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01 September 2008

Mrs Jean Alder  
The Principal  
Futures College  
Thorpe Bay  
Southend on Sea  
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Dear Mrs Alder

Fresh Start: Monitoring Inspection of Futures College

### Introduction

Following my visit with Brian Sharples HMI, Lynne Kauffman and Raymond Jardine Additional Inspectors to your college on 2 and 3 July, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the college opened in September 2007.

This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

### Evidence

Inspectors observed the college's work, visited 25 lessons, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, nominated staff, groups of students, a representative of the Prospects Learning Foundation the sponsoring trust, the chair of governors, and representatives of the local authority (LA).

### Context

This letter is part of the monitoring procedures required by the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) during the first two years of the existence of any establishment given a 'Fresh Start.'

Futures College opened on 1 September 2007 in the buildings of its predecessor school. The college became a Trust School in September 2008, supported by the Prospects Learning Foundation; the college employed the majority of the staff from the predecessor school and is led by the principal of the former establishment.

The learning trust has secured the necessary planning permissions and the financial support of the DCSF and a range of other bodies to build a new senior college and refurbish other buildings on the same site; construction can begin when the final details regarding land transfer are completed. The working relationship with Prospects College, a local work-based learning provider, will enable Futures College to potentially provide access to a wide range of vocational courses; the majority of this provision will take place on site when the new facilities are completed.

Although smaller than average the college roll continues to rise. The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups is above average and the figures for those who are learning English as an additional language are twice the national figure. The proportion of students, who have left or joined the college other than at the normal admission times, is high. Attendance is well below the average for secondary schools nationally.

The college serves an area which displays a significant range of social and economic disadvantage and the proportion of students eligible for free school meals is three times the national average. The proportion of girls and boys and the number of students in each year group varies annually. Attainment on entry is well below average. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is well above average although the percentage of students with a statement of special educational need is just below the national figure.

#### Achievement and standards

The college will publish its first set of national test results for Key Stage 3 and 4 in August 2008; the outcomes of these tests and examinations will be examined in full in the autumn term inspection monitoring visit.

The college is confident that it will continue the trend of improvement established by the predecessor school and meet its Key Stage 3 and GCSE targets. Evidence noted during lesson observations confirms that achievement continues to be directly related to the nature of the challenge provided by staff. Learning and outcomes are proportionate to the ability of the students where good teaching is taking place.

#### Personal development and well-being

The college has developed an effective system to support vulnerable students by introducing a close monitoring programme that focuses on intervention at four levels. The programme is recognised nationally as exemplar practice in supporting inclusion. Its success relies on the dedication of staff involved and networking facilitated by the vice principal; however, limited administration support puts additional pressure on this team.

The majority of pupils behave well at break, lunchtime and when moving around school. An increasing number of teachers are incorporating the schools code of conduct into their lessons to clarify expectations of behaviour and work ethic. Nevertheless, behaviour in lessons is inconsistent between teachers and departments, and is highly dependent upon the quality of teaching. Where students are fully engaged in lessons and teaching challenges their participation, they behave well.

Attendance has improved slowly because the college is developing their own strategies to compensate for the restricted LA Education Welfare support; however low attendance, compounded by parental difficulties in attending meetings continues to impact on student achievement. The complexity of need within the school's catchment is affected by cultural expectations and the students' prior learning experiences. A recent, useful LA review has made suggestions of how the school may begin to address these issues as they relate to attendance. Diverse strategies already in place include the 90% rule where participation in school teams or social events is only open to those with 90% plus attendance. Early intervention work with the school's primary partners and meetings held in local housing estates to encourage parent attendance are slowly having an impact on improvement and encouraging students to take greater responsibility for their attendance and punctuality. Students are monitored by year group and as individuals. Five principals who are responsible for each key stage follow up on the analysis that highlights the problems of specific students. Older students engaged in vocationally oriented off-site courses attend well. Strategies affecting exclusions have shown a dramatic reduction over the past three years; this is helped by the 'on call' system and monitoring use of the isolation bay.

Students are growing in confidence and taking greater personal responsibility for their college's improvement. The majority of students enjoy college, although they had some criticism of the quality of the outdoor environment. The college has recognised that students need to have more opportunity to develop contacts with the community. The college council, prefects, head boy and head girl show a passionate commitment in leading the student body to make their school a better place.

### Quality of provision

Teaching was found to be satisfactory overall with some good practice on which the college can build. Objectives and expected outcomes are shared with students, who respond well to imaginative teaching; relationships are good, students are managed effectively and they behave well. In the better lessons, skilled questioning helps students to build on their prior learning and explain their reasoning during class discussions. Information technology is also used effectively to illustrate and enliven class teaching. Learning support assistants are, in the main, used productively to support and guide those students who need additional help. The emphasis placed on speaking and listening and on collaborative work is a feature of the most effective lessons which leads to a good pace of learning. Where learning is slower, teachers

talk too much and require too little so that students lose concentration and their behaviour deteriorates. Sometimes, insufficient attention is paid to ensuring that tasks and activities are pitched appropriately for all students in the class. In this respect, the common template used to plan lessons is sometimes used to sequence the work with too little use made of assessment information and target levels to guide lesson planning.

