

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404040
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr Colin Burnett
Headteacher
Hollingworth Business & Enterprise College
Cornfield Street
Milnrow
Rochdale
Lancashire
OL16 3DR

Dear Mr Burnett

Ofsted survey inspection programme: Curriculum Innovation

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 13-14 June to look at your school's evolving curriculum and how it contributes to standards and achievement, teaching and learning and inclusion.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text. Feedback letters are published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made include interviews with staff, meetings with students, lesson observations and scrutiny of relevant documentation.

Your school presents a positive model for stepped yet radical innovation in curriculum management as a way of supporting the individual needs and ambitions of a diverse student community. The impact of innovation on teaching and learning, achievement and standards and inclusion has been good.

Achievement and standards

Rigorous analysis of performance in national tests is one aspect of the school's monitoring of curriculum impact on standards and achievement. Progress made between Year 7 and Year 11 betters national averages in many respects. Progress and standards in mathematics are particularly good. Although the overall standards attained by Year 9 in 2006's national tests were below the national average, progress across Years 7 to 9 was

significantly better than the national pattern. Recent curriculum changes are tailoring courses more closely to students' varying abilities, and in-school assessments indicate that results for the current Year 9 and for the current Year 8 will show a marked improvement. The percentage gaining five or more A*- C grades at GCSE or equivalent in recent years has been better than the national average. Expansion of vocational options in Years 10 and 11 has provided opportunities for worthwhile qualifications to those not well served by standard GCSE assessments. The impact of this is seen, for example, in the numbers gaining NVQ Level 2 accreditation in Construction and in Engineering who might otherwise have struggled to gain qualifications for progress to further education or training.

Teaching and learning

Schemes of work, assessment and target-setting as well as teaching methods are expected to support varying individual needs and are monitored by Programme Leaders and the senior leadership team. Lesson-planning, assessment and resources are developed collaboratively, based on a school-wide framework. The impact of this whole school policy and practice can, for example, be seen in the Year 8 'Support' group's teaching and learning: students are taught in small groups by a limited number of teachers who get to know them well. Even small achievements are recognised and celebrated, building up trust and self-esteem. The pupils themselves see this as a very positive development and appreciate working with others of similar ability and approach. "We can work at our own pace." "My levels have increased. I used to be in bottom sets in my previous school." Some of those with special needs have found the transition from one academic year to the next at the start of June uncomfortably abrupt, which has been recognised and will be taken account of in future. There has been a positive impact on personal development as well as academic progress, supported by a recently redesigned and cohesive Personal, Social, Health and Religious Education programme. "I've matured a bit more. I can trust myself to make decisions." "Now my mum trusts me. And I've learnt to cook!"

Behaviour observed around the school was good and very good in lessons.

Quality of curriculum

The decision to move the start of the new school year from September to June has meant that former Year 9 students make a substantial inroad into GCSE work as the new Year 10 before the long summer break, and former Year 7 pupils are given a convincing sense of progress and achievement as they become the new Year 8 (feeling that they have outstripped friends in other schools). The school uses a range of assessment criteria to group students in order to meet particular learning needs. Assessment and tracking of progress indicate that this approach is enhancing the achievement of students across the ability spectrum. Accelerated courses allow the most able students to complete the standard curriculum for Years 7-9 in two rather than

three years and to take some GCSE subjects early. Additional GCSEs or AS courses are then a realistic option in Year 11 for these students. This has been trialled successfully in History, Art and Information Technology. A recent curriculum development is reducing the number of GCSE subjects taken by most students so as to release more time for foundation subjects such as history and geography and for additional accreditation in English and mathematics. An additional period has been added to the school day, used for booster classes, accelerated courses and curriculum enrichment for Years 7 to 9 and for targeted support or additional GCSE work in Years 10 and 11. Curriculum leaders see it as a still-evolving resource: "Like a research tool incrementally developed...giving quality rather than just quantity, to raise attainment." The benefits to gifted and talented students, for example, are clear: opportunities to explore new subjects or to travel more quickly through familiar ones.

Leadership and management

The vision energetically communicated by the senior leadership team is well embedded throughout the school. Their commitment to the 'pathways' approach that places students into groups according to ability and approach to learning is shared by all staff. Its underlying aim is to change what was perceived as a content-driven, 'one size fits all' curriculum into one able to accommodate a considerable range of need and aspiration, with well serviced routes to post-sixteen education, training or employment. Adjustments to lesson and lunch times, to staffing structures, to behaviour management and to curriculum provision in recent years have had a quantifiable impact on achievement and standards and on personal development. Close collaboration with further education colleges and local industry has extended vocational options and also complemented provision for the most able. The school has grown and is heavily over-subscribed.

Inclusion

The stress on personalised learning, with students being supported as they discover their best learning strategies and pathways, enables the school to be inclusive. Students with very different abilities and some with a range of disabilities and difficulties have access to all opportunities and are helped to progress as well as their peers.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed; the school should:

- ensure that all students, including those with special needs, are securely prepared for transition from one school year to the next
- continue its development of assessment for learning and of marking that balances encouragement with clear guidance on how pupils can improve.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop the curriculum in the school.

Yours sincerely

Patricia Metham
Her Majesty's Inspector