

Hill Top School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	130942
Local Authority	Gateshead
Inspection number	360165
Inspection dates	15–16 February 2011
Reporting inspector	John Farrow

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

Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	91
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	4
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Dorothy Dawson
Headteacher	Mrs Elaine Colquhoun
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	Wealcroft Felling, Gateshead Tyne and Wear NE10 8LT
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors. Sixteen lessons were observed and 13 teachers were seen. Meetings were held with members of staff, representatives of the governing body and groups of parents and students. Inspectors observed the school's work, and looked at documentation, including that relating to safeguarding of students, teachers' planning and students' progress. Thirty-three parents' and carers' questionnaires were also scrutinised.

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

- The progress of different groups of students (especially those at the earlier stages of learning and development).
- The use of assessment to support students' active involvement in all their lessons.
- The quality of provision for the small number of post-16 students retained in the school beyond statutory school age.

Information about the school

Hill Top is a secondary school for students with severe, moderate or autistic spectrum learning difficulties. The school is of average size compared to similar schools of this type. Students are drawn from across Gateshead local authority and almost all are from a predominantly White British heritage. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is just over three times the national average. There are nearly three times as many boys as girls, with a very small number of students looked after by the local authority. There are currently four students with complex autistic spectrum difficulties at the school over the age of 16. This is an interim arrangement agreed with the local authority, pending the outcome of the authority's Special Educational Needs Review. The school was designated as a Specialist Arts College in September 2010 and holds a number of nationally recognised awards, including the International Schools award. More recently it has gained the Leading Parent Partnership award.

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?

1

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

2

Main findings

Hill Top is an outstanding school. Leaders and managers at all levels of responsibility share a strong sense of teamwork and common purpose. They work together enthusiastically and systematically to secure ever more ambitious outcomes for students of widely differing abilities; they make effective and routine use of a broad range of monitoring activities and drive steady and progressive improvement. As a consequence, the school has continued to improve well since the previous inspection. For example, it has built on previously good, highly-individualised target-setting procedures which ensure that the school can compare its performance accurately against emerging local and national benchmarks. This means senior leaders and the governing body now have an accurate, well-evidenced knowledge of the school's strengths, and the understanding and resolve needed to tackle the few remaining weaknesses. Consequently, the school has a good capacity for sustained improvement.

Students respond very well to the school's positive atmosphere. They quickly begin to acquire new knowledge, understanding and skills almost as soon as they join the school. As a result, most make good progress and some make exceptional progress. Students are almost always enthusiastic and strive to achieve their very best in lessons and all other aspects of their life and work in the school. Most are proud and joyful members of this vibrant, outward-looking school community. Their exemplary attitudes and outstanding behaviour enable them to make the best of the memorable and varied opportunities provided by the school's rich and diverse curriculum. The school's recent designation as a specialist Arts College is already having a marked impact on students' learning and active experience and participation in a range of creative arts. This has led to an expansion of the range of nationally recognised external qualifications now being secured by the students.

Teaching is good overall and much is outstanding. This ensures that students are invariably well motivated and purposefully engaged in their lessons. Teachers and teaching assistants work together particularly effectively, using their detailed understanding of assessment to match each new learning challenge precisely to each student's individual requirements. However, while target-setting is already well established and effective, school leaders acknowledge that their use of relevant sources of national comparative data, to ensure all targets are as rigorous as possible, needs further refinement. Since the previous inspection, students have a much better understanding of their individual progress targets. However, the quality of marking, especially the use of written comments designed to help them understand where they need to improve is not always as helpful as it could be and still varies too much across different classes and subjects.

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What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Develop the use of appropriate sources of national comparative data, matched to the underlying abilities of different groups of students, to help set the most ambitious, yet realistic individual progress targets possible.
- Take further steps to ensure the quality of teachers' marking always helps students to understand in detail how to improve their work.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

1

The nature and complexity of the students' special educational needs and/or disabilities mean they are very unlikely to reach the standards expected of the vast majority of mainstream students. They enter the school with a wide range of previous achievements, but even the most able are almost always well below the national average levels expected of young people of similar ages.

Most students are keen and enthusiastic learners who enjoy learning and apply themselves conscientiously in lessons and work diligently towards achieving their individual targets. Students of differing abilities and those belonging to different groups make progress, learn and develop equally well in relation to their individual starting points. Nearly all students make at least good progress. A few make outstanding progress, which compares very favourably to that made by similar students elsewhere.

