

Phoenix College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	110189
Local Authority	Reading
Inspection number	325103
Inspection date	30 April 2009
Reporting inspector	Melvyn Blackband

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Boys
Number on roll	
School (total)	50
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr K Cody
Principal	Mrs E Lansdown-Bridge
Date of previous school inspection	19 June 2006
School address	40 Christchurch Road Reading RG2 7AY
Telephone number	01189 015524
Fax number	01189 015688

Age group	11–16
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by an Additional Inspector.

Description of the school

Phoenix College provides for boys with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). About two thirds of the students have been assessed as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or oppositional defiance disorder (ODD). The majority of students are White British with a minority of students from mixed White and Black Caribbean backgrounds. Over 60% of students are entitled to free school meals.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Phoenix College is a good school. Its overall effectiveness has improved since the previous inspection. Due to their social and behavioural problems, the standards attained by students when they join the school are well below average. Almost all of them, however, achieve well. For instance, there has been consistent improvement since the previous inspection in the levels of qualifications that students gain in Years 10 and 11, including a range of GCSE and Entry Level accreditations.

The quality of teaching continues to improve and is good throughout the school. Teachers ensure that their lessons are interesting and well paced. As a result, the students enjoy their work and respond by trying their best. However, the quality of the assessment of students' work lacks consistency. For instance, each subject uses different methods to assess students' progress. This results in learning targets for students that are not always well coordinated or focused and so students are sometimes not clear about how to improve their work. This slows down the pace of learning. In contrast, the students' behavioural targets are exceptionally clear and precise and students are fully aware of their progress. This has a significant beneficial impact on their behaviour and personal development.

The curriculum is effective, particularly in helping to provide the students with the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. There are very good activities to provide them with practical experiences of working life and which lead to challenging vocational qualifications. The curriculum is enriched by the imaginative use of educational visits and by the contribution of the many visitors to school, which effectively extends the students' social and cultural understanding. The hard work of staff enables them to overcome the difficulties caused by the somewhat cramped accommodation.

The students make excellent progress in their personal development. They thrive within the caring ethos of the school. This helps those who have behavioural and emotional problems get over many of the barriers to their learning. Those who have continuing difficulties are quickly identified and supported. At every stage of the day, students are well supervised and there are always trusted adults available to give support or advice. Because of very good programmes in personal, social, health and citizenship education (PSHCE), the students learn to keep themselves safe and healthy and gradually to take responsibility for their own behaviour. Their good progress in learning and using basic skills prepares them well for their future careers. Most students value their school. This is evident through the good relationships they have with staff. Attendance is satisfactory. Many students attend regularly, which is a significant improvement from their attendance at other schools. However, a minority of students are often absent despite the school's best efforts. The great majority of parents are happy for their children to attend, knowing that they enjoy their lessons and that the school has high expectations of their progress. One parent commented, 'Both my sons have gained a second chance here'.

The headteacher has led the school well in improving overall effectiveness, particularly in ensuring that staff work as a close-knit team and share a common vision for the school. An enthusiastic management team gives her good support. The governing body has several relatively new members, led by the chair, who has been in office for one month. Governors have a satisfactory knowledge of the school's day-to-day running. They are beginning to develop strategies to hold the school to account. The school evaluates its work accurately and, as a result, development planning has improved since the previous inspection, to focus more clearly

on the school's priorities for improvement. There is therefore a good capacity for the school to improve further.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve the consistency of assessment and use this information to set clear targets for students that help them to understand both their progress and how to improve their work.
- Develop strategies to improve the attendance of students who have high rates of absence.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

The students' attainment when they join the school is generally far below that typical for their age. They often come with very low reading levels and many have large gaps in their knowledge and understanding. Despite this low start, students achieve well. Students in the 11-14 age range make very good gains in reading and, in 2007 and 2008, nearly all students in Year 10 gained qualifications at Entry Level. Most students maintained this progress to gain a range of GCSE qualifications in Year 11, although the average grades remained somewhat below those expected of students in mainstream schools. In addition, most Year 11 students achieved success in a range of vocational qualifications. This represents consistent improvement since the previous inspection. There is no evidence of underachievement by any group or individual. Students make generally very good progress in the basic skills of English and mathematics, as well as in science and in information and communication technology (ICT).

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

The students' outstanding progress in personal development reflects the school's strong management of behaviour and its emphasis on moral and social values. Students' spiritual understanding develops very well because of the many opportunities they have to reflect on their attitudes towards others in the school community. Students relate well to adults and each other and there are open and friendly relationships. The students have a very good understanding of the multi-cultural nature of society. Staff provide very good role models, and as a result students gain an excellent understanding of cultural diversity and the importance of community cohesion in the school, the local community and further afield.

