

Cambridge Education  
Demeter House  
Station Road  
Cambridge  
CB1 2RS

T 08456 40 40 40  
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk  
[www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

Direct T 01223 578500  
Direct F 01223 578501  
risp.inspections@camb-ed.com



17 December 2008

The Principal  
Futures College  
Thorpe Bay  
Southend on Sea  
SS2 4UY

Dear Dr Alder,

Fresh Start: monitoring inspection of Futures College

### Introduction

Following my visit with Heather Weston HMI and Christine Dick HMI to your college on 9-10 December, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Colleges (HMCI) to confirm the inspection findings.

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

This letter will be published on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

### Evidence

Inspectors observed the college's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, nominated staff, students, the chair of governors, and a representative of the local authority (LA).

### Context

Building work has commenced on the new premises adjacent to the current buildings. The college became part of the National Challenge in September supported by Prospects Learning Foundation (PLF), the sponsoring trust. Nine new staff were appointed in September 2009, including the head of girls physical education and the head of science. A new head of mathematics has been promoted internally.

## Achievement and standards

The ability profile of the 2008 Year 11 cohort was well below average when they entered the predecessor school and further disrupted prior to the transition to Futures College. In 2008 the proportion of students obtaining the new national bench mark of five higher grade GCSE's including English and mathematics, at 24%, was below the governments floor target. Similarly the proportion obtaining 5 A\* - G grades, at 81%, was significantly below the national figure. The underachievement of middle ability boys was most notable. As a result, the LA drew up plans to involve the college in the National Challenge.

Although students are now making satisfactory progress in three-quarters of their lessons, insufficient high quality learning opportunities are available to enable the college to redress previous weaknesses in the students' education; for example, the students limited use of subject specific vocabulary. In those lessons where the teaching was focused on learning outcomes students made appropriate and often good progress. However, achievement was limited in one in four lessons because the planning was focussed on what the staff and the class would do rather than on what students would learn. However, the outcomes of current modular courses provide an indication of where improved outcomes are evident; for example, all 22 students entered for Business studies recently secured a higher level GCSE pass at external moderation; similarly, significant numbers of students have secured GCSE grades for information and communication technology, and for mathematics.

## Personal development and well-being

Attendance has improved noticeably to just over 90%; however, this remains well below the average for secondary colleges. The rate of persistent absence remains high, although the college has taken effective action to reduce the attendance issues posed by Polish and Czech speaking students by recruiting a bilingual support assistant who has established a positive relationship with the parents.

Where supervision is effective, the students' behaviour in corridors and public areas is appropriate and informal social groups are in evidence; however, some excitable behaviour does go unchecked. Punctuality to lessons varies and latecomers are not always challenged by staff. Older students believe behaviour to have improved since the start of the summer term. The students' attitudes to learning vary noticeably with the level of challenge and engagement expected. Those interviewed commented that they make better progress where they are confident to ask questions and contribute to the lesson. The use of internal inclusion has helped to maintain the decline in the rate of exclusion; however, the rate of exclusion remains above average.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in July 2008:

- Continue to challenge some parents' and students' attitudes to education in order to improve overall rates of attendance - satisfactory progress.

### Quality of provision

The majority of the lessons observed were satisfactory. One in five lessons was good or outstanding; however, the same proportion was found to be inadequate and some lessons judged to be satisfactory contained a number of missed opportunities. Variations in the quality of learning are hindering student progress.

In lessons which are good or better and in some of the satisfactory lessons, relationships and behaviour are good and students show a positive attitude to learning. These lessons are conducted at an appropriate pace, activities are interesting, questioning is good and as a result, students work hard and make good progress. Teachers show good subject knowledge; their lessons are well planned with work at the appropriate level to meet students' needs.

Most students understand the level they are working at but too many are vague on this matter and how they might improve. In some lessons students are given good opportunities to evaluate the work of their peers against detailed level or grade criteria. This enables them to suggest ways to improve the work of their peers, and make further progress themselves. These collaborative opportunities are appreciated by students and extend both their subject knowledge and ability to use subject language appropriately.