In lessons, students are able to sustain their concentration well, often working for extended periods with minimal support from adults. In other challenging situations, such as in an outstanding music lesson, older students showed an impressive ability to appraise critically their own compositions or those of another student, objectively but also with compassion and sensitivity. Students show this type of remarkably consistent and thoughtful behaviour routinely towards each other in and around school, for example when listening to each other attentively, when speaking aloud or communicating through signing with other members of the class. Older students act as excellent role models for their younger peers and willingly accept their share of responsibility for promoting the school's fully inclusive ethos, based on mutual consideration and respect. In this way, and through their participation in performances or activities such as the junior sports leader programme, students make an exceptional contribution to both their school and wider community.

Students' exemplary behaviour along with their above average attendance, are key factors underpinning their good achievement and outstanding personal development. Their positive 'can do' attitudes also support the acquisition of the skills that contribute well to their future well-being when they move on to the next stage of their education or training. Students say, or show by their relaxed and confident behaviour, that they feel exceptionally safe in the school. They also show a very good sense of right and wrong and an understanding of the choices they can make that contribute towards living a healthy and physically active lifestyle.

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These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

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

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

* In some special schools inspectors do not make a judgement about attainment in relation to expectations of the pupils' age.

How effective is the provision?

Teaching consistently ensures that students remain well motivated and fully engaged. Teachers and teaching assistants work together well and they are highly ambitious on behalf of the students. They also share responsibilities in class and around the school seamlessly, promoting students learning and well-being in equal measure. They are particularly skilled at assessing individual student progress objectively against ambitious individual targets. They use this detailed and accurate information well to plan the next, often small step, in each student's learning experience or development. Teaching routinely makes good use of information and communication technology (ICT) to enhance or extend the range of learning opportunities available in lessons. For example, in an outstanding mathematics lesson, the teacher used a bespoke power point presentation in conjunction with a series of well-chosen closed questions, to effectively consolidate new learning for two students who had been experiencing confusion over the concept of odd and even numbers.

Since the previous inspection, the school has built well on its strong tradition of using accurate and well-moderated assessment information to set challenging individual targets. Teachers consistently ensure that students understand their individual targets, but the

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quality of marking, especially the use of written comments designed to help students understand where they need to improve, is not always helpful.

The curriculum is outstanding and provides students with numerous memorable experiences and rich opportunities that support high quality learning and wider personal development. It, too, has continued to develop well since the previous inspection and is now particularly well suited to the needs of students. An extensive programme of visits, visitors and residential experiences in this country and abroad adds further interest and enjoyment to their learning. The schools specialist Arts College status is helping to support highly effective teaching and learning, particularly in the areas of music, art and design and ICT. It permeates into many other aspects of the schools work, for example, by extending learners' opportunities to engage with other students in other settings and enhancing their confidence and self-esteem.

Care, guidance and support are outstanding. The school has created a positive and secure environment that supports students' learning, personal development and enjoyment extremely well. This helps make sure that the vast majority of the students make the best of the opportunities provided. This is evident in all aspects of the school's work with its students, in the quality of the relationships that exist between staff and students and the obvious pleasure they derive from each other's company. It is also a key strength underlying the impact of its work with other schools and outside agencies and the vast majority of students' families.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	2
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	2
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	1
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

How effective are leadership and management?

School leaders and managers, staff and the governing body have worked together very effectively to secure year-on-year improvement in both provision and outcomes. Their commitment to these shared objectives is evident throughout many aspects of the life and work of the school and is accurately informed by sophisticated and highly effective monitoring and self-evaluation procedures. For example, as a result of determined actions taken by senior leaders, several complementary forms of local and national comparative data are now in use to bolster the rigour of target-setting and tracking arrangements. School leaders recognise they still need to consolidate the use of such sources of comparative data and match them even more appropriately to the diverse needs and abilities of different groups of students.

Governance is good: the governing body makes a purposeful and influential contribution to setting the direction of the school's development. It conscientiously discharges its statutory duties and has helped ensure that policies and procedures are outstanding and

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fully meet requirements. As a result, there is a comprehensive awareness of safeguarding issues among staff. It also has a good first-hand knowledge and understanding of the school's work and has acted as an effective support to the headteacher during a recent challenging staffing reduction exercise.

