



Francis Combe School And Community College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number 117522
 Local Authority Hertfordshire
 Inspection number 290860
 Inspection dates 7-8 February
 Reporting inspector Robert Drew

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

Type of school	Comprehensive	School address	Horseshoe Lane
School category	Community		Garston
Age range of pupils	11-18		Watford
			WD25 7HW
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	01923 672964
Number on roll (school)	989	Fax number	01923 665888
Number on roll (6th form)	112		
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair	Mr John Wickes
		Headteacher	Miss Nicky Williams
Date of previous school inspection	11-15 March 2002		

Age group 11-18	Inspection dates 7-8 February 2007	Inspection no. 290860
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by four Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Francis Combe is an average-sized comprehensive school serving parts of Watford. The majority of students are White British, about 5 per cent are of Pakistani origin and small numbers come from several other ethnic minority groups. Students range in ability, but on average, attainment on entry is well below national levels. Far more students than average have learning difficulties and disabilities and are entitled to free school meals. A very small number are in the care of the local authority. The proportion using English as an additional language is broadly average. The school links with local secondary schools and a college for some of its sixth form and Key Stage 4 courses. A new headteacher was appointed less than a year ago.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

This school is in a phase of rapid improvement, and its overall effectiveness is satisfactory. The new headteacher has initiated radical change which staff strongly support and implement well. Standards are rising, teaching and learning are greatly improved and the curriculum offers a much better match with students' needs and interests. Consequently the great majority show positive attitudes to school and a productive ethos for learning prevails.

Teaching and learning are satisfactory, with some areas of real strength. Intensive training and support from local authority (LA) officers and staffing changes, have meant that unsatisfactory teaching has mainly been eliminated. The essentials of secure teaching, clear purpose, good student management and positive relationships are now well established. Most lessons pitch the challenge to students at the right level, involve them actively and ensure that expectations about behaviour are met, which is raising standards across the school. The good progress typical of Key Stage 3 students is being enhanced, so that Key Stage 4 and sixth-form students generally achieve satisfactory. Although standards are significantly below national values they are improving and the gap is narrowing. Students are increasingly keen to learn and show a growing awareness of the standards to aim for and how to reach them. Students do not gain enough of the top grades available when they take public examinations or tests.

Curricular provision is satisfactory and better suited to students' needs. In Years 10 and 12, new vocational courses and other programmes for specific groups have been introduced. Care, guidance and support are also satisfactory overall with those now entering Key Stage 4 or the sixth form receiving very effective help. A crucial change this year has been the rapid introduction and immediate impact of tracking systems to monitor academic performance closely, which makes prediction reliable and guides staff and students with precision towards areas needing improvement.

Personal development is satisfactory. It benefits from improved care, a better curriculum and better teaching. Students show increasingly positive attitudes and much behaviour is very good. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development are satisfactory. Most students are becoming much more mature and socially aware. They respond well to issues of maintaining personal safety, healthy lifestyles and contributing to the wider community. However, behaviour and attitudes are only judged satisfactory overall because attendance is too low and exclusions too high.

Leadership and management direct the school well. An outstanding lead is provided by the headteacher, enhanced by good and improving support from others. Governors have recently established good arrangements for monitoring

the school's work and giving secure advice and support. Their impact is satisfactory. The headteacher has galvanised colleagues into urgent, productive action. She has shown remarkably clear vision, accurate diagnosis of needs, a willingness to make hard decisions and the skill to gain strong support from colleagues. The school is very accurate in its self-evaluation and demonstrates an equally good capacity for further improvement. With students making satisfactory progress, value for money is satisfactory.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form Grade: 3

Provision in the sixth form is satisfactory. In the 2005 and 2006 examination, results were very low and students did not achieve as well as they should. However GCE AS results were better and satisfactory. Interim tests and assessments show that achievement and standards are now satisfactory in Year 13 and stronger still in Year 12. This is largely because teaching and learning have improved substantially and post-16 leadership procedures have been improved. The recent refinement of assessment procedures gives teachers a clearer understanding of students' progress which is satisfactory. The head of sixth form has a newly defined role, with clear accountability and vision and very effective support from the headteacher and colleagues. His strong commitment to raising achievement for all is appreciated by students and has created a good working ethos. There is good capacity to improve further.

