

Fearnhill School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117504
Local Authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	358150
Inspection dates	2–3 February 2011
Reporting inspector	Meena Wood HMI

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

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	952
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	149
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Paul Vaughan
Headteacher	Jeremy Whelan
Date of previous school inspection	1 November 2007
School address	Icknield Way Letchworth SG6 4BA
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four additional inspectors. Forty teachers and 45 lessons were observed. Meetings were held with groups of students, the Chair of the Governing Body, teachers, support staff, leaders and managers. Inspectors observed the school's work, and carried out a number of joint observations of lessons with the school's senior managers. They scrutinised the school development plan, departmental reviews, student performance data in Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form, a range of school policies, local authority reviews, governing body minutes, the school's internal teaching and learning observations, and students' work. They analysed the questionnaire responses completed by 360 parents and carers.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at a number of key areas:

- the extent to which teachers use assessment data to inform lesson planning and activities that meet students' needs across key stages
- how well students are challenged and supported in their learning and how much progress they make in lessons
- the extent to which the curriculum is personalised to students' needs and abilities, enabling them to achieve their potential
- the rigour and accuracy of the monitoring and evaluation of outcomes and provision in the sixth form
- the capacity of all leaders, to contribute to school development and enhancement, including how well they monitor their respective areas of responsibility and use outcomes to drive further improvement.

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 arrangement with two other schools in the area. Students come from a wide range of social and economic backgrounds. The percentage of students eligible for free school meals is in line with national averages. Nearly three quarters of students are of White British heritage and the remainder are mostly of Indian heritage. The percentage of students who are advanced bilingual learners, or at early stages of speaking English as an additional language, is below national averages. An average proportion of students have special educational needs and/or disabilities and fewer than is typical have statements of special educational needs. The most common needs relate to emotional, learning and behavioural difficulties. The school has a Special Support Unit which provides support for students who are failing to reach their potential as a result of behaviour and learning difficulties.

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: how good is the school?

4

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

4

Main findings

In accordance with section 13 (3) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires special measures because it is failing to give its students an acceptable standard of education and the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the school are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement.

Improvement since the last inspection is inadequate. The previous inspection judged the school's overall effectiveness as good and the school was asked to improve the consistency of teaching across subjects by sharing good practice more frequently and effectively. The school was also required to develop the curriculum further, to promote personalised learning and fulfil individual needs and aspirations. While the headteacher and the deputy headteacher have shown great determination in the last year to prioritise actions in these areas, monitoring of practice has not been timely or effective and the school as a whole lacks the capacity to tackle these priorities effectively.

Consequently, the weaknesses still remain and attainment in Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form has not risen sufficiently, so that the vast majority of students significantly underachieve against their potential. The percentage of students gaining five or more GCSE grades A* to C including English and mathematics has been well below the national average for the last three years. Students' rate of progress from Year 7 to Year 11 has declined markedly to significantly below national averages. Students' achievement in English, mathematics and science and especially in English, over this period has been inadequate. In addition, too few students gain adequate basic skills in information and communication technology (ICT). Many students make unsatisfactory progress in learning during lessons. This in turn is holding down levels of attainment for too many students.

Teaching and learning are inadequate. Most of the lessons observed were characterised by a lack of challenge, and activities that were not in line with most students' skills and abilities. This demonstrates teachers' low expectations of what students are capable of achieving. The quality and volume of work produced by students are often poor. In too many lessons, the pace is either too fast or inappropriately slow. Assessment techniques, such as effective questioning and use of success criteria, are not used to check students' progress against their learning objectives. Teachers do not adjust activities where necessary and, importantly, they do not ensure that students receive detailed verbal and written feedback on areas for improvement. In most lessons, teachers neither check effectively what students have learnt nor test their skills and grasp of knowledge. Learning support assistants are not deployed well enough in lessons to support less-able students and those with emotional or behavioural needs.

Students' behaviour in lessons is largely satisfactory and sometimes good and, where behaviour is inadequate, it is as a result of poor lesson planning that does not engage

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students in productive learning. Students' attendance has improved considerably and is now good.

