

Thorns Community College

Stockwell Avenue, Brierley Hill, DY5 2NU

Inspection dates

4–5 December 2012

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Inadequate	4
	This inspection:	Requires improvement	3
Achievement of pupils		Requires improvement	3
Quality of teaching		Requires improvement	3
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Good	2
Leadership and management		Good	2

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement. It is not good because

- While the quality of students' learning is improving, they have not made good progress in all subjects, including in English.
- Disabled students and those with special educational needs have not experienced good enough teaching and additional support and they have not achieved well. This is, however, improving quickly.
- Not all teachers make sure that their lessons are planned to take into account what students already know and can do.
- Students do not always get written feedback that helps them understand what they need to do to improve.

The school has the following strengths

- Strong leadership from the Principal and other senior leaders has resulted in a significant change in the expectations teachers and students have of what can be achieved.
- The effectiveness of leaders across the school's work is now good. They have a clear understanding of what their responsibilities are and of how they can continue to improve students' achievement.
- Teaching is improving quickly and more students are making better progress than has been the case in the past.
- Students' behaviour and attitudes to learning have improved dramatically since the time of the last inspection. They are no longer inadequate and are now good.
- Students feel safe, have a good understanding and appreciation of different cultures and traditions and play an active role in helping the school to improve.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed teaching in 33 lessons and made shorter visits to a number of sessions. Some observations were undertaken jointly with a member of the senior leadership team.
- Inspectors held meetings with staff, students, a representative from the local authority and the Chair of the Interim Executive Board.
- Inspectors took account of the 120 responses to the online questionnaire (Parent View) and the school's own student and parental questionnaires. They observed the school's work and considered responses to 75 staff questionnaires.
- Inspectors considered the school's own analysis of 2012 examination results as well as the information about the achievement of students currently in the school. They looked at a range of documentation related to how the school evaluates its own work as well as considering the school's improvement and development plans.
- Inspectors took into account evidence gathered at previous monitoring visits.

Inspection team

James McNeillie, Lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Sue Morris-King

Her Majesty's Inspector

Peter Lawley

Additional Inspector

Rosemarie McCarthy

Additional Inspector

Full report

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.

Information about this school

- The school is larger than the average-sized secondary school.
- Most students are from White British backgrounds, with a small proportion from Asian or Asian British heritages.
- Few students are learning English as an additional language.
- A broadly average proportion of students are eligible for the pupil premium (additional government funds to support particular pupils, including looked-after children and those known to eligible for free school meals).
- Fewer students are supported at school action than is the case nationally. There is a higher than average proportion of students supported at school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs.
- The school is part of the Stourbridge Educational Trust (TSET) which is an organisation that shares expertise and training to improve the quality of teaching in member schools.
- The school has received a number of awards including Investors in People, Artsmark and the Black Country Quality Mark.
- Students attend courses and placements at the following providers: Cherry Tree Learning Centre; Stourbridge College; Dudley College; St Thomas' Community Network; and The Education Development Service.
- In March 2011, the school was judged to require special measures. At the visit before this inspection, the school was judged to be making good progress in addressing the weaknesses identified at the section 5 inspection.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for students' attainment and progress.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve teaching to make it consistently good by making sure that:
 - teachers always plan lessons that take into account what all groups of students already know and can do
 - lessons often give students opportunities to develop and use the skills they need to write, read and communicate accurately
 - all groups of students, including disabled students and those with special educational needs, have frequent opportunities to develop the skills they need to work well on their own and with each other when not under the direct control of the teacher
 - students' work is marked regularly and the feedback they receive is clear about what they need to do to improve
 - there are even more opportunities for the best teachers to share what they do well.
- Increase students' achievement to good by making sure that:
 - more of them make expected and better than expected progress in English
 - disabled students and those with special educational needs receive high-quality teaching in all lessons as well as good additional support
 - all subject teachers carefully analyse the gaps that students at lower levels have in their skills, particularly in reading and writing and make sure that they systematically teach those skills

