

The Thomas Cowley High School

School Lane, Donington, Spalding, PE11 4TF

Inspection dates 25–26 September 2012

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected	
	This inspection:	Good	2
Achievement of pupils	Good		2
Quality of teaching	Good		2
Behaviour and safety of pupils	Good		2
Leadership and management	Good		2

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school.

- Thomas Cowley is a school where all individuals are valued and have equal opportunities to succeed.
- From below-average starting points, students make good progress and reach average standards when they leave Year 11.
- Students enjoy school, feel safe, behave well and attend regularly.
- They, and their parents, are proud of the school.
- The school is improving because leaders and managers at all levels, including the governors, maintain a firm and successful focus on improving teaching, raising attainment and accelerating students' progress.
- Good teaching in most subjects, particularly mathematics and English, enables students to achieve well.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Books are not marked to a consistently high standard in all departments.
- In a few lessons, teachers do not always ask students questions that challenge their thinking, or set tasks at precisely the right level for students of differing ability.
- The best practice in teaching is not fully shared across the school, so the progress students make in different subjects varies.
- New, more rigorous systems for checking the work of departments have yet to become a routine part of the school's work.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors saw 30 teachers teaching 30 lessons, of which three were joint observations with the headteacher and senior teachers.
- They held discussions with groups of students, staff and members of the governing body.
- Inspectors observed the school's work, and looked at students' books, progress data, safeguarding information and other documentation.
- Inspectors analysed the views of 18 parents through the Parent View website. They also scrutinised the results of the school's recent parental surveys.

Inspection team

Ann Ashdown, Lead inspector	Additional inspector
Victoria Bishop	Additional inspector
Kathleen Yates	Additional inspector
Margaret Jones	Additional inspector

Information about this school

- This school is much smaller than the average-sized secondary school. It is a non-selective secondary modern school operating within a selective system where approximately 25% of students attend grammar schools.
- The proportion of students known to be eligible for the pupil premium is broadly average.
- A below-average proportion of students are from minority ethnic backgrounds, and a similar proportion speak English as an additional language.
- The proportion of students supported at school action is average. The proportion supported at school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is well below average.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set out the minimum expectations for attainment and progress.
- The school became a specialist technology college in 2006 and an academy in September 2012.
- The academy predecessor school, The Thomas Cowley High School, was last inspected in January 2011 and judged to be a satisfactory school.
- It has specially resourced provision for students with special educational needs. Students have sensory impairment. They are supported in a unit that currently caters for five hearing impaired students and one visually impaired student.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Further improve teaching so that more is outstanding by:
 - making sure books are marked to a consistently high standard, so that all students are sure how to improve their work and reach their targets
 - asking students more open, complex and perceptive questions to challenge their thinking and deepen their understanding
 - setting work at exactly the right level of difficulty for all groups of students.
- Reduce variations between departments so that students achieve equally well in different subjects by:
 - refining and embedding new, more rigorous approaches to checking the work of all departments
 - sharing the very best practice in teaching more widely across the school.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils is good

- In lessons most students are keen to learn, answer questions, and concentrate on their work. Consequently they make good progress and achieve well.
- Students enter the school with attainment which is significantly below national averages. Some students have particularly low levels of literacy. Students who need extra help are quickly identified and receive timely extra help which allows them to make good progress in reading.
- All groups, including disabled students and those who have special educational needs, those who speak English as an additional language and those who are supported by the pupil premium, make equally good progress. Like the deaf students in the well led and managed specially resourced unit, they make good progress because they receive knowledgeable and sharply-focused help from both teachers and teaching assistants.
- At the end of Year 11 students reach standards that are broadly average in most GCSE subjects and, for the last three years, above average in GCSE mathematics. The proportion of students who make the progress that is expected of them in English and mathematics compares favourably with national figures. Although progress in English was slightly lower than expected this year, progress in mathematics remained above national averages.
- Year 7 students were seen achieving particularly well in their very first lesson of algebra, where they confidently worked together to devise strategies for solving equations.
- Work in students' books and the school's most recent progress data confirmed that current students are on track to reach their targets this year.
- Despite the school's efforts, variations in attainment and rates of progress between subjects do remain. In most GCSE and work-related subjects attainment rose in 2012, although standards in science, art and physical education did not show the same improvement as other areas. The impact of the school's status as a technology college is seen in students' good progress in a range of technological subjects.