Much remains to be done to build capacity in the school's senior and middle managers to enable the school, including the sixth form, to improve. There are significant inadequacies in the strategic and operational leadership and management of monitoring and self-evaluation systems. These failings, coupled with considerable weaknesses in the curriculum, teaching, assessment for learning and the quality of academic guidance, are limiting the school's overall capacity to improve quickly. The school's specialist status in mathematics and computing has had no discernible impact on achievement and standards.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise the proportion of students attaining five or more GCSE subjects at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, by February 2012 and ensure that all students accelerate their achievement in Key Stages 4 and 5 through a clear strategy that results in:
 - improving the quality of lesson planning, especially in English, mathematics, science and information and communication technology, ensuring that learning objectives and activities are better matched to students' needs
 - a greater focus on academic guidance, assessment techniques and checks on students' understanding and learning through effective questioning and detailed feedback
 - a greater drive on the quality and volume of work produced by students in class and out of lessons
 - an appropriate pace of learning, greater challenge, and where necessary effective learning support for individual students
 - a curriculum that meets students' needs more fully at all levels, ensuring that they achieve their potential in school and in off-site provision.
- Develop the capacity of leaders, managers and the governing body to improve the school by:
 - strengthening the consistency and robustness of monitoring of the quality of teaching, of assessment, and scrutiny of students' work by all leaders and managers
 - raising staff expectations of what students can achieve and ensuring a greater focus on students' learning and progress in lessons in line with their needs
 - developing self-critical evaluation processes at all levels of the school that enable staff to take greater accountability for students' outcomes.
- Accelerate achievement and raise aspirations in the sixth form through greater rigour in monitoring, evaluating and planning of the provision.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils**4**

Less than half of Year 11 students in 2010 attained five or more GCSE A* to C grades including English and mathematics, a result well below that to be expected from their

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starting points. According to the school's tracking data, an even lower proportion of current Year 11 students are predicted to attain five or more A* to C grades GCSEs including both English and mathematics, despite a number having already successfully attained a GCSE A* to C grade in mathematics. The majority of underachieving students are White British, less-able students and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Indian students achieve well above national averages. Interventions for underachieving students, such as revision sessions, are not timely or rigorous enough.

In many lessons, students are responsive to tasks and indicate their willingness to learn. However, a significant minority are not engaged effectively in the work set and do not make satisfactory progress in acquiring knowledge and skills. Consequently they acquire a superficial understanding and are not confident in transferring what they have learnt to other contexts. Written work is poorly presented and often unfinished. The volume of students' work, especially in English, is low. In addition, students at the early stages of speaking English as an additional language and students who have difficulties with their learning do not progress sufficiently well.

Students have a satisfactory awareness of healthy lifestyles and many participate in the varied sporting and other extra-curricular activities. Students feel safe and their behaviour is satisfactory around the school; most are respectful and considerate. Levels of fixed-term exclusions have reduced and follow-up and reintegration procedures are generally consistent.

As an eco-school, groups of students have participated in recycling initiatives. Humanities lessons serve to satisfactorily develop students' citizenship skills, and their moral, ethical and social understanding. However, in other subjects, teachers do not extend learning opportunities that build on students' heritage or appreciation of different cultures.

Students' workplace skills are underdeveloped; over half of them do not acquire the basic and computing skills they need by the age of 16 to enter further education, training, apprenticeships, or employment.

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These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	4
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment ¹	4
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	4
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	4
The extent to which pupils feel safe	3
Pupils' behaviour	3
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	3
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	3
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	4
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attendance ¹	2
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	3

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low

How effective is the provision?

There is a lack of rigour and consistency across departments in teaching lessons for students with different abilities and in assessing, and tracking, their progress. For example, in a Year 11 English lesson, all students completed the same task regardless of their ability. They spent too much time identifying emotive language from texts and writing simplistic sentences; some reported on the lack of clarity of the learning objective. Expectations of what students can achieve are too low and tasks do not adequately sustain their concentration. As a result, their progress is slower than it should be. Less-able students, in particular, are not helped to develop their learning skills and are not equipped to increase their knowledge by working independently. More-able students are not adequately challenged. Their needs are not fully met because students with differing abilities are expected to learn at the same pace and, usually, with the same materials and activities. A number lose concentration and chat in lessons and, as a result, make inadequate progress.

