

Thorns Community College

Stockwell Avenue, Brierley Hill, DY5 2NU

Inspection dates

27–28 February 2014

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement.

- In 2013, standards at the end of Year 11 were low and rates of progress too slow. Students in the current Year 11 are making better progress as a result of closely targeted support.
- The achievement of disabled students and those with special educational needs requires improvement, particularly in English. There is currently no leader of the support provided for this group of students.
- Although most students behave well in lessons and around the school, a small minority disrupt the learning of others.
- Not all teachers plan lessons in sufficient detail to ensure that the most able are sufficiently challenged or the least able sufficiently supported. They do not always make it clear to students why they are undertaking a task or how it will enable them to reach their targets.
- Where teaching is less effective, students' attitudes to learning are poor because tasks do not interest them and their behaviour is not sufficiently well managed.
- The quality of marking is inconsistent so that students do not always understand how well they are doing or what to do to improve.
- Although the new Principal has a clear understanding of areas for development, and achievement is now rising, the new policies and strategies that have been introduced are not yet sufficiently established to have had a sustained impact on improving the quality of teaching and learning.
- The local authority has not addressed the lack of a substantive governing body with sufficient urgency. The interim executive board has provided good support for the school but does not have the capacity to fully support and challenge all aspects of the school's work.

The school has the following strengths

- The gap in the performance between those for whom the school receives additional funding and other students is now closing dramatically across the school.
- The range of subjects that students study is well planned to meet their individual needs and interests.
- The pastoral support provided by the school is robust and ensures that students feel safe and well cared for.
- The new leaders of English, mathematics and science are strong and are having an impact on raising achievement in these subjects.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 52 lessons, seven of which were seen together with one of the school's senior leaders. They also made a number of further short visits to lessons.
- Meetings were held with students, governors and staff, including subject leaders. A telephone conversation took place with a representative of the local authority.
- The inspectors observed the school's work and looked at policies, the school's own assessment of its strengths and weaknesses and its development planning, minutes of meetings of the governing body, records of lesson observations, information about students' progress, safeguarding documents, and samples of students' work.
- The views of the 14 parents and carers who responded to the online questionnaire (Parent View) were taken into account, together with the school's own survey of the views of parents and carers. Inspectors also took account of 23 responses to the staff questionnaire.

Inspection team

Mary Davis, Lead inspector	Additional Inspector
Neil Gillespie	Additional Inspector
William Cassell	Additional Inspector
Christopher Crouch	Additional Inspector
Jane Woodall	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The school is larger than the average-sized secondary school.
- The proportion of disabled students and those who have special educational needs supported through school action is above average, as is the proportion supported through school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs.
- The proportion of students from minority ethnic heritages is below average. Very few students speak English as an additional language.
- The proportion of students for whom the school receives the pupil premium, which provides additional funding for students in local authority care and those known to be eligible for free school meals, is average.
- Eight students from Years 10 to 11 follow a variety of full- or part-time alternative courses at Black Country Wheels or at the Cherry Tree Medical Centre.
- The school meets the current government floor standards for secondary schools, which set the minimum expectations for students' attainment and progress.
- Over the past two years, there has been a significant turnover in staffing, including senior leaders. The school was led by an acting Principal for the autumn term in 2013. The new Principal took up post at the start of January 2014.
- During 2013, both the English and mathematics departments experienced staffing shortages and long-term absence. The mathematics department had no leader for a term. New leaders of English, mathematics and science have recently taken up post over the last two years.
- The three members of the interim executive board were appointed in 2011. There is currently no substantive governing body.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that teaching is consistently good or outstanding by:
 - improving the rigour with which teachers plan their lessons so that tasks are sufficiently challenging to stretch those of highest ability and support those of lowest ability
 - making sure that lesson activities are relevant and interesting so that they fully engage students in their learning
 - making sure that students understand the purpose of lesson tasks and how they will enable them to build their skills, knowledge and understanding to reach their targets
 - improving the consistency of written marking so that students understand how well they are doing and what they need to do next, and ensuring they have sufficient opportunity to use this advice to improve their work.
- Raise the achievement of disabled students and those with special educational needs by appointing a qualified leader to coordinate the support for this group of students.
- Ensure that all students behave well in lessons by consistently applying the school's behaviour policy in all lessons and that all teachers have high expectations of students' attitudes to learning.
- Ensure that the local authority takes urgent action to establish a full governing body.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils

requires improvement

- Students typically enter the school with average basic skills in reading, writing, communication and mathematics but, by the end of Year 11, the proportion of students gaining five GCSE passes at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, was below average in 2013. This was due to the staffing difficulties encountered by the school during this academic year in key subjects, which resulted in insufficient support being put in place to address underachievement. These issues have now been resolved and the school's current assessments indicate that standards have risen substantially.
- Progress of all students in English and mathematics was well below that of other schools during 2013, and the most-able students did not achieve the highest grades of which they were capable. The school has rigorously addressed the underlying issues, and current assessments indicate that rates of progress across the school have improved considerably in these subjects. The school does not limit students' chances of achieving higher grades by entering them early for their GCSEs.
- The progress of disabled students and those with special educational needs was below expectations and this has not improved at the same rate as their peers because the school has yet to appoint a leader to coordinate the support for this group. Specialist teaching assistants are taking an interim role and are providing a good quality of support for individuals.
- There is no significant difference in achievement between students of different ethnic backgrounds or the very few who speak English as an additional language and other students.
- Year 7 catch-up funding is used appropriately to provide support for those entering the school with low basic skills in literacy and numeracy. This support is being increasingly effective and leaders are now checking more carefully that this is leading to raising standards. This support continues through Key Stage 3 and beyond in order to ensure that students have the skills they need to achieve. Teachers regularly provide opportunities for students to read out loud and promote the technical vocabulary for their subject. Students were observed reading fluently and with expression. The library is well used after school.
- The gap between the achievement in English and mathematics of students for whom the school receives additional pupil premium funding and that of their classmates widened in 2013. These students were over a grade below their peers in both subjects. The wide gap in progress rates has remained since the previous inspection. However, the school has rigorously addressed this and raised the awareness of all teaching staff of the needs of this group. As a result, the school's tracking shows that the gap has closed dramatically for the current Year 11, and this is also the case across the school. During the inspection, it was clear that the performance of this group is a focus in all lessons and those of highest ability were observed to be achieving equally as well as their peers.
- The small number of students following alternative courses achieve well as a result of the active and appropriate courses that closely match their needs and interests.
- In most lessons, students are keen to do well, and students in Year 11, in particular, were observed showing commitment to their studies even when the teaching was uninspiring or the task mundane.

The quality of teaching**requires improvement**

- Although the large majority of teaching observed during the inspection was good, and some was outstanding, there is some inconsistency and a small amount of teaching is inadequate.
- Although all teachers are focused on the different groups of students in their classes through identifying them on seating plans, there is no expectation that they will plan their lessons in detail to make sure that all these groups are appropriately challenged or supported. In many lessons, therefore, all the class undertake the same task with the result that sometimes the most-able students find the work too easy or those of lower ability cannot make a start because it is too difficult.
- Where teaching is inadequate, students are not engaged in their learning because either tasks are not at the right level of difficulty or they are unexciting and lacking in relevance to the students' experience.
- Although most teachers identify a learning objective for the lesson, it is not always made clear to students why this task is important or what relevance it has in enabling them to reach their targets.
- Where teaching is most effective, teachers' good subject knowledge and an organised approach ensure that students know what to do to succeed, because teachers have ensured that skills have been built consistently over time. For example, in an English lesson where the teaching was outstanding, students confidently shared their work and identified for each other how to continually edit and improve their response to an examination question. The school's policy of modelling high-quality answers by showing 'what a good one looks like' (WAGOLL) has been effective in raising students' aspirations.
- Students know their targets and are often provided with the opportunity to assess their own or each other's work. Some written marking observed during the inspection was exemplary, providing students with clear guidelines on what to do next to reach their targets and providing the opportunity to apply this advice by, for example, redrafting a paragraph or trying a new challenge. The quality of marking overall, however, is inconsistent, so not all students understand how well they are doing or what they need to do to improve.
- Where teaching assistants are present in classrooms, they are well deployed and provide good support, using questioning well and knowing when to stand back and encourage students to develop independence.

The behaviour and safety of pupils**requires improvement**

- The behaviour of students requires improvement. In most lessons, there is a calm atmosphere and students show positive attitudes to their learning but, in a small minority of lessons where the teaching is less than good, students are not engaged in their work and are disruptive. During the inspection, this was often because the task set was not appropriate or because the teacher was not insisting that students follow instructions.
- Behaviour in the corridors and outside on this large school site is good. Students are punctual to lessons and are polite and welcoming to visitors. Inspectors were impressed with the way students were keen to help them find their way around the building and, in lessons, with their willingness to discuss their work with inspectors.