Engagement with external partners, including local schools health and social service professionals and members of the wider community is outstanding. For example, the school has a long-established and highly-regarded role promoting girls' involvement in sport, in partnership with several other schools in the local authority. Senior leaders also often play a particularly effective role managing communications and coordinating support for students and families with significant multi-agency involvement. A strong and highly visible commitment to the needs and aspirations of individual students lies at the heart of the school's very effective approach to promoting equality and tackling discrimination. This commitment was even echoed in conversations held with older, more-able students. They are also actively involved in securing equality of opportunity for younger, less confident students by promoting their involvement in extra-curricular sporting activities. Outcomes are rigorously monitored and demonstrate they are equally positive for different groups of students. The school itself is a very cohesive community and students from different backgrounds get on noticeably well with each other. Arrangements to promote community cohesion are good; effective arrangements are in place to promote wider engagement with religious and ethnic groups beyond the school's immediate community. Senior leaders have a clear understanding of the impact of this work in school but arrangements to evaluate its impact within the local community are less well developed.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	1
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	2
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	2
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	1
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	1
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	2
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	1

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Sixth form

Current sixth form provision is made on an interim basis with the agreement of the local authority; pending completion of the local authority-led special educational needs review. Students currently on roll all have severe and complex autistic spectrum difficulties and are operating at very early stages of learning and development. Their learning frequently involves them experiencing a range of immediate sensory activities designed to consolidate and extend their communication and interaction skills. This can mean that they hardly appear to move far from their starting points, but accurate and sharply observed assessment confirms most of them make good 'lateral' progress, albeit in very small steps. Programmes and activities are well matched to students' individual needs. Care, guidance and support are all geared to ensuring that students are well prepared for the learning and personal development challenges they will inevitably face during the next phase of their lives beyond school. The sixth form is well led and senior leaders and the governing body are in the process of considering how they can develop sixth form provision further in the near future.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	2
Taking into account:	2
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	2
The quality of provision in the sixth form	2
Leadership and management of the sixth form	2

Views of parents and carers

A broadly average proportion of parents and carers returned questionnaires. A very large majority of those who did are overwhelmingly supportive of the school's provision and the outcomes that it achieves. Safeguarding, leadership and the management of behaviour are all rated particularly highly along with the extent to which students enjoy school. A small number of responses take an opposing view and feel that the school should be doing more to inform them of their child's progress and to help them be more involved with their child's learning. This was followed up by an inspector who scrutinised a small number of student case files. These often indicated intricate case histories, where school staff had played a central role, sometimes coordinating effective support and interventions between parents and other professionals, enabling students to begin to make good progress. The quality of annual reports and the detail they contain were also scrutinised and judged to be of a high standard. However, the school has acknowledged that it had needed to do more to promote more effective partnerships with parents and carers and has worked conscientiously to do so by working with them to secure the Leading Parental Partnership Award. This initiative was discussed with a small group of parents, who felt this process had done much to improve the quality and ease with which they felt they could freely interact with appropriate school staff. Inspectors concluded that relationships with the vast majority of parents and carers are purposeful and constructive and have reflected these positive views in the report.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Hill Top 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 33 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 91 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	17	52	14	42	1	3	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	23	70	10	30	0	0	0	0
My school informs me about my child's progress	20	61	8	24	5	15	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	18	55	10	30	3	9	1	3
The teaching is good at this school	18	55	11	33	2	6	1	3
The school helps me to support my child's learning	17	52	10	30	4	12	1	3
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	14	42	13	39	3	9	1	3
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)	17	52	12	36	0	0	2	6
The school meets my child's particular needs	16	48	13	39	3	9	1	3
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	17	52	14	42	1	3	0	0
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	16	48	14	42	1	3	2	6
The school is led and managed effectively	18	55	12	36	3	9	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	20	61	10	30	3	9	0	0

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.



27 February 2011

Dear Students

Inspection of Hill Top School, Gateshead, NE10 8LT

Thank you for the welcome you gave us when we came to inspect your school.

This is what we found out.

- Your school gives you an outstanding education and is helping you to achieve well and to develop into very confident young people.
- You enjoy going to your school and feel very safe there because of the outstanding care and support you get from both adults and other students.
- Your teachers and teaching assistants work really hard to make your lessons interesting and well matched to your learning targets.
- You help yourselves to learn well by behaving extremely well and working very hard in lessons.
- The headteacher and those who work with her to run the school are always trying to improve the school to give you the very best education they can.

We have asked the school to make sure they set your learning targets at exactly the right level, matched carefully to your individual needs, to help you achieve as well as you possibly can. We are also asking the teachers to make sure their marking is always as helpful as possible, so you always know what you need to do to reach your next learning target.

Yours sincerely

John Farrow

Lead inspector

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