Students understand and value the points system and respond very well to the rewards and praise they are given. As a result, they work harder, behave better, and therefore make good progress. Most students enjoy their time at the school. Many students attend very regularly. This is because they enjoy school and are proud of their achievements. The school is generally calm because students feel safe and confident and know what is expected from them. One boy stated that the school was 'Loads better' than his previous schools. When students' behaviour becomes unacceptable and disrupts learning, staff deal with it calmly and with understanding and support for the student involved. Students were emphatic that bullying is rare and quickly dealt with. Parents generally have a high regard for the way the school manages behaviour. Students further develop their understanding of their behaviour and responsibilities to others through very good PSHCE programmes. They have an excellent appreciation of how to conduct themselves with regard to their own safety and the safety of other people. They gain a very good knowledge of how to stay fit and healthy. For example, the school has gained national awards such as the Sportsmark, and some students in Years 10 and 11 are studying for GCSE

in physical education. The progress that students make in their personal qualities and in basic skills, prepares them well for further training and for the workplace.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teachers know their students well and this enables them to plan interesting well-paced lessons. Specialists teach most subjects and they bring enthusiasm and high expectations to their lessons. Many students enter the school believing they will be unable to learn. They gradually gain the confidence to attempt new and challenging activities because they receive a high level of individual tuition and support from their teacher and the well-trained teaching assistants. Teachers are skilled in managing behaviour and in establishing clear routines. Students feel secure and respond well to these routines. As a result, they generally enjoy their lessons and try their best. Teachers make use of a variety of assessment strategies, some of which successfully involve students in reviewing their own learning. Assessment procedures, however, are not consistent throughout the school. As a result, they are not always used effectively to sharpen students' learning targets and to ensure they understand exactly what they need to do to improve.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The school has very good provision for teaching the basic skills. Because of the inconsistencies in target setting, however, teachers are not always able to match the curriculum closely enough to the specific learning needs of each student and this sometimes slows down the pace of learning. Staff have successfully overcome the barriers to delivering the curriculum created by the quality of the accommodation. Very good programmes in PSHCE ensure that students understand the value of living healthily and about how to keep themselves and others safe. Adults consistently support students as they develop their self-confidence as learners and as valued members of the school community. The high quality of support underpins the school's curriculum. There are trips and visits so that students learn new things in different situations. Some students take part in shared activities with other mainstream schools. These experiences help to combat the students' perceptions that they have been 'marginalised' by the education system. There are very well constructed programmes to teach the oldest students about the world of work and which encourage them to gain a range of vocationally based experiences and qualifications. The activities successfully motivate most students to continue their education in college or on training places.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

The school provides a high standard of care, and safeguarding procedures exceed national expectations. The staff support students outstandingly well. Most staff are Keyworkers for a small group of students. These staff are particularly effective because they have an excellent relationship with 'their' students and their parents. All concerns over students' welfare are communicated to the whole staff and this results in consistent tailored support for each student. There is further support available from the art psychotherapist who provides valued help to the most vulnerable students. Parents report a high degree of satisfaction with their level of

involvement in their children's education. The school takes determined steps to improve the students' attendance, which remains, however, satisfactory overall, rather than good, because of persistent high rates of absence by a minority of students.

The students have a very clear understanding of their behaviour targets and how to improve their conduct. This has a significant positive effect on their self-control and behaviour. However, teachers do not generally write the students' learning targets with sufficient precision to enable them to understand clearly how to improve their academic work.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The headteacher, supported by an effective leadership team, has driven through substantial improvements since the previous inspection. Teaching standards have risen and the tracking and analysis of students' progress has improved. This provides the senior team with a good overview of provision and enables them to intervene decisively where underachievement is detected. The school monitors its work well and the consequent self-evaluation of the school's performance is accurate. For instance, the senior team are aware that assessment and target setting needs further development and this area of work features as a priority in the school's development planning. Students of all backgrounds and abilities get a fair deal and students are encouraged to welcome the diversity that individual staff and students bring to the school.

The excellent communication and a strong team spirit within the school enable staff to feel fully consulted, involved and valued. The quality of professional training is good and clearly linked to the monitoring and performance management of teachers. This has made a significant contribution to improving the quality of teaching and to the students' good achievement. Staff are well deployed and resources are used prudently. The effectiveness of the governing body has improved since the previous inspection, although presently several members are relatively newly appointed. Governors have devised appropriate measures to monitor the school's work and these are beginning to be successful in providing more effective strategic management.

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Annex A

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

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	2

¹Grade 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.

Personal development and well-being

How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	1
The attendance of learners	3
The behaviour of learners	1
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1

The quality of provision

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

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	2
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	1
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	2
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?	No

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

13 May 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Phoenix College, Reading, RG2 7AY

Not long ago I came to your school to see how you were getting on and whether I could suggest anything to make the school better. I enjoyed meeting some of you in the classroom and in the dining room.

I was only with you for one day. That was long enough for me to realise that you go to a good school. I could see that you enjoy being there and that for most of you, your behaviour and attendance has improved since joining Phoenix College. These are the main strengths of the school.

- You work hard and make good progress in your work and excellent progress in your behaviour and personal development.
- You have a good range of activities, including good programmes to prepare you for when you go on to further education or training after you leave school.
- All the adults at the school have a real interest in your welfare and look after you very well.
- Lessons are interesting. This means you enjoy learning and do your best.
- Your school is well run.

I think the school could improve further in two ways.

- Your teachers should write down all the small improvements you make in your work, in the same way. This information should be used more effectively to give you a better idea of what you need to do to improve your work.
- Staff should devise even better ways to help those of you who have poor levels of attendance to want to come to school more often.

You can help yourselves too by making sure your behaviour is always good and, for some of you, by coming to school more regularly. Then you should learn even faster.

Yours faithfully

Mel Blackband

Lead Inspector