

Thorns Community College

Stockwell Avenue, Quarry Bank, Brierley Hill, West Midlands DY5 2NU

Inspection dates

4–5 May 2016

Overall effectiveness

Inadequate

Effectiveness of leadership and management	Inadequate
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Requires improvement
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Inadequate
Outcomes for pupils	Requires improvement
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an inadequate school

- School leaders and the governing body have failed to ensure that safeguarding in the school is effective.
- Leaders have not acted quickly enough to improve the quality of teaching and outcomes for pupils to a good standard.
- Not enough pupils in key stage 4 make good enough progress, although this is improving. This is particularly the case for pupils who have special educational needs or disability.
- The school's ability to improve has been hindered by instability within leadership, especially senior leadership, resulting in insufficient capacity.
- Governance is not effective. Governors, many of whom are new, are still developing the skills they need to support and challenge leaders.
- The quality of teaching remains too variable, although it has recently begun to improve. Not all teachers meet leaders' expectations in lessons.
- Teachers do not use the information they have about pupils well enough to plan work that meets their learning needs.
- Leaders are not using the information they collect to check the impact of teaching on the progress of particular groups of pupils with sufficient rigour.
- Pupils' attendance is too low, especially for pupils who have special educational needs or disability and those who are disadvantaged. Leaders do not evaluate their actions to improve attendance with sufficient rigour.

The school has the following strengths

- The principal has ambition and vision for the school. The senior team, some of whom are recently appointed, are committed and have absolute determination to succeed and improve outcomes for pupils.
- Most-able pupils do well, making good rates of progress that are in line with similar pupils nationally.
- The proportion of Year 11 pupils successfully moving on to education, employment or training after leaving Thorns Community College is higher than the national average.

Full report

In accordance with the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires special measures because it is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the school are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- As a matter of priority, ensure that all aspects of safeguarding are effective, by:
 - making sure that new safeguarding leaders and all staff receive appropriate training
 - reviewing school policy to reflect the most current legislation and guidance and fully embedding this in the practice of all staff
 - making sure that effective, timely and appropriate support is available for the most vulnerable pupils at the school.
- Improve leadership and management in order to drive standards higher and accelerate the progress pupils make, by:
 - quickly developing the roles and skills of governors so that governance is robust and secure and ensures the school fulfils its statutory duties
 - ensuring that newly appointed senior leaders have clearly defined roles and responsibilities, receive appropriate support, collect evidence of their actions and evaluate the impact of their work
 - evaluating the effectiveness of the use of pupil premium funding to identify interventions which have reduced gaps in outcomes between disadvantaged pupils and others in the school
 - using all of the information available to check on the impact that teaching has on pupils' progress, especially for different groups of pupils within the school.
- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in order to accelerate improvements in pupils' progress and outcomes, especially for pupils who have special educational needs or disability, by:
 - making sure all teachers consistently meet leaders' expectations for teaching and learning, for example in the pace of lessons and making sure pupils know how to improve their work
 - making certain that teachers meet pupils' needs and check that all receive the support needed to ensure best progress
 - sharing the good practice that is already established within the school.
- Improve pupils' behaviour, attendance and attitudes to school and to learning by ensuring that:
 - positive action is taken to increase attendance and reduce persistent absence, particularly for pupils who have special educational needs or disability and those who are disadvantaged, so that attendance is at least in line with national averages for all pupils
 - systematic and coherent structures are developed for the analysis of pupils' behaviour so that it can be monitored over time and the effectiveness of strategies to improve behaviour can be fully evaluated
 - parents are fully aware of actions taken by the school in response to tackling poor behaviour.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess the impact of this aspect of leadership and management and how it may be improved.

An external review of the school's use of pupil premium funding should be undertaken to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is inadequate