Written feedback to students is inadequate and the presentation and quantity of work they complete demonstrate a lack of guidance from their teachers. Marking, in the main, is infrequent and cursory and does not help students to know what to do to meet their targets. Homework is set too sporadically, and literacy, numeracy and computing skills are not being developed systematically in all subjects.

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The curriculum is not structured well enough to enable students to achieve their potential and aspirations, although recent changes to the science curriculum have resulted in positive outcomes for some students. Less-able students across the curriculum do not achieve well with a significant number failing to complete coursework or not receiving adequate examination practice, for instance, as in English. In addition, a high proportion of more-able students do not achieve the A* or A GCSE grades. There is, currently, a limited choice of vocational courses, although the school is reviewing this. Students working below GCSE level follow relevant courses at the local college, but with less-than-satisfactory outcomes. There is insufficient rigour in the curriculum taught to students who are referred to the school's student support unit for poor behaviour.

Year 7 students enjoy an effective transition into the school. Students gain satisfactory advice and guidance on making their subject choices in Years 9 and 11. Vulnerable students are well supported to ensure that they remain in school. There is a strong focus through counselling and mentoring on those at risk of exclusion and those who are young carers. The vast majority of those at risk of exclusion are successfully reintegrated into alternative education. However, the quality of learning support for those with special educational needs and/or disabilities is inadequate. Parents report that their children's individual education plans are not regularly completed and learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, not identified early enough.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	4
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	4
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	4
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	3

How effective are leadership and management?

Senior and middle managers have an unrealistic view of the school's current strengths and weaknesses. Middle managers are not involved in self-evaluation processes and are not held to account for the quality of provision and outcomes for students. Lesson observations are too generous in their evaluations of assessment and teaching, and do not analyse the impact of these on students' learning and progress. Consequently, weak practice is reinforced. Subject reviews focus solely on examination results and do not take into account the quality of teaching and analysis of students' work. As a result, managers do not identify effective and timely actions that would tackle the weaknesses.

Not enough has been done in recent years to support teachers and middle managers in developing their teaching skills. There is a small minority of good practice in teaching and assessment, but this is not shared across subjects and key stages.

Tracking and monitoring systems of students' progress are inconsistent across the school, with department leaders working individually. The data are not used to best effect to set challenging targets for all students and in lesson planning. The school is consistently

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failing to meet its targets. Managers have not focused adequately on the systemic underachievement of the majority of White British students and students with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Moreover, they have not implemented timely and effective actions to address inequalities arising from this.

Partnerships with external agencies are satisfactory in terms of young people's welfare. However, the school has not held to account the other institutions that contribute to the educational outcomes for their students in Key Stage 4. Safeguarding arrangements are satisfactory, but health and safety arrangements in a few instances lack rigour, for example in science lessons. A satisfactory range of activities leading to the promotion of greater community cohesion has not been fully embedded within the school's ethos and curriculum.

Communication between the school and parents and carers is generally good. However, the school does not always inform them of their children's progress in a timely way. The governing body's effectiveness is inadequate as governors have not provided the school with the support and challenge it needs and have not kept it under close enough review in order to help it to improve.

The school does not provide adequate value for money, in view of the limited progress and low standards achieved by the vast majority of its students. Furthermore, support staff are not deployed effectively enough.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	4
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	4
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	4
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	3
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	3
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	4
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	3
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	3
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	4

Sixth form

Leadership and management of the sixth form are inadequate as self-evaluation has not identified the full extent of its weaknesses. The deputy headteacher has worked effectively on areas of weaknesses in the last year. This has resulted in better teaching being seen by

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inspectors in the sixth form than in Key Stage 4; however, outcomes for students are still inadequate. Too many students fail A-level examinations and the progress they make against their prior attainment is below national averages.

