

Fearnhill School

Inspection report

Unique reference number	117504
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	386178
Inspection dates	6–7 March 2012
Lead inspector	Davinder Dosanjh HMI

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 which gives Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills (HMCI) the authority to cause any school to be inspected. The inspection was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	867
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	131
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Paul Vaughan
Headteacher	Jeremy Whelan
Date of previous school inspection	2 February 2011
School address	Icknield Way West Letchworth SG6 4BA
Telephone number	01462 621200
Fax number	01462 621201
Email address	head@fearnhill.herts.sch.uk

Age group	11–18
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Introduction

Inspection team

Davinder Dosanjh

Her Majesty's Inspector

Cheryl Jackson

Additional inspector

Michael Stanton

Additional inspector

Hugh Betterton

Additional inspector

This inspection was carried out with two days' notice. Inspectors took account of the responses to the on-line questionnaire (Parent View) in planning the inspection. They observed 36 lessons taught by 35 teachers. Most were joint observations with members of the senior team. Inspectors made short visits to other lessons. Inspectors met with senior leaders, groups of students, staff, members of the governing body, and a representative of the local authority. They observed the school's work, and scrutinised students' work and records of students' attendance, behaviour, exclusions, results of parental and carers questionnaires conducted by the school and monitoring information on the quality of teaching.

Information about the school

Fearnhill is a specialist mathematics and computing college secondary school of average size. It has a small sixth form that shares some teaching within a consortium with two other schools in the area. Nearly three quarters of students are of White British heritage and the remainder are mostly of Indian heritage. The percentage of students who speak English as an additional language is below the national average. The percentage of students known to be eligible for free school meals is above the national average and increasing each year. The proportion of disabled students and those with special educational needs is above the national average. The most common needs relate to emotional, learning and behavioural difficulties. The school meets the current floor standards.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness	3
Achievement of pupils	3
Quality of teaching	3
Behaviour and safety of pupils	3
Leadership and management	3

Key findings

- In accordance with section 13 (4) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector is of the opinion that the school no longer requires special measures. Fearnhill School is a satisfactory school that has shown significant improvement over the last year. The school provides a supportive and inclusive environment for its students. The sixth form is good. Students take great pride in their sixth form because it has raised their aspirations, developed their confidence and enabled them to become independent learners. The school is not good overall because teaching has not led to achievement which ensures that all students make good progress. Attainment is not above national averages.
- Students’ achievement has improved and is now satisfactory, with attainment broadly average. Mathematics has shown significant improvement while, in English, progress has been slower due to substantial staffing problems which have now begun to be eased. In the sixth form, students make good progress on their A and AS level courses, where standards have improved substantially.
- Teaching has improved in the last year due a concerted programme of coaching and staff training. Inadequate teaching has been challenged by senior leaders and eradicated. Though teaching is satisfactory overall, it is good in the sixth form, and an increasing proportion throughout the school is now good, with some that is outstanding. Lessons do not always cater well enough for disabled students and those with special educational needs. Learning support is satisfactory, but not always well deployed.
- Students’ behaviour is satisfactory. Most students behave well in lessons and feel safe in the school. The school is an orderly place. Attendance is average.
- Strong and effective leadership from the headteacher and leadership team has ensured a rapid rate of improvement. Decisive and effective actions have significantly improved the achievement, teaching, and the sixth form. The

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specialism has created many opportunities for students, including the opportunity to visit Cambridge University to look at mathematics in higher education.

- Schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory may receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise achievement further, particularly in English and mathematics by:
 - ensuring that literacy and numeracy is promoted well by teachers of all subjects
 - reviewing and evaluating the reading programme to ensure it is improving skills
 - supporting and developing new staff to the English department to ensure a consistent approach to teaching and assessment.
- Increase the proportion of teaching that is good or better to 75% by February 2013 by:
 - making more effective use of learning support assistants by planning specific activities that they can tackle with individuals or small groups
 - ensuring lessons include questioning that is challenging and requires students to think about their learning
 - ensuring teaching meets the different needs of all groups of students.

Main report

Achievement of pupils

Attainment shows an improving trend. The proportion of students gaining five or more GCSEs at grade C including English and mathematics is now in line with the national average and is improving strongly. Students have made slower than expected progress in English. However, evidence in lessons and books indicate they are now making progress in line with expectations. In English lessons, examples were seen of teachers plugging gaps in students' previous learning successfully. A strong programme to support students at risk of underachievement is raising attainment in core subjects and students are catching up in English. Students make good progress in modern foreign languages, science and humanities. Students from an Indian heritage and those learning English as an additional language make good progress. Girls outperform boys. The achievement of disabled students and those with special educational needs is satisfactory, reflecting the additional intervention they receive from subject areas outside lessons. However, there are some lessons where the work is not adapted to meet students' learning needs; students are supported to complete the tasks set for them, but gaps in their learning and understanding are not always addressed. Strategies aimed at improving the reading

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of all students with low reading have shown limited success.