- the ways in which additional pupil premium funding is spent have a more significant impact on the learning, development and progress of those students for whom the funding is intended.
- Strengthen further the effectiveness of leadership by making sure that there is a smooth transition from the effective interim executive board to an established governing body whose members have the skills and expertise to ask the necessary questions that will challenge and support the school in its future development.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils

requires improvement

- Students' achievement is improving quickly. In 2012, it was good in mathematics and in science subjects. Their progress in other subjects was variable.
- Students currently in the school are making more rapid progress in almost all subjects and in all year groups than in the past. This is as a direct result of better teaching and students' better attitudes to learning.
- Achievement is not good because trends over time show that students, including disabled students and those with special educational needs, and those known to be eligible for free school meals, have not made quick enough progress in a range of subjects, including in English.
- The school is effectively narrowing the gaps in achievement between different groups of students. For example, students from White British and Asian or Asian British heritages are now achieving in line with each other. Therefore, the school is making sure that there are increasingly good opportunities for all.
- Some students were entered for GCSE examinations before they reached the end of Year 11. The school's approach to examination entry did not limit students' progress.
- Disabled students and those with special educational needs are making better progress now than in the past, although there remains some variation. There is a much-improved approach to how the school supports those students who require extra help, and this is making a difference.
- The school has used the pupil premium funding to help improve students' attitudes to learning. This has helped improve levels of punctuality and attendance and reduced exclusions from school.
- The pupil premium funding has also been used to provide extra support sessions to improve examination results. The overall levels of attainment for students supported by this funding rose slightly in 2012. The gap between these students and their peers narrowed but remains significant. As a result of the establishment of a team of adults to support these students' needs, their progress is beginning to accelerate.
- A detailed action plan to help students have better skills in reading and writing is in place, and the impact of this can already be seen in the achievement of students in Year 7. Students' ability to use these skills is not consistent in all years and in all subjects. However, there are good opportunities for students to write in science, geography and religious studies as well as in English.

The quality of teaching

requires improvement

- Teaching has improved significantly since the last inspection, but is not consistently strong enough to be judged good overall.
- One student explained to an inspector, 'Good learning happens when the teacher gets everyone involved.' This is happening more frequently

- When teaching is at its best, teachers have consistently high expectations of what students can achieve. Good and outstanding teachers use their strong knowledge of the subjects they teach to ask carefully considered questions that help students learn quickly.
- The features of teaching that are consistent in the best lessons are as a result of good-quality training teachers have received. For example, in many lessons students are presented with 'WAGOLL' (What A Good One Looks Like) which then helps them to know how to be successful.
- Disabled students and those with special educational needs are being supported to make better progress in an increasing number of lessons. This is because most teachers and teaching assistants have a good knowledge of students' particular needs and of the most effective ways to help. However, this good practice is not consistent across the school. In a few lessons teachers and teaching assistants do not sufficiently adapt work to fully meet these students' needs and maximise their learning.
- In less-effective lessons, teachers talk for too long and this prevents students from developing the skills they need to be able to work on their own. Teachers also do not plan lessons to take into account the knowledge and skills students already have, including those who have lower ability levels, and miss opportunities to help students develop important reading, writing and speaking skills.
- The quality of written feedback students receive is not consistently good in helping them understand what they need to do to improve.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are good

- There have been significant improvements to the behaviour and attitudes of students and this is a direct result of the strong leadership of this aspect of the school's work. These improvements mean that students, and groups of students, feel safe. Parents overwhelmingly agree.
- In lessons, students respond quickly to their teachers' expectations of behaviour, and very positive relationships exist.
- Very many students across the age and ability ranges are enthusiastic about learning and are motivated to succeed. They work well and sensibly together in groups in different classroom situations.
- Students' behaviour was outstanding in a design and technology lesson in Year 8 where they worked sensibly, safely and quickly when not under the direct control of the teacher. In a physical education lesson in Year 10, boys needed no reminders of what was expected of them which led to them making good progress in developing their football skills.
- At breaks and lunchtimes, students move around the site sensibly. Students of different ages and ethnic backgrounds get on well together and have developed a good understanding and awareness of multicultural differences.
- School leaders' excellent analysis of behaviour issues and the reasons why and where they occur means that support can be given to students and teachers to reduce the risk of problems happening.
- Strategies to support students whose behaviour can be difficult are wide ranging. The excellent impact of these can be seen in the sharp decline in the number of students excluded from

