditional curriculum would not be appropriate are well met, with a good programme of work-related learning enhanced by links with the local further education college. A number of strategies, including enhanced curriculum time, are helping to improve students' basic skills, which the college rightly recognises as a barrier to progress. Performing arts and sport are strongly represented in a good programme of extra-curricular activities; these are appreciated by students, as reflected in high participation rates. The programme for personal, social and health education also contributes to students' personal development, raising self-esteem and confidence.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Care, guidance and support are good. There is a strong pastoral support system and vulnerable students are quickly identified. Child protection procedures are well understood by all staff.

Thorough risk assessments are carried out for all educational visits. Students say they feel safe and they value the steps taken by the college in dealing with issues such as bullying.

Strong links with feeder primary schools help to ensure that the transition for Year 7 students runs smoothly. Present arrangements, with Year 7 students in the 'homebase' and those in Years 8 to 11 grouped in a house system, are valued by students across the college. Younger students are able to benefit from the experiences of older ones, and Year 7 students develop their personal, social and learning skills.

The student support centre offers good help to those students with a wide range of social and learning needs who are unable to remain in the classroom. A team of youth and community workers also gives enhanced support to students. The inclusion centre successfully re-engages disaffected students and acts as an alternative for those at risk of exclusion. Progress managers work closely with tutors and subject teachers to gain an overview of students' academic progress. Provision for students with learning difficulties/disabilities is good and helps them to make satisfactory progress.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Leadership and management are satisfactory. The headteacher has united the staff, with a determined approach to secure improvements in students' progress. The senior leadership team shares the headteacher's vision for the college's development and ensures that it is communicated well to all staff. There is a common sense of purpose throughout the college. Through extensive professional development and training, all staff are focused on raising standards.

College leaders are taking a wide range of actions to improve attainment, including developing the use of assessment to identify underachievement across the college. Regular meetings for senior and middle leaders have a clear focus on improving attainment at Key Stage 3, and there is support from senior leaders in English, mathematics and science.

The performance of departments and individual teachers is monitored, but systems lack rigour and have not been used to best effect to identify and remedy inconsistencies in teaching and learning and departmental performance. Middle leaders understand their role in the self-evaluation process and their accountability for students' achievement. Faculty heads and subject leaders feel they are well supported. Nevertheless, the role of middle leaders in improving performance is underdeveloped. It is not robust enough to bring about the rapid and sustainable change required to raise students' achievement significantly.

Governors know the college well and are aware of what needs to be done to improve it. They are committed and supportive and fulfil their responsibilities effectively. The college has accurately identified its strengths and what it needs to do to improve. There are already signs of success in improving students' achievement - for example, attainment in national tests at Key Stage 3. Through its actions on behaviour, attendance, assessment and the development of middle leaders, the college demonstrates a satisfactory capacity to improve.

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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?	4
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	NA
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	3

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	4
The standards ¹ reached by learners	4
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	4
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	3

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	3
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	3
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2
How well learners enjoy their education	3
The attendance of learners	3
The behaviour of learners	3
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	3

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	3
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2

¹ Grade 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.

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	4
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	4
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?	Yes

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

29 November 2007

Dear Students

Inspection of Unity College, Lancashire, BB11 3EN

Following our visit to your college, we would like to thank you for making us feel welcome and for talking to us in meetings, at social times and in lessons. This proved very helpful.

You were complimentary about your college and appreciated the range of performing arts and sporting activities on offer. You are proud of the college's specialist status. You also told us how behaviour had improved and that the college is a safe place to work and learn. You were also aware of some areas which could be improved.

Inspectors agreed with much of what you said. However, we also think that the college needs to improve in some important areas. At present, your standards are not as high as we would expect to see in similar schools. You are not making the progress you should in your lessons and this shows in your test and examination results. You are capable of achieving so much more.

For this reason, your college has been given a 'Notice to Improve', which means that we will visit your college again during the next year. These are the improvements we have asked Mrs Cryer and the governors to make.

- Improve test and examination results at the end of Year 9 and at GCSE, so that all of you are achieving as well as you should.
- Make sure most of the teaching is good or better.
- Monitor, more effectively, the progress you are making and the quality of teaching in the college.

We have also asked all the leaders in your college to make these improvements as quickly as possible. We know that your headteacher, governors and all the staff at your college have your best interests at heart and we wish you every success in the future.

Yours sincerely

Angela M Headon

Her Majesty's Inspector