In the sixth form, students achieve well and examination results show a three-year improving trend with an increase in the proportion of students gaining higher grades. Students make good progress because of a well-focussed curriculum which is heavily academic and detailed tracking and monitoring of student progress.

Where learning and progress is good in lessons, students were enthusiastic and curious to find out more. Students could understand clearly how well they were learning and were guided in how to improve their work and reach higher grades. Paired and group working is a regular feature in these lessons, improving students' capacity to learn more independently. For example, in an outstanding history lesson, Year 12 students became engrossed in a role-play activity based on the Council of Trent and the revitalised Catholic Church. They presented arguments and interpretation of evidence by being interviewed for a television programme. Students explained their ideas confidently and used well-researched historical ideas. Learning was satisfactory when students were given passive roles and they simply completed tasks without seeking to understand the bigger picture or showing little self-motivation.

Students' development of literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum varies. There are examples of effective strategies using key words, but these are not applied consistently. Not all teachers identify common spelling, punctuation or grammatical errors in students' work regularly and support them to rectify any misconceptions. Most parents and carers are positive about the progress their children make at the school.

Quality of teaching

Sixth-form lessons are carefully planned and encourage independent learning in and outside the classroom. High-quality written feedback at A and AS level has supported students' learning and progress. Throughout the school, the most effective lessons are characterised by precise, confident and engaging teaching that ensures all students are challenged to maximise their capabilities. Marking and feedback ensures students understand how to improve. The opportunities students have to use assessment criteria to evaluate their own work and identify improvements are gradually increasing. This is particularly so in humanities, physical education, drama and art. Lessons are made interesting and relevant so that they involve learners immediately. In a Year 8 music lesson, for example, the teacher created an excitement about classical music by using a wide variety of resources to engage students, from piano to YouTube. Students engaged enthusiastically in discussions about the composer and instruments and listened while peers played the piano. Excellent use was made of peer- and self-assessment to evaluate performance. A good mathematics lesson created a fascination in learning of how mathematics is applied in real life. Students used information and communication technology well to examine 'crash tests' and draw various graphs about cars crashing, reflecting on the impact on people.

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Teachers' subject knowledge, engaging students in lessons and providing opportunities for students to learn from each other were all strong contributors to the students' progress in lessons. In many lessons, key words designed to promote students' use and understanding of literacy were used well. Not all teachers' questioning expects the more- and most-able students to learn more quickly or develop more thoughtful responses. On occasion, lessons lack sufficient pace and challenge and activities are not pitched appropriately at the needs and interests of all learners. Parents, carers and students recognise that substantial improvements have been made to teaching.

Teaching makes a satisfactory contribution to students' spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development. Students debate moral issues in religious studies and history, take on leadership roles in physical education, and learn to work in teams in a growing number of subjects. The most effective lessons, especially in humanities, help students' spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development. Here, discussion and activity lead to an appreciation of social issues and personal responsibility.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

In those lessons that are good or better, students are well behaved because the lesson are engaging and they are willing participants in effective group work and peer-assessment. Behaviour is less than good when teachers are not consistent in using agreed behaviour management strategies. Behaviour around the school is satisfactory and students respond to teachers' interventions. Students do not all demonstrate self-discipline. The school has comprehensive systems that, regularly and systematically, analyse school trends in behaviour at an individual level. Effective action is taken as a result, leading to an improving trend in behaviour. Students, parents and carers confirmed that behaviour has improved greatly.

Students know how to keep themselves safe in a developing technological world. In lessons, students manage risks well in practical activities. They understand the health risks associated with smoking, alcohol and drugs. Students are confident that the small numbers of bullying incidents are dealt with appropriately by their teachers. Students have a good understanding of different types of bullying, such as cyber-bullying, prejudice-based bullying and homophobic bullying, and are supportive in trying to prevent it from occurring.

Following an improving trend in attendance rates for all groups of students, attendance is now average. The rate at which students are persistently absent continues to fall and continues to be a high priority for the school. Punctuality, although improving, remains a focus for the school. There is still a significant minority of students who are slow to arrive at lessons.