Before this year, too many students began courses with unacceptably low entry levels and teaching was not sufficiently adapted to their needs. Radical changes to the curriculum and teaching quality have been made so that both are now satisfactory. Guidance and support is satisfactory for the sixth form as a whole but very good for current Year 12 students, with many opting for Level 2 courses working towards vocational qualifications, a provision that makes good use of new links with outside institutions. As a result, retention rates are satisfactory.

Sixth formers play an important part in the life of the school and are very good role models. For example, around half act as mentors to younger students, particularly new arrivals. Some organise the school's Fancy Dress Day, raising money for charities, and the Culture Day, designed to promote tolerance. Others are responsible for producing a Christmas pantomime. The recently formed sixth-form school council is already very active and makes a strong contribution to the school as a whole.

What the school should do to improve further

- Significantly raise attendance levels and reduce exclusion rates so that a greater proportion of students have strong continuity in their learning.
- Raise standards for Key Stage 4 and sixth form students, and ensure that more students gain the top grades available in tests and examinations.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Achievement is satisfactory. Current standards in Year 11, while below national averages, are higher than in recent years and this is further improved by the work seen of current Year 10 students. Consequently, students are making sufficient progress from their low starting point in Year 7. In Key Stage 3, students make good progress so that standards at the end of Year 9 are below average but higher than could be expected given the low starting point. Previously, progress was not always sustained in Key Stage 4 but there is a new, very effective, tracking system in place and consistently effective teaching so that progress is secure and standards are rising. These changes are strongly underpinned and sustainable because teaching quality has been remarkably improved, and monitoring of academic progress is now a strength. Staff take early action on underperformance and students understand their own strengths and weaknesses well. Attitudes to learning have become substantially more positive. Despite general improvements, the school is aware that too few students gain the highest possible standards. Targets are challenging and the school strives to meet them.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 3

Personal development and well-being are satisfactory. Inspectors observed mainly good and safe behaviour. Students understand the consequences of their actions because of the recent renewed emphasis on the behaviour policy, but fixed-term exclusions remain too high. There are very few racist incidents but some bullying is reported mainly via the Internet and mobile phones. Sixth formers take responsibility for organising many fundraising activities and events, but there are fewer opportunities for younger students to show such initiative. Nearly three quarters of students say they are usually happy at school. They are enjoying the more healthy lunches but complain that prices are high. Students get plenty of exercise because there is a good allocation of time for physical education and sports. The school and year councils are in their infancy and have not yet had sufficient time to influence policy and decisions. Similarly, it is only in recent months that students have had the chance to develop their workplace skills. Spiritual, social, moral and cultural development

is satisfactory, though the spiritual dimension is less well developed. Attendance is improving following recent strengthening of procedures, but remains below the national average.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Teaching and learning are satisfactory with some good features. Teaching has improved significantly this year: remaining areas of weakness are being addressed strategically by departments. High-quality specialists now fill virtually all posts and recent coaching has helped ensure lessons always have good structure and pace. In the majority of lessons, progress is good and any low level disruption is systematically challenged. Where they were present, learning support assistants were effective and enhanced the progress of lower attainers.

Underpinning all lessons are warm working relationships between students and teachers: in lessons deemed good or outstanding, students thoroughly enjoyed their work. Students say that teachers respect them and are respected in turn. There is still inconsistency in the level of challenge across the key stages and the emphasis placed on speaking and listening. The approach to marking and the guidance to individuals on how to improve are both good in many instances, but not yet consistent between individuals and across departments.