Overall, despite a few examples of good and outstanding teaching, the quality of teaching is inadequate as in many lessons aspirations are too low and teaching insufficiently challenging. Students report that they are 'spoon fed' and spend too much time copying information. Inspectors observed many students not developing the critical and higher-order thinking skills they need for independent study and higher education.

The school has not adequately tracked students' progress, nor do teachers consistently make appropriate interventions for those who underachieve. However, under the leadership of the deputy headteacher, tracking is starting to gain more rigour. Academic guidance is unsatisfactory, as support and feedback on students' personal progress vary in quality from subject to subject. There is limited curriculum provision for the less-able to achieve their potential. Monitoring, evaluation and planning of the provision are too weak to make an impact on improving students' outcomes.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	4
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	4
The quality of provision in the sixth form	4
Leadership and management of the sixth form	4

Views of parents and carers

A high number of parents and carers responded to the questionnaires and most were generally satisfied with the education of their children. However, a number of comments were expressed in relation to insufficient homework, insufficient challenge in lessons, disruptive behaviour, turnover of staff and poor quality of teaching, notably in English, mathematics and computing. A small proportion of parents and carers also expressed concerns about the lack of information on their children's progress, other than through consultation evenings, but the vast majority were pleased with the level of information they received on their children's progress. Inspectors found evidence to support the range of concerns.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Fearnhill School to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school. The inspection team received 360 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 952 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	89	25	233	65	32	9	1	0
The school keeps my child safe	104	29	239	66	11	3	2	1
My school informs me about my child's progress	89	25	244	68	19	5	4	1
My child is making enough progress at this school	88	24	234	65	30	8	2	1
The teaching is good at this school	77	21	244	68	27	8	4	1
The school helps me to support my child's learning	74	21	232	64	42	12	2	1
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	59	16	251	70	41	11	1	0
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	97	27	229	64	13	4	3	1
The school meets my child's particular needs	81	23	241	67	27	8	3	1
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	92	26	205	57	44	12	12	3
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	77	21	231	64	35	10	6	2
The school is led and managed effectively	122	34	211	59	18	5	3	1
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	120	33	213	59	21	6	2	1

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

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	59	35	3	3
Primary schools	9	44	39	7
Secondary schools	13	36	41	11
Sixth forms	15	39	43	3
Special schools	35	43	17	5
Pupil referral units	21	42	29	9
All schools	13	43	37	8

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2009 to 31 August 2010 and are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2009/10 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

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

Sixth form figures reflect the judgements made for the overall effectiveness of the sixth form in secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on 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 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:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement.■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils.■ The quality of teaching.■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships.■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
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.

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.



4 February 2011

Dear Students

Inspection of Fearnhill School, Letchworth, SG6 4BA

Thank you for your welcome when we visited your school recently. Your comments helped us greatly in forming our views. These are the main things we found out about your school.

Many of you make effective contributions to the school through the activities relating to community cohesion. The school supports those of you who have difficulties in your personal lives and ensures that you stay on track. However, your school requires 'special measures', because its not providing you with as good an education as it should. The curriculum has shortcomings that the school knows it needs to tackle. In lessons, most of you are not making enough progress. This is largely because the teaching does not meet your needs and does not sufficiently challenge all of you to attain the standards of work that you are capable of. We observed that teachers do not spend enough time on checking what you have learnt. The advice you get from marking is not always good enough to help you improve and you are not encouraged to learn from your errors. Although most of you come regularly to school wanting to learn, we noted that a number of you do not concentrate and chatter, especially when the work lacks interest or is too difficult.

To help the school to improve further the school's leaders have agreed to:

- improve teaching, assessment and your learning
- give you guidance on your written work and provide a more appropriate curriculum for all of you
- develop the leadership and management skills of staff and governors so that they keep a closer check on your progress and learning
- raise sixth-form aspirations through more rigorous monitoring of your progress.

Inspectors will visit the school regularly to check on how well the school is improving. The headteacher, senior staff and governors have much to do; you can all help by working hard and by letting your teachers know if the work they give you is either too easy or too difficult. I wish you all the best in your studies and for your future.

Yours sincerely

Meena Wood

Her Majesty's Inspector

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