- Leaders' current arrangements for safeguarding pupils do not meet statutory requirements nor reflect the most up-to-date guidance that is available. Staff training in safeguarding does not reflect the most recent legislation. In addition, at times, insufficient action, or recording of action, has been taken to support the most vulnerable pupils. Leaders are now aware of these concerns and have started to rapidly rectify this situation. Leaders ensure that pupils who access their education at places away from the school are effectively safeguarded.
- Actions taken by leaders and governors since the two previous inspections have not resulted in sufficient improvement in the quality of teaching and outcomes. As a result, these areas still require improvement to become good.
- Turbulence in leadership in the school has resulted from many changes to the senior leadership team. The senior leadership team has had insufficient capacity to secure the improvements needed in enough areas of the school because of staffing issues and long-term absence. Recently, the principal has restructured the senior team as staffing matters have been resolved. This has resulted in a considerable increase in leadership capacity. It is too early for this to have had a demonstrable impact on improving the school.
- School leaders recognise that some of the ways they use the pupil premium funding are having a positive impact in closing gaps in achievement between disadvantaged pupils and their classmates. However, leaders have not sufficiently evaluated the strategies they are using to support disadvantaged pupils. As a result, they are not sure which interventions have proved most effective in reducing the achievement gaps.
- Many parents stated that they receive valuable information about their child's progress and that the school responds well to concerns. However, this perception is not held by all parents.
- Senior and middle leaders know how well pupils are doing overall because they scrutinise performance information regularly. For example, middle leaders are held to account by the headline performance committee for the progress of pupils within their subject areas. However, there is insufficient analysis of how well all different groups of pupils are doing. This is especially true for disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs or disability.
- The principal has ambition and is determined to make the school successful. He has a clear vision for the school and is supported by two established vice-principals and five recently appointed assistant principals. Most parents feel that the school is well led and managed. One comment included 'The principal is a good man and a good leader'.
- Senior leaders know the school's strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning. Leaders use a wide range of information to inform their realistic assessment of school standards and create clear plans for improvement.
- Staff continue to share leaders' vision for the school, despite the changes in senior staff and their roles. Staff support the school and are committed to its improvement and success. One parent said that their children at the school '...have taken advantage of some of the many opportunities the school offers and are fully involved in school life. Many staff go out of their way to provide an interesting and diverse curriculum and other opportunities'.
- Leaders are improving the quality of teaching through successful training and development sessions. For example, leaders have shared clear expectations of how to approach teaching, learning and assessment. Teachers benefit from this training and development and as a result teaching practices are improving. However, some variation in practice remains and not all staff follow school policy. Senior leaders have clearly linked teachers' performance to the outcome of pupils they teach and other standards expected of teachers.
- Leaders have planned a curriculum that is broad and balanced and provides a range of courses that meet the needs and interests of pupils. There is a good range of subjects for pupils to choose from that interest pupils. The curriculum embeds opportunities to develop pupils' spiritual, social, moral and cultural development, particularly in humanities and ethics lessons.
- School leaders place importance on good relations and wider participation by pupils. Staff support this emphasis through providing a range of well-attended extra-curricular and enrichment opportunities for pupils. These include visits, trips, subject clubs and a variety of sporting, performing and expressive arts clubs.

- Pupils are prepared well for life in modern Britain. The curriculum and extra-curricular activities result in the development of positive values, attitudes and respect for people who are different from themselves.
- Year 7 catch-up funding is used well to support progress in English and mathematics of pupils with low attainment on joining the school. Pupils' skills are developed through small-group and individual support. As a result, pupils' literacy and numeracy skills are improving.
- **The governance of the school**
 - Governors have not fulfilled their statutory responsibilities where safeguarding is concerned. They have not monitored this important aspect of the school's work with sufficient scrutiny and rigour and as a result they have not noticed that safeguarding arrangements are ineffective.
 - Governance has changed since the previous inspection. A new governing body which replaced the interim executive board was established in summer 2015. The new governing body has not fully developed clear roles for all its members. As a result, governors are not fully in a position to challenge and support the school to drive the rapid improvements necessary.
 - Those who are new to governance do not have the skills to develop a detailed understanding of the school's strengths or weaknesses but are undertaking appropriate training to develop these skills.
 - Governors have a good grasp of how additional funding should be deployed, including funding for disadvantaged pupils. They aspire to ensure that it makes a difference to pupils. However, governors have not judged the effectiveness of interventions taken because they have not checked on the success of these strategies.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are not effective.
- Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment requires improvement