All students are provided with targets for the end of each year, based on their prior attainments. Progress towards them is recorded and reviewed termly using a central database to help key managers identify those students who are underachieving; the database provides a potentially very powerful tool in this respect. Senior and middle managers are learning how to make best use of this resource; for example, to identify strengths and weaknesses across year groups and subjects. A relative weakness is that measures of progress entered into the system are too vague and the quality of assessments that underpin these termly reviews, particularly in Years 7 to 9, varies across subjects. The college is tightening its methods from September to record more specific information on students' standards and improve its knowledge of how well individuals or groups are achieving. This is essential to enable the college to use such information strategically to guide students in their pathways to qualifications and further training.

Marking varies in quality, particularly in the guidance students receive to help them take their next steps in learning. There is some very good practice developing; for example, in history and English. Students' knowledge and use of their targets is also variable and better developed in Years 10 and 11. Here, feedback from teachers and the use of assessment criteria is more often linked to how students can achieve their targets. The college acknowledges that further work is needed to link marking and feedback with students' targets to help individuals understand how to improve; planning is underway to achieve quality and consistency in the use of assessment.

Much is being done to provide a curriculum that meets students' needs and aspirations. In Year 7, specialist expertise is deployed in some subjects such as science, music and arts, while a more integrated and topic based programme is taught by class tutors for almost half the week. The planning is designed to help students to acquire the skills to learn independently and to develop their literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) skills. The more prominent role that form tutors take helps to smooth the transition from primary education and to build students' confidence. In an effort to provide a more individualised curriculum the college is planning to cover the Key Stage 3 curriculum in two years with some students in order to offer a wider range of accreditation pathways at age 16 and beyond. In partnership with a number of local colleges, plans are in place to develop provision much further, through the introduction of a range of diplomas by 2012 in areas such as ICT, construction, hospitality and sports and leisure.

All students have a core academic curriculum which is extended through three more vocationally orientated options; for example, through BTec and applied GCSE courses. There are some students, including those at risk of disaffection, for whom an alternative pathway provides access to work-based learning in many areas such as basic carpentry, construction and customer services. In this first year of operation all Year 11 students from the college are going on to further education, employment or training. This is a significant achievement.

### Leadership and management

The college is led effectively by the principal who shows a clear drive and determination to see the college succeed. She provides clear direction and has developed a good ethos for the college. The working relationship with Prospects Learning Foundation is good, which contributes towards the strong capacity to improve and manage change.

Governance has grown effectively from the arrangements that helped the predecessor school out of special measures. A public consultation is underway that will enable the learning foundation to appoint the majority of the trust's governors. The college governing body has developed an appropriate committee structure that enables the principal to deploy senior managers to inform key discussions.

The college meets current requirements for safeguarding its students and has given assurances that its partner colleges have also undertaken such checks to the same standard.

A sound senior management team has been established. The principal is keen to develop the role and competencies of senior and middle managers in order to strengthen the leadership capacities at all levels. Senior staff have a realistic view of the strengths and weaknesses to be found across provision; the college is very aware of the need to improve standards and of the political imperative to exceed GCSE floor targets. The monitoring and evaluation of teaching is secure, members of the senior and middle management teams were invited to accompany HMI in the joint observation of teaching. The detailed analysis of learning developed with inspectors, highlighted areas where the college's appraisal of the quality of teaching and learning can be further refined.

### External support

Having been granted trust status by the DCSF the college accepted responsibility for negotiating the support it deemed appropriate from other institutions and outside agencies. The effective support provided from Edison and Prospects Learning Foundation has helped the college move forward and good decisions have been taken on the external support required in the next academic year. There has been good working relationships between the staff and the LA consultants, whose support is greatly valued. However, the college expressed concern that the LA has been

unable to provide sufficient educational welfare officer support to address the attendance issues of the most vulnerable students in the college.

### Main Judgements

The college's overall progress has been satisfactory, with good progress on the development of the curriculum and the strategic direction of the college.

### Priorities for further improvement

- Improve the quality and consistency of teaching, particularly to ensure that all students are sufficiently challenged and make good progress.
- Use assessment data more effectively to help students understand how to review and improve their progress.
- Develop senior and middle managers strategic use of systems for reviewing students' progress to guide their work.
- Continue to challenge some parents' and students' attitudes to education in order to improve overall rates of attendance.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, /and the Prospects Learning Foundation /and the Corporate Director Children and Learning, Southend on Sea.

Yours sincerely

David Jones  
Her Majesty's Inspector