The quality of teaching is good

- Teaching is usually good, and in some lessons it is outstanding.
- In a particularly effective lesson where students were devising their own play, inspiring teaching enabled them to make rapid progress in acquiring skills and knowledge about dramatic techniques.
- In other lessons observed, teachers typically used a variety of teaching methods and a range of attractive resources to engage the interest of their students. In a Year 7 lesson, students improved their field sketching skills as they worked outside to sketch the building housing their geography classroom.
- Disabled students and those who have special educational needs benefit from timely and personalised support from knowledgeable teachers and teaching assistants. They enjoy learning in the attractive environment of the 'Blue Room', where their particular needs are met well and they make good progress in developing literacy and numeracy skills.

- Teachers manage their classes well. They use praise to develop students' confidence and encourage them to contribute to lessons. A well-structured system of rewards encourages students to give their best.
- The school's records show that teaching has improved because in most lessons there is now a better balance of teacher-led and independent activities. Students enjoy working independently and also cooperate well when working in pairs and groups.
- In the best lessons very perceptive questioning by teachers, work that is closely matched to students' needs and detailed and accurate marking all contribute to students' good achievement.
- In some lessons progress is slightly slower when questioning does not fully challenge students' thinking, work for some students is either too easy or too difficult, and marking is not detailed enough to help students to reach their targets.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are good

- Students typically behave well. In lessons and around the school, most show respect for each other and for staff and visitors.
- School records show that incidents of challenging behaviour and bullying are dealt with promptly. The number of students excluded from school has reduced dramatically and the school is rightly proud that there have been no exclusions since Easter. Governors play a valuable part in working with students and their parents to ensure students remain in school.
- The school's well-organised house system, good induction arrangements and a calm and supportive learning environment all contribute to students' feeling of safety and promote their good behaviour.
- Effective use of tutor time, moving assemblies, the school's personal, social and health education programme and a wide range of out-of-school activities all contribute to students' good social, moral, spiritual and cultural development.
- All students, particularly those whose circumstances make them vulnerable, receive expert help from teachers and outside agencies to enable them to make the most of their time in school. Students speak warmly of the support they receive and parental surveys (including the online survey, Parent View) indicate how much parents value the education the school provides.
- Students are keen to take responsibility. Senior students who spoke with inspectors explained how they raise funds for charities, listen to younger students read and work with the school council to improve the school environment.
- Students speak knowledgeably about the potential dangers of drugs, smoking and alcohol and had a clear understanding of how to keep themselves safe. They are well aware of different types of bullying, including cyber-bullying. Students are confident that any problems they have will be taken seriously and addressed quickly by staff.

The leadership and management are good

- The headteacher, ably supported by senior staff, has ensured that previous weaknesses have

been addressed and consequently teaching is improving and standards are rising.

- Teaching is led well, particularly by the senior staff who lead the groups of subjects or 'domains'. Effective performance management and good training opportunities for all staff are helping to improve the quality of lessons. However, the best practice, particularly that seen in outstanding lessons during the inspection, has yet to be fully shared across the school.
- Recent high-quality training for senior staff in assessing the quality of teaching is leading to more rigorous monitoring and evaluation of the work of subject departments. These improvements have yet to be refined and become fully embedded in the work of the school.
- School self-evaluation is accurate. Strengths are celebrated and weaknesses are being tackled effectively.
- Staff and other resources are well deployed. Although some inconsistencies between departments remain, the school has successfully raised standards in weaker subjects by changing the curriculum, providing high-quality staff training, and appointing talented leaders and skilled teaching staff.
- The school rightly prides itself on bringing out the best in all students by giving them equal opportunities to succeed. Consequently, for example, the gap in attainment between those students supported by the pupil premium and other groups of students is narrowing.
- The curriculum is broad and balanced. A good choice of academic and work-related courses meet students' needs well. The school's technology specialism has enriched the curriculum and allowed all students chose from a good range of technological subjects. All safeguarding requirements are met. Staff are fully trained and knowledgeable, especially about issues such as child protection.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - is good because the members of the governing body know the school's strength and weaknesses well
 - provides valuable support and challenge for the headteacher and is fully involved in determining the school's strategic direction, such as its conversion to academy status.

What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>

School details

Unique reference number	120662
Local authority	N/A
Inspection number	409367

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

Type of school	Academy converter
School category	Voluntary controlled
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	628
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Terry Chapman
Headteacher	Martyn Taylor
Date of previous school inspection	N/A
Telephone number	01775 820254
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