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1 February 2013

Mr Nick Bowen
Principal
Horizon Community College
Dodworth Road
Barnsley
South Yorkshire
S70 6PD

Dear Mr Bowen

No formal designation monitoring inspection of Horizon Community College.

Following my visit with Marianne Young, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your college on 30 and 31 January 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was a monitoring inspection carried out in accordance with Ofsted's 'no formal designation' procedures and conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was carried out because students' achievement was a cause for concern in the two schools that were amalgamated to form the new Horizon Community College.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the college's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Principal, senior and middle leaders, groups of students, the Chair and four members of the Governing Body, a representative of the local authority and three consultants appointed by the college to support the raising of students' achievement.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the college is making reasonable progress in raising standards for all students.

Context

Horizon Community College opened in a new building in September 2012. Formed from the amalgamation of two schools, the college provides education for 2,106 students aged 11 to 16. This is larger than most secondary schools nationally.

Almost a quarter of the students are supported by the pupil premium (additional government funding for children in local authority care, students known to be eligible for free school meals and students whose parents are serving in the armed forces).

The Principal and two vice-principals were appointed from outside of the two former schools. Since the college opened there has been a small amount of change in staffing. The governing body is largely made up of governors from the two former schools. The college has commissioned additional expertise from the local authority and other sources to support the raising of students' achievement in English, mathematics and science.

Achievement of pupils at the college

Due to significant improvements in teaching and the use of assessment since the college opened, there has been an increase in the proportion of students working at or above the levels expected for their age. Consequently, the college is able to set targets for five A* to C grades at GCSE, including English and mathematics, that are considerably higher than those in the former schools.

Lesson observations and school records show that the proportion of students making progress at or above the expected rate has improved since the college opened, especially in English, mathematics and science. The pace of improvement is most rapid for the less-able students and those who are disabled and who have special educational needs. They are closing the gap on national average standards of attainment because college leaders use assessment information more effectively to plan additional support that is much better matched to their needs.

Students supported by the government's pupil-premium funding are also quickly improving their progress. This is because the college uses the additional money effectively to engage their parents in supporting their learning and attendance, to provide learning enrichment programmes and to purchase additional support from student and family welfare staff.

The more-able students have improved their progress since the college opened but not at the same rapid pace as other groups. This is because teachers are not consistently planning work that stretches them. Students' progress in developing literacy and numeracy skills in all subjects is at an early stage and patchy.

The quality of teaching

During the college's first term, leaders have worked very hard to ensure that all teachers plan interesting lessons which provide the right level of challenge for all groups. This has brought about an improvement in the quality of teaching overall, but new methods are not securely embedded in every class. Where teaching is strongest, the pace of learning for all students is brisk because they learn through

interesting 'hands-on' tasks which involve independent problem solving, researching or practical work. These tasks are especially effective when linked to students' experience and interests, for example, when finding out how local businesses increase their profits.

Teachers have a detailed knowledge of the levels at which students are working and their future learning needs. In the stronger lessons, teachers use this information effectively to ensure that all groups, especially the more-able, receive work at the right level of challenge throughout the lesson. In too many lessons, however, the more-able students make insufficient progress because they spend a large part of their time doing the same work as all other students. In the more effective lessons, teachers continually check students' progress and instantly provide more support or challenge where this is required; however, this is not consistent across the college.

All students know their end of year targets. Some students say how much their progress is helped when they receive clear guidance about the next short steps they need to take towards these; however, this is not a routine part of every teacher's work. A college priority is to improve the quality of marking and feedback to students. There is clear evidence that this has had a positive impact on the work of many, but not all, teachers. Students particularly value the time they are given to use the feedback to improve their work. A small amount of marking shows low expectations for presentation and completion of work, which is reducing the impact of this work on students' progress.

The work planned for students is strongly influenced by the college's focus on community enterprise and this has a positive impact on their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. With support from local businesses, students have worked very successfully to design and make gifts that can be sold for fundraising activities. They are also supported by nearby rotary clubs in working with local charities to make a positive difference in their community. College publicity shows that a very large number of students are engaged in such activities.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

The amalgamation of the two schools has been managed effectively and the college presents a very cohesive community. This is evident in how well students get on with each other, especially in the large social areas of the college. The social mixing of the students, however, is adversely affected by the need to stagger the college day for all year groups to alleviate congestion on nearby main roads.

Students' behaviour and attitudes to work make a strong contribution to their improving progress. There is very little disruptive behaviour in lessons and this is only when weak teaching causes them to lose their focus on learning. In general, they work well independently and show good teamwork skills when working as part of a group. They enjoy life and work in the college; therefore there are no significant problems with attendance or punctuality.

Students feel safe in the college because it is a calm, orderly environment in which large numbers can move around without too much congestion. They say that they have no concerns about bullying in any form and, as a result of clear guidance, they understand how to avoid threats posed by misuse of the internet and mobile phones.

The quality of leadership in and management of the college

The new Principal, vice-principals and governing body effectively communicate high aspirations and clear aims for the new college. As a result of their well planned preparatory work before the college opened, and their continuing support and guidance, they have gone a long way towards bringing the two different staffs together as one team fully committed to new and more effective methods of teaching.

The governing body and senior leaders use performance-management processes very effectively to tackle inadequate teaching and to ensure that the new senior and middle leaders are those with the best skills for leading improvement in students' achievement. Heads of school and subject leaders are already showing that they can use information about students' progress to identify and challenge weak teaching. The college is developing a systematic approach to training teachers which, although not fully in place, is helping many to improve their practice. As a result of this effective performance management, there is considerably less inadequate teaching than there was with largely the same staff in the former schools. This demonstrates the growing capacity of senior and middle leaders to continue raising students' standards of attainment.

A key driver for the college's improvement is a much more effective system for recording and evaluating students' progress. After the first term of using this system college leaders can identify clearly and quickly which groups of students are achieving well and which are underachieving. They are now beginning to use this as a well-evidenced basis for challenging teaching which uses the methods promoted by the college, but not effectively enough to secure good progress for all groups, particularly the more-able. Senior and middle leaders are also using the increasingly detailed information about students' progress to pinpoint more precisely the priorities for their improvement plans and to check that their plans are leading to improved achievement.

The governing body have a very clear view of the aspects of teaching and leadership in the former schools that needed to be improved with the opening of the new college. This has enabled them to make a very strong contribution to planning the new college and the appointment its senior and middle leaders. They have a very detailed understanding of the quality of the college's work, helped immensely by the honest, evaluative information they receive from the Principal and vice-principals. With this they provide appropriate support and challenge to ensure that everything is being done to raise the achievement of all students. They have also helped college leaders to ensure that all safeguarding procedures meet requirements.

External support

The local authority has provided effective support to the governing body and senior leaders at all stages in the launch of the new college. They continue to work in strong partnership. The local authority has a clear understanding of students' outcomes and has made personnel available for the college to buy in for a substantial period of time to help raise standards of attainment, especially in the English department, which currently has an acting subject leader until the new, recently appointed, head of English starts later this year. The school has commissioned external support from a range of sources in addition to the local authority, including other schools. They have used this support well to add to their capacity to deal with the most urgent weaknesses as quickly as possible. Staff and middle leaders welcome this external input and are deriving considerable benefit from it.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Education, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Barnsley. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

John Rutherford
Her Majesty's Inspector