

Dowdales School

Nelson Street, Dalton-in-Furness, Cumbria, LA15 8AH

Inspection dates 20–21 November 2013

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Good	2
	This inspection:	Good	2
Achievement of pupils		Good	2
Quality of teaching		Good	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Outstanding	1
Leadership and management		Outstanding	1

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school.

- Dowdales provides a highly positive environment for learning; students thrive and staff continually develop their skills.
- Students make good progress and achieve above average standards in most subjects at GCSE.
- Students with disabilities and those who have special educational needs make excellent progress. Their needs are fully met in classes and any additional support is carefully planned.
- Teaching is good and there is some that is outstanding. Teachers' in-depth subject knowledge and enthusiastic approach inspires students to do well.
- Relationships are reinforcing and positive. Students develop excellent personal skills, including those in leadership and enterprise.
- Students feel valued and are safe. There is outstanding support to promote their wellbeing, especially for those who need extra help.
- Students' behaviour is outstanding. They have a real love for learning and a mature approach in lessons. They behave impeccably around school.
- The headteacher, senior team and governors provide outstanding leadership, which is based on extremely high aspirations for all students.
- There are excellent procedures to manage and improve teaching. Leaders tackle issues that result in students making less than expected progress quickly and effectively.
- The school has a strong capacity to sustain further improvements. This is significantly enhanced by its wide-ranging and productive partnerships.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Teaching in the mixed-ability classes does not always provide a high level of challenge for more-able students.
- Students do not make the same rapid progress in mathematics that they make in other subjects.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 42 part-lessons and sampled students' work across all year groups and most subjects. Two lessons were observed jointly with senior leaders.
- Inspectors met with all senior leaders, several subject leaders, the special educational needs coordinator and pastoral leaders. They met with five governors and two representatives of the local authority.
- They had discussions with groups of students and spoke to students in lessons and around school.
- A range of documentation was examined, including the school's self-evaluation and improvement planning, records from governing body meetings, performance management and safeguarding procedures, attendance and behaviour records.
- Inspectors took account of 84 responses to Parent View (the Ofsted online questionnaire) and of the responses made to the school's recent parent survey. They spoke to some parents by telephone at their request. They also took account of 54 staff questionnaires.
- During this inspection, inspectors asked additional questions designed to ascertain the school's view of the impact and effectiveness of local authority services to support school improvement. This information will contribute to work being carried out by Ofsted to assess the use, quality and impact of those services.

Inspection team

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Her Majesty's Inspector

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Additional Inspector

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Full report

Information about this school

- Dowdales is an above-average sized secondary school.
- Most students are taught in mixed-ability classes at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. Those with high aptitude are taught in separate groups.
- The proportion of students known to be eligible for the pupil premium funding is below average. Pupil premium is additional government funding provided to this school for students known to be eligible for free school meals and children who are looked after by the local authority.
- The proportion of students who are disabled or who have special educational needs and are supported through school action is below average. The proportion of students supported at school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is well below average.
- There are very few students from minority ethnic backgrounds and almost all have English as their first language.
- Dowdales is a strategic partner in the Queen Katherine Teaching School Alliance, Kendal and also the Northern Lights Teaching School Alliance, North Yorkshire. It is part of the Furness Education Consortium and a member of the Council for the Registration of Schools Teaching Dyslexic Students. It is a lead school for leadership, coaching and volunteering with the Youth Sport Trust, has the Arts Council Artsmark Gold Award and is a British Council International School.
- The school has four specialist leaders of education and fourteen lead learners. It provides support and hosts professional development events for a number of schools in the area.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Increase the proportion of outstanding teaching by:
 - checking students' understanding throughout lessons to ensure that the more-able students in mixed-ability classes always have demanding tasks that take their learning forward rapidly
 - honing questioning to provide greater challenge for students and promote deeper understanding
 - giving students more opportunities to enquire and learn for themselves.
- Ensure that students make rapid progress and attain the same high standards in mathematics as they do in other subjects by
 - ensuring teaching builds on prior learning at a more rapid pace
 - providing greater challenge for the more-able students in the mixed-ability classes.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils is good

