

The Community College Whitstable

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	118803
Local Authority	Kent
Inspection number	326896
Inspection dates	11–12 March 2009
Reporting inspector	Joan Greenfield

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

Type of school	Modern (non-selective)
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1098
Sixth form	117
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Keith Hooker
Headteacher	Helena Sullivan-Tighe
Date of previous school inspection	2 May 2006
School address	Bellevue Road Whitstable CT5 1PX
Telephone number	01227 272362
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by four Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

The college is similar in size to most other secondary schools. It is a non-selective school in a selective area. A much higher proportion of students than average have learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and about half of these students have behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. Most students are from White British backgrounds, and the remainder come from a range of other heritages, including some from Traveller families of Irish heritage. Many more students than usual join or leave the college at other than the normal transfer times. The college is a specialist college for mathematics and computing.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

The college's overall effectiveness is satisfactory. It is an improving school, but not yet at a fast enough rate to raise standards substantially. The college's GCSE examination results have risen over the past three years on most measures. However, the proportion of students gaining five or more A* to C grades including English and mathematics fell in 2008 because of the students' weaker performance in English. Senior staff have taken robust and successful action to tackle this decline and the college's tracking information indicates that students are on course to do better than in 2007 and 2008. Although standards remain below average, students' achievement is satisfactory. Most groups of students, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, make satisfactory progress. Students, especially those in Year 11, are benefitting from better teaching, the setting of more challenging targets and the systematic tracking of their progress against these targets. In addition, the college has introduced a range of intervention strategies to support those in danger of underachieving. These strategies are helping students to make faster gains in their learning.

Students' personal development and well-being, as well as the care, guidance and support they receive, are satisfactory. Students make a positive contribution to the college and wider community. They have a good understanding of the need to adopt healthy lifestyles and how to keep safe, and appreciate the extent to which the personal, social and health education programme has informed and raised their awareness of personal risks. They relate well to each other and value the strong relationships they have with staff. Students are particularly enthusiastic about the vertical tutoring system through which they receive good pastoral support. Students enjoy college and most have positive attitudes to learning. Their behaviour is satisfactory in the main, and frequently good, especially in lessons that interest and motivate them. More than half of the parents who returned the inspection questionnaire expressed concerns about standards of behaviour and the way it is dealt with. Inspectors noted some low-level disruption and off-task chatter in a few lessons, but saw no poor behaviour.

The quality of teaching is satisfactory, with some examples of good and occasionally outstanding teaching. However, not all teachers involve students actively enough in lessons or provide them with work that challenges them sufficiently. In addition, the marking of students' work is inconsistent and does not give students enough guidance on how they can improve it and move on to the next level or grade. As a result, students do not make the good progress that is necessary to raise standards substantially. The good curriculum, especially the range of vocational courses at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form, meets students' needs well, providing them with a variety of pathways that are flexible and responsive to their interests and abilities. The college's specialist subjects are starting to have a stronger impact on the college's work, but their effectiveness varies.

The headteacher provides good direction to the work of the college and has a clear view of its future development, building on the many initiatives that have occurred already to improve the opportunities available for students. She is ably supported by her senior team, a small number of whom are relatively new in post. Middle managers are becoming more effective. There is a clear commitment to raising standards further and the success of the actions taken so far is reflected in the improvements seen in students' progress this year. The college works well with other agencies and schools but its partnership with parents is not as secure. A relatively large number of parents expressed concerns about the lack of permanent teachers in some subjects and its impact on their child's progress, and the quality of communication between

the college and parents. Together with the governors, who undertake their responsibilities well, the college's leaders recognise that they have more to do to reassure parents about the effectiveness of the college's provision and its future direction.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

The sixth form is satisfactory. Some aspects of its work are strong. For example, it has successfully encouraged many students to apply for entry into higher education, including those who had not considered this route as a possibility. The appointment of an 'Aim Higher' coordinator has been particularly effective in this respect. Standards are below average, but students' achievement is satisfactory when account is taken of their starting points. The good curriculum matches students' needs well. Recognising that some students were placed inappropriately on academic courses, the college has widened the range of vocational courses, resolved a number of staffing issues and strengthened its entry requirements to specific courses. In addition, sharper monitoring arrangements ensure that students meet specific targets as a condition of continuing with their chosen courses.