Where there are weaknesses in teaching, planning is unimaginative, activities are dull, and too many are designed to occupy students rather than engage their attention. The emphasis is on what is being taught rather than on what students are learning. Learning objectives all too often lack clarity and rarely specify what students are expected to achieve. Too little attention is paid to meeting the needs of students of different abilities and in a number of lessons students carry out tasks with insufficient challenge. Sometimes, students do not have the skills required to carry out the task or are not supplied with resources to develop the required skills. Questioning strategies do not give students opportunities to discuss their responses and develop their thinking. As a consequence, when students are not involved the pace of learning varies and behaviour declines. In a few lessons, behaviour is unacceptable with students deliberately disrupting learning.

The quality of marking is too variable. Although most work is marked, students do not receive feedback with sufficient regularity as to the level they reached and how to improve. Although the quality and use of assessment data by senior leaders has improved and the range of data available is significant, the tracking of the students' progress is not simple and accessible to ensure that staff can improve learning and

raise standards. However action is being taken to improve the effectiveness of various systems utilised, this is at an early stage of development. Although teacher assessments have been used to inform planning, teachers' moderation of levels remains inconsistent.

The range of curriculum opportunities available through the college and its partners is good but a greater proportion of the vocational provision needs to be delivered on site. This is part of the plan for the future; however, it is important that level 1 and level 2 courses in vocational studies and, for example adult literacy, numeracy and IT skills are made widely available as soon as possible in order to raise standards and enhance motivation. The quality of the morning tutor period varies too much to foster positive attitudes to learning. The college is currently evaluating the Year 7 integrated curriculum and planning to extend this approach into Year 8. In collaboration with other partners, a bid has been submitted to extend the range of diplomas offered at Key Stage 4.

The college is committed to the principle that all students should be able to make the best progress they can and ensure equality of opportunity. Targeted interventions are carried out to support students identified as underachieving and some learning support staff make a notable contribution. Those students with barriers to their learning, whether emotional or social benefit from the range of effective support from the college's student and family support services. This has resulted in both a reduced level of exclusion and the improvements in behaviour noted by senior students. Safeguarding arrangements continue to meet requirements.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in July 2008:

- Improve the quality and consistency of teaching, particularly to ensure that all students are sufficiently challenged and make good progress - inadequate progress
- Use assessment data more effectively to help students understand how to review and improve their progress. – satisfactory progress

### Leadership and management

The principal has a very clear understanding of the areas that require development and the strengths she can deploy to address her concerns. Progress has been made with attendance and the range of curriculum opportunities available has been enhanced.

It is important that governors, trust partners and the LA remember that this is an establishment facing challenging circumstances and as such there is a key

requirement that all initiatives focus on the quality of teaching learning and the impact required on standards and achievement.

The senior leadership team need to consider what adjustments can be made to the teaching of English and mathematics in the spring term that will have maximum impact on the 2009 GCSE and vocational outcomes. Senior and middle managers have a great deal to do to build capacity in terms of; teaching skills and vocational curriculum enhancement if the level of underachievement evident in the 2008 data is to be successfully addressed.

The college has developed a wealth of assessment data, and some senior staff are able to make appropriate use of this material to inform strategic decisions; however, this critical information must become more accessible and simple to use if subject leaders and class teachers are to be held to account for pupil progress.

The college was invited to provide a senior management team nominee to join the inspection team and the principal took this role herself. Senior and middle managers were involved in the joint observations of lessons with inspectors. A formal evaluation of this exercise revealed that although all participants identified the major strengths and areas for development in each lesson, grading offered on a number of occasions was more positive than the judgement given by HMI. The lead inspector invited the principal to review her role shadowing the inspection team. She provided a thought provoking analysis of teaching and learning illustrating where she had perceived strengths and areas requiring development, summarising that the college's key focus must be on the quality of learning provided. HMI concur with this analysis.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in July 2008:

- Develop senior and middle managers strategic use of systems for reviewing students' progress to guide their work – satisfactory progress

#### External support

The range of LA support available has helped the college to appropriately address a range of the training and development needs. However, senior staff note that it is difficult to secure educational welfare officer support where individual attendance issues occur with students in Year 11. The local authority believes it has recently made some improvements to the support available.

The national challenge arrangements finalised in October will provide central government funding and a programme of additional support from the retiring LA head of school improvement when she takes up her new role as National Challenge Adviser.

## Main Judgements

The college's overall progress is satisfactory

## Priorities for further improvement

- Review the Year 11 timetable arrangements for English and mathematics to enhance provision and raise standards.
- Ensure that all lessons focus on the quality of learning.

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

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Jones".

Her Majesty's Inspector