Leadership and management

The headteacher and senior leaders are driving forward improvements through raised expectations and increasingly challenging targets. Staff morale is good and

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there is a shared sense of purpose, with staff being held more accountable for student outcomes. There are rigorous systems to monitor and evaluate the progress the school is making, such as the data systems to track students' progress. Accurate assessments mean that the school can now identify more precisely the individuals and groups where further support is needed, leading to better achievement. Regular lesson observations, targeted coaching and professional development have led to a higher proportion of good teaching.

Self-evaluation is accurate. Middle leaders are more consistent in the way they monitor and evaluate their subject areas and faculty reviews are reflective and robust. There is good practice across the school, particularly in humanities. Good leadership in the sixth form has contributed to the significant improvement in achievement through comprehensive monitoring of student progress and the focus on the development of independent study skills. There are very effective arrangements to ensure students are on the right courses.

Some significant challenges remain. After a period of staffing turbulence, the school is addressing weaknesses in English and in the provision for disabled students and those with special educational needs. However, the impact so far is limited.

The governing body's 'inadequate 2 outstanding' working party is driving forward improvements. The governing body monitors the work of the school closely. The school gathers the views of parents and carers regularly and the majority feel things have improved since last year. The school has well-established safeguarding procedures that meet statutory requirements.

The curriculum has been developed to ensure that it provides a closer fit with the needs and interests of students. A small number of vocational courses have been introduced. All students take humanities courses at GCSE. This initiative has been very successful. The specialist mathematics and computing college status is beginning to have an impact on raising whole-school attainment, particularly in mathematics. A variety of information and communication technology courses have been introduced to suit the different needs of students. The curriculum provides satisfactory support for students' spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development. Extra-curricular activities include a range of educational and cultural visits. There are strong links with the Holocaust Educational Trust and the school has produced a powerful video to record their work and the impact it has had on students' understanding. However, not enough attention is paid to preparing students for their role in Britain's more diverse cultural society. The school tackles discrimination satisfactorily and strives to provide equal opportunities for all. Gaps between groups of students are narrowing and the school monitors carefully the impact of its provision on different groups.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	46	46	8	0
Primary schools	8	47	40	5
Secondary schools	14	38	40	8
Special schools	28	48	20	4
Pupil referral units	15	50	29	5
All schools	11	46	38	6

New school inspection arrangements have been introduced from 1 January 2012. This means that inspectors make judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2010 to 31 August 2011 and represent judgements that were made under the school inspection arrangements that were introduced on 1 September 2009. These data are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2010/11 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Primary schools include primary academy converters. Secondary schools include secondary academy converters, sponsor-led academies and city technology colleges. Special schools include special academy converters and non-maintained special schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning and development taking account of their attainment.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Attendance	the regular attendance of pupils at school and in lessons, taking into account the school's efforts to encourage good attendance.
Behaviour	how well pupils behave in lessons, with emphasis on their attitude to learning. Pupils' punctuality to lessons and their conduct around the school.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving based on its self-evaluation and what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the governors and headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.
Safety	how safe pupils are in school, including in lessons; and their understanding of risks. Pupils' freedom from bullying and harassment. How well the school promotes safety, for example e-learning.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



8 March 2012

Dear Students

Inspection of Fearnhill School, Letchworth, SG6 4BA

Thank you for the welcome you gave us during the inspection. We found it very helpful to talk to you, look at your work and visit your lessons. You helped us to understand what it is like to be a student at your school.

The school provides you with a satisfactory education. It has made strenuous efforts to improve and no longer requires special measures. The sixth form is good and students achieve well on A and AS level courses. Staff work hard to support you in your work and your attitudes reflect the school's positive learning culture. GCSE results are improving strongly and you make satisfactory progress. The quality of teaching you receive has improved rapidly and you told us how much more work you have to do in lessons. The curriculum is broad and you benefit from a wide range of courses. You feel safe and your school is led effectively by your headteacher and the team of leaders and managers, who are determined to ensure that it provides the best for every one of you. We were very impressed by your Holocaust DVD because it captures your emotional journey. We have asked the school to improve some areas of its work. These were to:

- raise achievement further, particularly in English and mathematics, so GCSE results continue to improve
- provide more good or better teaching by matching tasks to your abilities so that you are challenged effectively.

You have a part to play and you can help your school by ensuring that you follow up the comments and suggestions that your teachers make to help you to improve your work. We wish you all success in the future.

Yours sincerely

Davinder Dosanjh
Her Majesty's Inspector (on behalf of the inspection team)

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