Most students are enthusiastic about the opportunities available to them and value the strengths of their relationships with staff. They speak positively about the good care, support and guidance they receive, including the regular mentoring from tutors. The teaching is satisfactory, with examples of good and occasionally outstanding teaching in a few subjects. Students develop the skills to learn independently and have strong confidence in their future prospects. They also make a responsible contribution to the college and wider community. Leadership and management are satisfactory, with responsibility shared amongst senior staff. This shared responsibility has some strengths. However, the lack of an overall sixth form leader means that the coordination of students' attendance and academic progress is not sufficiently robust. The college has been proactive in planning for the future. Senior leaders recognise that the current timetabling arrangements leave some students with a fragmented learning experience during the week that can affect their attendance.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise standards and achievement substantially, especially in English and mathematics.
- Consistently provide students with more demanding work in lessons and engage them more actively in their learning.
- Improve the quality and consistency of marking students' work and give them more guidance on how they can improve it and move to the next level or grade.

A small proportion of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Standards are below average by Year 11 but students' achievement is satisfactory. This picture is better than the GCSE examination results in 2008, which were well below average. The GCSE examination results for the 'capped' average points score have been well below average for several years, but have risen steadily over the past three years, narrowing the gap with the picture nationally. In 2008, the results also improved at five or more A* to C grades, but declined

when English and mathematics were included, mainly because of the students' weaker performance in English.

Students' attainment when they enter Year 7 is below average. Their weak literacy skills affect their learning at all stages. Most students make satisfactory progress overall between Year 7 and Year 11. It is more rapid in Years 10 and 11 than in Years 7 to 9 because the college has focused its attention on Years 10 and 11 to raise standards in the GCSE examinations. However, leaders are aware that a sharper focus is required in Years 7 to 9 to ensure a stronger baseline when most students start their GCSE courses. Few differences exist between the performance and progress of boys and girls and other groups of students. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make satisfactory progress in line with their peers because of the targeted support they receive.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 3

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is satisfactory. There are strengths in their moral and social development, but their spiritual awareness and their understanding of the diversity of society in multicultural Britain are not as well developed. Students relate well to each other and value the strong relationships with staff. Most students enjoy college and have positive attitudes to learning. Although most students attend regularly, attendance rates remain below average because of the persistent absence of a small minority. Students have a good understanding of how to manage risks in their own lives and are emphatic that the college is a safe place to be. They do not consider bullying to be a particular issue and say that any instances are dealt with swiftly by staff. The behaviour of the majority of students is satisfactory and frequently good. However, not all behave well, which results in the application of the college's sanctions, including that of exclusion.

Students' good awareness of the need to lead healthy lifestyles is reflected in the numbers that participate in extra-curricular activities and in their choices of food at lunchtimes. Students participate well in their college community and have contributed to a number of college initiatives, such as the vertical learning groups and decisions on uniform. They take pride in describing their many activities within the local community. Good links with local businesses and an increasingly diverse range of vocational courses make a positive contribution to preparing students for their future lives, but are countered by weaknesses in students' literacy and numeracy skills.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Although there is some good and occasionally outstanding practice, most teaching is satisfactory. Typically, lessons are carefully planned to provide students with a suitable range of activities, although they are not always matched carefully enough to the range of attainment in the class. This means that the work does not always challenge the more able students or fully meet the needs of the lower attainers. Teachers share the lesson's objectives with the students so they are aware of what they are expected to learn, but do not always do enough at the end of the lesson to encourage students to explain what they have learned.

A common feature of many lessons is the students' lack of active involvement in their learning. This occurs because teachers talk for too long when giving explanations, or ask questions that fail to challenge students' thinking and encourage them to reflect more deeply. The result is that the pace of the lesson slows and students lose concentration. In addition, students do not have enough opportunity to work together in pairs and small groups to share ideas or to take responsibility for working independently. Nevertheless, collaborative learning is beginning to develop well in some of the project-based learning in Year 7. Students make good progress in those lessons where teachers use a variety of active learning approaches, provide really challenging work, and plan opportunities for students to assess their own work and that of others.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum meets students' needs and aspirations well. This is particularly so in Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form, with the introduction of a wide range of vocational courses, some in partnership with other local schools. A positive feature of the curriculum is the way that it responds flexibly to meet the needs of students according to their individual requirements and interests. For example, there are opportunities to receive additional literacy and numeracy support, undertake additional courses in minority subjects after school and to follow courses at the local college. The project-based approach to the curriculum, introduced this year in Year 7 on one day each week, is planned well and builds on the students' experiences in primary school. It also helps them to develop their problem-solving skills in working cooperatively with others on real issues, such as mounting an exhibition in the town. Students in Year 7 are highly motivated by the course and speak enthusiastically about it.