- Most students enter the school with attainment that is at or above the expected level in English and mathematics.
- Students make good progress from their different starting points in English and have attained high standards at GCSE for the last three years. A slight dip in 2013 has been fully analysed, ensuring that all students currently in the school make good progress.
- Standards in mathematics declined in 2012 and consequently the proportion of students achieving five or more GCSEs at grade C and above including English and mathematics declined to broadly average. Leaders have taken effective action to bring about a considerable improvement in the proportion of students achieving five good GCSEs including both English and mathematics in 2013.
- The school does not enter students early for GCSE. Students continue to build on their knowledge and skills to achieve the best possible grade when entered in the summer of Year 11.
- Improvements to teaching are ensuring that students make better progress in mathematics lessons. However, the rate of progress is still below expectations for students who achieved Level 4 at Key Stage 2 and this remains a key priority for mathematics leaders and teachers.
- The vast majority of students make good progress in other subjects across Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 because teachers have high expectations and make learning interesting and relevant. Students make particularly good progress in English, science, humanities, religious education, dance and drama, where teaching is matched carefully to students' differing abilities.
- Where progress is not as rapid, for example in music, PE and art, appropriate steps are being taken to secure improvements.
- The school promotes equality of opportunity effectively for all students. The commitment to mixed-ability teaching ensures that all students benefit from rich and varied learning experiences. However, occasionally the more-able students in mixed-ability classes do not make the same rapid progress as others. In some lessons, the work they are set does not extend their learning as quickly as it could.
- Students with lower prior attainment, with disabilities or special educational needs make excellent progress. They benefit from teaching that meets their needs effectively and from full involvement in group work with students of all ability. The Year 7 catch-up funding is used very effectively to provide additional support for those who need extra help.
- Students supported by the pupil premium funding receive a range of additional support to raise their achievement and develop their personal skills. They make better progress than similar students nationally but are around one-third to half a grade behind other students in the school at GCSE. Evaluations of the detailed plans to raise achievement show that the gap is narrowing.
- More-able students in the high aptitude groups make rapid progress and achieve highly. Regular monitoring of their progress ensures they are on track to reach their full potential in each subject.

The quality of teaching is good

- Teaching is good and there is some that is outstanding. Teachers' strong subject knowledge, together with varied and enthusiastic approaches to teaching inspire a love for learning. Lessons are well organised so students know exactly what they are expected to learn.
- Students make good progress because teaching builds on their knowledge, skills and understanding effectively over time. In a highly effective GCSE history lesson for example, students applied their skills to test sources for reliability before reaching well considered conclusions about public health in the nineteenth century.
- Students' reading and writing skills are promoted well, enabling them to access information and

write with confidence in a range of subjects. Their written work is well organised, neatly presented and of high quality. The promotion of mathematical skills across the curriculum is not as well developed and is a priority in school improvement plans.

- Teachers take care to attend to the learning needs of students with disabilities and those with special educational needs during whole class teaching. Students with literacy difficulties are helped to overcome barriers to their learning with excellent specialist support.
- Students who are eligible for support with pupil premium funding receive additional support in small groups or through individual tutoring as well as good support in class. Students feel that their needs are very well met; their work shows that they make good progress.
- Teachers use assessment information well to plan lessons. Marking is informative and teachers provide frequent opportunities for students to reflect on their learning. Students have a good understanding of what to do to improve their work.
- Where teaching is highly effective, teachers assess students' understanding as the lesson progresses and adapt their teaching to meet the needs of all students precisely. However, there are some lessons where students' understanding is not checked as carefully, which results in a slowing of progress in parts of the lesson.
- Form-time at the start of the day is extremely well organised in most classes. Students consider issues, such as bullying, share positive behaviours for learning and reflect on their own learning and targets for improvement. In a minority of classes, this time is not used as productively.
- Many teachers use questioning skilfully to develop deeper understanding and extend students' learning. This was seen in several lessons, including in German, Information Technology and English. However questioning is not always as sharp or searching enough to explore complex ideas and develop students' higher level thinking.
- Where students learn most rapidly they are given opportunities to investigate, solve problems and carry out independent research. This was seen in very effective science lessons. However there are some occasions when the tasks set for students are not open-ended or challenging enough for more-able students in the group.
- Students are extremely well prepared for the next stage of their education or training. They receive outstanding guidance to help them choose the most suitable Key Stage 4 courses. The very strong links with post-16 providers and local employers ensure they are well informed of their choices when they leave Dowdales. Virtually all students go on to further education or training.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are outstanding

- Students have excellent attitudes to learning. In lessons they behave maturely, often supporting each other and always willing to contribute their understandings. Their enthusiasm for learning drives them to achieve their best.
- Students cooperate well in class and during practical work. They respect each other's views and work extremely well in pairs and small groups. In a lesson on rugby league, Year 7 students quickly organised themselves into teams and conducted themselves skilfully with due care for everyone's safety.
- Behaviour around the school is impeccable. Students show consideration toward each other and are extremely polite and well mannered. They are friendly and sociable during breaktimes. They are fully aware of their responsibilities in school and as representatives of the school when off-site.
- All students have the opportunity to take on leadership roles and they develop excellent leadership and enterprise skills as they progress up the school's 'leadership ladder'. Students make valuable contributions through the School Council and various student groups and as form captains, prefects, sports leaders and coaches. They frequently review teaching and their views are respected and acted on.
- Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural awareness is promoted extremely well in lessons, assemblies and the many additional opportunities they have to develop their personal skills.

Consequently they have a considered approach to ethical issues and respectful understanding of different cultures and lifestyles.