school, which is now below the national average. Success is also obvious in the significant decrease in the number of issues that arise during the school day.

- The school deals quickly with incidents of bullying when they occur, which is not often. The physical design of the school has also been altered to support students to feel safe, for example in the design of the new students' toilets.
- Students' attendance is above average and the number of students persistently absent is below average. Regular attendance at school is promoted and celebrated during mentor time and in assemblies.

The leadership and management are good

- The Principal shows an outstanding commitment to improving the school and to making sure that staff, students and parents understand his vision. This has been extremely effective. He has a highly visible presence around the school and students enjoy having the opportunity to talk to him and give their views. Students and staff describe clearly the difference he has made.
- Senior leaders share the Principal's dedication and are making a very positive difference to the quality of teaching, students' achievement and the range and quality of subjects and courses on offer to students. These leaders are excellent role models and are good and outstanding teachers. There is no sense of complacency.
- The high expectations of senior leaders are evident in the challenging targets set for students.
- At the heart of the school's quick improvement has been better teaching. Leaders have had a very good impact as a result of their knowledge and expertise of what makes the best teaching. Good-quality training and support for teachers have been provided using the school's own resources as well as expertise from other local schools.
- Staff morale at the school is high; all of those who responded to Ofsted's questionnaire confirmed they are proud to be members of the school.
- Senior leaders have a good understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses as a result of very effective processes for checking the quality of teaching and students' achievement. Importantly, leaders also have a clear understanding of what is needed to make sure that the school becomes 'good'.
- Leaders of subjects and other aspects of the school's work are held to account for how well pupils are achieving. This is a significant improvement from the time of the last full inspection. Most subject leaders, including leaders of English, mathematics and science, track students' progress towards challenging targets well and take effective action to help anyone falling behind to catch up. However, this good practice is not yet consistently in place across all subjects.
- The leadership of support for disabled students and those with special educational needs is now good. There has been a substantial restructuring of the way in which these students are supported, including how teaching assistants work. This is making a difference to the quality of students' learning. Teaching assistants described a renewed enthusiasm for their work.
- The management of staff performance is good. This is closely linked to how well teachers are making a difference in the classroom, and to how staff in the school support all aspects of students' achievement.

- The range of subjects and courses on offer to students is good. The school carefully monitors the attendance and behaviour of those students who follow courses not at the school. Leaders know that courses are making a good difference to students' attitudes and engagement. Leaders have started to check the progress students are making in their learning when being educated out of school.
- The local authority has funded the high-quality support received from a National Leader of Education as well as from one of its consultants. This support has helped to increase the school's capacity to be better and to improve the quality of teaching. Financial and teaching support will continue, at least in the short term.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - Members of the interim executive board know the strengths and development needs of the school, including how quickly the quality of teaching is improving, and what still needs to be done to increase students' achievement in comparison to all schools nationally. They have received training on aspects such as the management of performance and have put this to good effect. Members know in detail how the school is spending additional funding to support the most potentially vulnerable students and what difference it has made. Appropriate plans are in place to establish a shadow governing body. However, leaders need to ensure that new members have the skills and expertise to ask the necessary questions that will challenge and support the school in its future development.

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	103853
Local authority	Dudley
Inspection number	398972

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1247
Appropriate authority	The interim executive board
Chair	Julie Jasper
Headteacher	Deane Baker (Principal)
Date of previous school inspection	28 March 2011
Telephone number	01384 816225
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