The college's subject specialisms in mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT) are gradually starting to influence provision in other subjects, but still have further to go. Some students take a GCSE course in ICT in Years 10 and 11, but the arrangements for other students are not as well planned as ICT is covered through individual subjects. The college is currently evaluating this provision to ensure that all students receive their entitlement. A good range of visits extend the work students undertake in lessons. The emphasis on their social and moral development in many cross-curricular activities broadens students' understanding of new areas, as well as contributing to their personal development. These are supplemented by a wide range of extra-curricular activities in sport, music and drama.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

Students receive good pastoral care, and the vertical tutor groups within the three 'mini-schools' ensure that they are known well by staff. In addition, a wide range of specialist staff and external agencies, including multi-agency teams, provide effective support for those students identified as having particular needs or who may be vulnerable. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities receive good support, although some of the intervention strategies, for example in numeracy, are in their early stages of implementation. Other groups, such as those from Traveller family backgrounds, also receive appropriate support to help them integrate fully into the life of the college. The college has worked tenaciously and successfully to reduce the level of absence, especially persistent absences. Most students attend regularly, and the below average attendance figures relate to a small number of students who do not attend as regularly as they

should, despite the college's efforts. Clear rules for acceptable behaviour are understood and supported by the majority of students, who consider that they are implemented fairly.

Students' academic support is satisfactory and improving. The targets set for students are now more challenging than previously and students' progress, especially in Year 11, is assessed and tracked systematically. However, not all teachers use this information sufficiently well to plan work that provides the necessary challenge and ensure that all students make good gains in their learning. The marking of students' work has some weaknesses as it is not undertaken consistently or rigorously enough to ensure that students know what they need to do to improve their performance.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

The headteacher is providing clear direction for the college's future development. She has been instrumental in extending the opportunities available to students, especially broadening the curriculum to extend the range of vocational courses, implementing the vertical tutoring system within the 'mini-schools', and gaining the new college buildings under the Building Schools for the Future initiative. With the strong support of her leadership team, the headteacher has taken firm and determined action to reverse the dip in the college's results in English. This has led to concerted action to sharpen subject leadership, improve the quality of learning and teaching, and implement more robust targets and better systems for tracking students' progress. These are all beginning to have a considerable impact, leading to improvements in many aspects of the college's work, although not yet implemented with the consistency that is required to raise standards substantially. Nevertheless, the success of its progress so far shows that the college has good capacity to improve further.

Senior staff have an accurate picture of the college's strengths and weaknesses and, with the support of external advisers and consultants, have focused on the key priorities that are likely to make a difference. Many middle leaders are playing a more strategic role in college improvement, but their impact in a few areas is not yet sharp enough to ensure consistency of approach within their subjects and across the college as a whole. The college's promotion of community cohesion is satisfactory. Its involvement in the local community is extensive and it has well-established links and exchanges with schools internationally. However, these good features are balanced by students' weaker understanding of life in multicultural Britain. Governors undertake their responsibilities well and give good support to the college. They monitor the work of the college closely and have recently become much more strategic in their approach.

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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	16-19
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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?	3	3
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well being?	2	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2

Achievement and standards

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

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?	3	2
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	
The extent to which 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 learners' needs?	3	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	3	2

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	3	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	2	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	3	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	3	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	3	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2	
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes	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 March 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of The Community College Whitstable, Whitstable CT5 1PX

You may remember that we visited the college recently. We enjoyed our visit, and our discussions with many of you helped us in our work. This letter is to tell you of our findings. I hope that many of you will take the opportunity of reading the full report.

The college provides you with a satisfactory education. Most of you are making satisfactory progress in your learning. Standards in the college are rising, but we think that some of you could do even better than you are doing currently. You have more challenging targets to aim for than you have had in the past and teachers are working hard, especially with those of you in Year 11, to make sure that you do well in all your subjects, and especially in English and mathematics. Most of you work well in lessons, particularly when the work is interesting, but a few of you chatter too much and do not concentrate sufficiently on doing the best you can. Some of you, though, are capable of making faster progress than you currently do. Although the teaching is satisfactory and sometimes better than this, we think that you need more good teaching if this is to happen.

You tell us that you enjoy college and that the adults in the college give you the right kind of support, especially when you have difficulties and problems. You are friendly and polite to each other and most of you behave as the college expects you to do. A small number of you, though, do not attend college regularly enough. You make a good contribution to the college and local community and you have a good understanding of how to keep healthy and safe. The good curriculum gives you many opportunities to develop your skills and interests and is preparing you satisfactorily for your future lives.

The college's leaders know what it does well and what it needs to do to get better. We have asked them to do three things to improve the college's work. You can help by always working as hard as you can.

- Help you make better progress, especially in English and mathematics.
- Give you more demanding work and involve you more actively in lessons.
- Mark your work more regularly and thoroughly, and give you more guidance on how you can improve it and move on to the next level or grade.

Yours faithfully

Mrs J Greenfield

Lead inspector