- The school's pastoral team is well organised. Behaviour support leaders, including heads of house, are rigorous in the way that they check on students' behaviour and track incidents over time. The tracking shows that incidents are declining and that support for those with behavioural difficulties is having an impact on improving the behaviour of individuals. Exclusions, previously above average, have declined as a result of the introduction of an internal exclusion room where students can be supervised as they work.
- Older students told inspectors that behaviour has improved dramatically over recent years and that they value the relationships they have with their teachers, who are always available to help them with their work or to support them if they have a problem. They also spoke highly of the vertical tutor system, which has resulted in a stronger sense of community and has helped them to have the opportunity to support younger students in their tutor group on a regular basis.
- Attendance rates have risen since the previous inspection and are now above average. The school provides strong support for families with poor attendance, including providing attendance clinics for parents and students.
- The school's work to keep students safe and secure is good. Students and parents agree that the school keeps them safe and there is always someone to whom they can talk. The school provides comprehensive support for students and their families facing challenging circumstances and enables the full inclusion of those students with a physical disability. For example, wheel-chair-bound students follow specially designed programmes in the school's fitness suite.
- Students have a good understanding of the different forms that bullying can take and say that the school deals quickly with any incidents and shows zero tolerance to racism or homophobic name calling. They say that they are provided with clear guidance on what to do if they encounter cyber-bullying.
- The school's systems of support include tutors, mentors, heads of house and senior pastoral leaders, and daily opportunities are provided for students to speak individually to their mentors. This results in students saying that they feel safe and well cared for.

The leadership and management

requires improvement

- Although the school's leadership has improved markedly since the arrival of the new Principal, leadership and management still require improvement as there are still issues which have not yet been dealt with effectively and the positive impact of recent changes has not yet led to secure and sustained improvement in the quality of teaching and students' achievement.
- The new Principal has been quick to evaluate the school's effectiveness and to identify appropriate areas for development, and has started to address them with rigour. He is well supported by his small senior team and together they have begun to have an impact on raising achievement, the quality of teaching and to ensure students' well-being. Leaders express their pride in both the staff and the students and their determination to take the school forward at a rapid pace but have not yet had time to fully establish new strategies for securing improvement.
- Since the previous inspection, the tracking of progress and the analysis of data on students' performance have been thorough, but have not led to effective strategies to address the underachievement identified. This has now been rectified and students in Year 11 spoke of how much they value the additional support they are receiving. This is now more closely focused on students' individual needs and staff are rigorously held to account for the rates of progress of

their students. Leaders are relentless in expressing the expectation that all students will make at least expected progress, and staff and students are responding well.

- The strong new leaders of English, mathematics and science have already had an impact on raising outcomes for students. They closely check on the progress of individual students and challenge teachers to ensure that progress targets are met. They are sharing good practice as a group and show a good capacity for continued improvement.
- Processes for setting teachers' performance targets have been made more secure, and salary increases are only awarded if targets are met.
- The quality of teaching is closely monitored and appropriate support put in place for those whose teaching requires improvement. A variety of training is offered but is not yet compulsory or fully focused on the needs of individual teachers. The main issues raised by the previous inspection regarding the improvement of lesson planning and the quality of marking have still to be effectively addressed.
- The courses that students follow are flexible to meet their needs and include pathways where students can follow off-site courses such as construction or hairdressing. The flexibility includes not only a range of choices but also varying the amount of time given to each subject according to individual students' needs. Careers advice is provided by the school's staff, and students in Year 11 say that this has helped them to decide on their next steps.
- A good range of clubs and other activities promote students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development well. The new phases of the building are light and airy with inspirational displays of students' work. The state-of-the-art sports facilities and the well-equipped drama theatre enrich students' experience and promote partnership with the local community. Some subjects, however, suffer from poor facilities and cramped conditions.
- The school seeks to engage the support of parents in a variety of ways. Learning mentors do not have teaching responsibilities and so they are available to respond quickly to concerns and are able to forge relationships with families over time. Information is provided through the website and through regular reports on students' progress.
- Safeguarding arrangements meet current requirements.
- The local authority has provided financial support for the school's leaders as well as the support of an external consultant. Support has also been provided to build the capacity of subject leadership and to improve behaviour. However, it has not taken swift enough action to secure a full governing body and this is urgently needed to ensure the school continues to have the capacity to improve.

■ **The governance of the school:**

- The three members of the interim executive board (IEB) have been working in difficult circumstances over the past three years: they have had to deal with issues such as the departure of the previous Principal and key staff, to provide support for an acting Principal and to oversee the appointment of the current Principal. They have worked hard to provide stability and direction during a period when the local authority's support varied. Although members have a detailed knowledge of the school and are totally committed to its success, they are very stretched in terms of reviewing the effectiveness of all aspects of the school's work and providing the challenge and support that the new Principal requires. Nevertheless, they have a good understanding of the school's effectiveness and how it compares to schools nationally. The IEB has had to seek and organise training and support. Their financial

expertise has allowed them to identify the need to make reductions over the next three years as a result of falling roles and to support the Principal in developing an appropriate plan.

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	431684

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1200
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Julie Jasper
Principal	Andy Cox
Date of previous school inspection	4 December 2012
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