- There is a constant focus on the prevention of bullying. Students are very well informed and talk sensibly about different types of bullying such as homophobic, racist and cyber-bullying. They understand the harmful effects it can have. Many students told inspectors that bullying is rare. Older students said that occasionally younger students may use inappropriate language but, as one student said, 'they soon learn that it's not the Dowdales way'.
- Students' attendance is consistently high and they are usually punctual to lessons. Their enjoyment of school is exemplified in the comment of one student who said, 'we come to school with a smile on our faces!' Students' personal and academic achievement is enhanced through the many clubs and sporting opportunities at lunchtimes and after school.
- The school is highly inclusive and leaders do everything they can to avoid exclusion. The support for students who are vulnerable because of their challenging circumstances and for those with special and behavioural needs is outstanding. Exclusions are few and are reducing.
- Students know how to keep themselves safe in many different situations, including when using internet sites. They show interest in discussing global issues and have a good appreciation of diversity, because such issues are explored in classes.
- The vast majority of parents, carers and staff are positive about behaviour and feel their child is safe and well looked after.
- Students are full of praise for the school, saying for example, 'we're proud to be Dowdales students; it's our identity and what we are', and 'staff help us to develop as people, not just as machines to get results.'

The leadership and management are outstanding

- The headteacher and senior leaders provide excellent leadership. They provide clear direction to make sure all students achieve as well as they possibly can. Staff are dedicated to achieving the school's aims, 'to provide a world class education for every student and be the best we can in all that we do'.
- Leaders and governors ensure that excellent relationships are fostered, discrimination is tackled and all pupils have equal opportunities to learn and make good progress.
- Self-evaluation is accurate and improvement plans focus on the right priorities. Plans set ambitious targets for students and the performance of staff. There is a strong link between performance, students' achievement and pay progression.
- The procedures to manage and improve the performance of staff are highly effective. Teaching is monitored rigorously and any teaching that falls short of expectation is supported to improve quickly. For example, students' achievement in mathematics is improving because subject leadership has been strengthened.
- Senior leaders have created a culture of learning and sharing good practice that benefits all staff. They receive and contribute to high quality professional development which helps improve teaching and raise standards. Students also play a significant part in reviewing teaching and leading improvements – a responsibility they relish!
- Most subject leaders monitor improve teaching and learning in their departments expertly. Occasionally, there has been a mismatch between predicted grades at GCSE and students' actual achievement. Where this has been the case, for example in Art, PE and mathematics, there are plans in place to secure improvement.
- Leadership of support for vulnerable students, those eligible for the pupil premium funding and those who have disabilities or special educational needs is excellent. Leaders know the students extremely well and ensure their needs are fully met.
- Students study a range of subjects that meet their needs well. More-able students are successfully guided to achieve top grades at GCSE. Those who need more help benefit from well targeted support to develop their key literacy and numeracy skills and follow a relevant curriculum. There are rich and varied opportunities for students to develop further skills and

extend their learning outside the school day.

- School leaders have cultivated an extensive range of partnerships to raise the aspirations of staff and students. International links and work with universities, local businesses, sports trusts, performing arts and engineering organisations, provide many additional opportunities for students. Partnerships with other schools, through teaching school alliances and local consortiums provide excellent professional development opportunities for staff.
- The four specialist leaders of education, fifteen lead learners and the 'Leading Learning' team work across the whole school and in many other schools locally and further afield. They are often observed teaching in the specially developed teaching room to provide coaching opportunities for colleagues.
- The vast majority of parents who responded to the online Parent View survey and the recent school survey express high levels of satisfaction. A few feel that they could be better informed about their child's progress. Those who contacted inspectors were extremely pleased with the school, saying that 'the school is highly thought of'.
- The excellent procedures to improve teaching, and develop leadership ensure continued high achievement, and provide the school with a very strong capacity to sustain improvement.
- The local authority supports the school effectively, under the terms agreed for schools requiring minimal support. Governors have benefitted from training and the adviser works closely with the Governing Body to support the performance management of the headteacher.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - Governors have a highly professional approach. They have an excellent understanding of students' achievement, strengths and key priorities in the school. This is because they have well established links with departments and regular meetings with different groups of staff and students. They carry out their monitoring role rigorously and probe for further information. They have high aspirations for all students and for the school as a whole.
 - Safeguarding and child protection arrangements meet all requirements. Governors have a detailed plan outlining how additional funding, including the pupil premium, is spent and its intended impact on raising students' achievement. Governors have resolved some difficult budget issues in the last few years.
 - The head boy and head girl are associate governors and make a valuable contribution to meetings as well as feeding back to students.

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	112383
Local authority	Cumbria
Inspection number	427356

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	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1,049
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Craig Bland
Headteacher	Julie O'Connor
Date of previous school inspection	15 June 2011
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