The provision for teaching and learning in the sixth form is satisfactory overall.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

The school provides a satisfactory curriculum which meets national requirements. At the beginning of the current year, it was significantly enhanced by the addition of a wide range of vocational options for Year 10 students who can now choose combinations of academic and work-related courses. When these students pass into Year 11 the school will have a Key Stage 4 curriculum which serves learners admirably. However these changes have not yet impacted upon the provision across the whole key stage. Carefully planned co-operation with local institutions has been instrumental in maximising choice. Students are well prepared for future employment by a comprehensive programme of work-related visits and work experience. The school has responded to the call for more physical activity by ensuring that all students have a minimum of two hours physical education per week. The curriculum is enriched and augmented by a good programme of after-school activities which include drama, music and a wide range of sports.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

Care, guidance and support are satisfactory. There have been significant improvements in many procedures in recent months, but there is a legacy of poor guidance for students in Year 11 and Year 13 that the school is working hard to address. Procedures for child protection and safeguarding students are very robust and meet current government requirements. Attention to health and safety matters and students' welfare is good. Looked-after children are well cared for. Arrangements to support those who are vulnerable or at risk of being excluded are satisfactory. Identification and support of students with dyslexia are good. Support for those with learning difficulties, and gifted and talented students, is improving but in its infancy. There is improving help for the growing numbers who enter school with little or no English. Increasingly good links with parents and local colleges are being forged. Guidance for students entering the sixth form is much improved, enabling them to choose courses at appropriate levels. The school has recently achieved the Careers Quality Award in recognition of the high standard of its new careers guidance. Assessment information is now used very well to track the academic progress of students and to provide them with appropriate challenge or support.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Since her arrival, the headteacher's leadership has been exceptional and she has made a rapid and marked overall impact. She has made an accurate evaluation of the school and established positive relationships. Staff morale is high and the sense of direction and capacity for further improvement are both good. She has successfully fostered a shared purpose and commitment at all levels. Senior leaders provide her with good support. The effectiveness of middle managers overall is also good and they monitor their subjects and year groups well. The headteacher has initiated numerous changes which staff have helped her implement, leading to remarkable improvements in teaching quality, the curriculum, tracking systems and behaviour. Good monitoring and support ensures that needs are accurately identified and suitable strategies swiftly put in place. Collectively, these factors have already led to improved standards and better rates of progress. Leadership and management have demonstrated a very good capacity to improve further: remaining weaknesses are being challenged and amendments have been made to the special needs provision to ensure that inclusion of all learners becomes central to the vision of the school.

The governing body has recently been reorganised and is now working satisfactorily. It is efficient and has a clear understanding of the issues facing the school. It makes a satisfactory impact on school life. The school has also re-established a very effective working relationship with the LA.

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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
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	3	3
The quality and standards in the Foundation Stage		
The effectiveness and efficiency of boarding provision		
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes

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 disabilities make progress	3	

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	3	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	3	
The behaviour of learners	3	
The attendance of learners	3	
How well learners enjoy their education	3	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	3	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3	

¹ Grade 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.

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?	3	3
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	3	3

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2	
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets	2	
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	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	3	
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	



12/02/07

Dear Students,

Francis Combe School and Community College, Horseshoe Lane, Garston, Watford WD25 7HW

Thank you for the welcome we received during our visit just before half term. Special thanks go to those who gave up part of lunch time to speak with us.

We enjoyed our visit because so many things are improving at the school:

- Standards had been too low but are rising; all year groups are now making sufficient progress.
- In Key Stage 3, you are making good progress.
- Teaching and learning have improved a lot this year; their quality is satisfactory overall: there are more good lessons than before and some excellent ones.
- The new headteacher has made an outstanding impact on the life of the school.
- Behaviour is satisfactory and in many lessons it is very good.
- There is a much better range of courses available to you in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form.

If the school is to carry on improving it needs to:

- Make sure attendance is higher and the number of exclusions is lower. Too many students have their learning interrupted by being out of school when they need to be in lessons.
- Work at raising GCSE and sixth-form standards even further so they match national ones and especially encourage able students to reach the very highest grades.

Yours sincerely,

Robert Drew
Lead inspector