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment across the school has improved since the previous inspection but it is not yet consistently good. Pupils make increased progress as a result of better teaching, but variations remain for some groups of pupils. Senior leaders know that there is more to do to reduce the inconsistencies that remain in teaching in some subjects.
- Although teachers know and understand pupils' individual needs, their teaching strategies are not always adapted carefully to suit them. For example, teachers have information about pupils who have low levels of literacy, yet still use the same text or written tasks with every pupil. This means that some pupils are not able to participate fully in all learning activities, and this slows down how well they are doing.
- Teachers regularly plan lessons with increasing levels of challenge. However, sometimes the pace of lessons is still too slow, particularly in longer lessons, so pupils do not always have the opportunity to move quickly enough to the aspects of the lessons which are more challenging.
- Pupils in some subjects, including English, history and German, benefit from clearly identified areas to improve their work in books. However, teachers do not always follow leaders' expectations with respect to marking and feedback. As a result, in some subjects pupils do not always know how, or are not given sufficient time, to improve their work.
- Staff changes in the past, especially in English, has resulted in variability in the quality of teaching. These have been resolved since the start of the current academic year. As there is now stability in staff, teaching in English is better than it has been before, reflected in improvements in outcomes.
- Teachers have good subject knowledge which they use effectively to provide interesting and engaging lessons. For example in a history lesson, the teacher used a range of relevant and well-chosen historical artefacts to stimulate a debate about the way the media presented the English Civil War.
- At times, questioning skills are first-rate, including in English and science. Teachers demand full responses and press pupils to elaborate and justify their answers. These teachers promote discussion between pupils and ensure correct use of technical vocabulary that is relevant to the subject. For example in a physics lesson, pupils were expected to use the terms 'nuclear fission' and 'nuclear fusion' correctly, and fully describe, compare and contrast these very different processes.
- The quality of relationships between adults and pupils is good and makes pupils engage in learning and want to learn. Teachers encourage pupils to show respect for the ideas and views of others. For example, in a dance lesson, pupils evaluated the performances of others by applying examination grade criteria. The pupils were then able to provide concise yet focused feedback to enable the performers to improve. However, in some lessons pupils place less value on the contributions by their peers than their teachers.

- Teaching assistants are prepared fully to support learning and employ effective ways to guide pupils in lessons.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare is inadequate

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is inadequate.
- Safeguarding systems are inadequate. Leaders have not ensured key procedures and statutory requirements for safeguarding have been followed consistently. Consequently, the safety and welfare of all pupils, particularly the most vulnerable, at the school has not been assured.
- Many pupils say they feel safe and are confident that if they had any difficulties they would be promptly and effectively dealt with by adults at the school. This view is shared by most parents.
- Almost all pupils state that bullying is not a concern for them, and only a small number of pupils say they are aware of bullying taking place at the school. However, some parents have reservations about how the school responds to their concerns, for example regarding instances of bullying.
- Pupils' personal, social and health education are developed through a programme of additional sessions and activities. Through these experiences pupils are able to explore these issues well. Pupils develop awareness of a range of issues including internet safety and the effects of radicalisation and extremism.
- There is a strong focus on providing effective careers education and information, advice and guidance. Information is made available to pupils about local colleges. Parents are involved in the careers information process. Higher levels of guidance are provided for pupils identified at risk of not continuing in education, employment or training when they leave school. As a result, more pupils who leave the school move on to college and others into employment with further training, than do nationally.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils requires improvement.
- The number of pupils regularly absent from school remains above the national average and the percentage of those persistently absent is high. Pupils who have special educational needs or disability and those who are disadvantaged have absence rates much higher than other pupils. Leaders recognise that more needs to be done to improve attendance, especially of these groups of pupils. Strategies to improve attendance are reflected in a new school policy but have not yet had time to have a positive impact.
- There has been a significant reduction in incidents of disruptive behaviour in lessons this year and low level disruption to lessons is rare. Leaders are currently addressing the school's behaviour policy which does not support all staff.
- Pupils often produce work that is well presented and complete, but this is not the case for all.
- Leaders keep records of poor behaviour and attendance. However, they do not evaluate the information they collect effectively in order to target resources and help measure the impact of their actions on individuals and groups of pupils.
- Teachers use the school's rewards systems consistently well in lessons. Parents recognise the benefits of praising good work, for example one commented that 'postcards through the post have given us a chance to celebrate our daughter's achievements'.
- Pupils move sensibly between buildings and along corridors. They get on well together at lunchtimes and breaktimes, socialising together and enjoying each other's company.
- Most pupils are courteous and polite; they readily greet visitors, hold doors open for them and interact positively when discussing their work in lessons.
- Most pupils respect their environment and there is little litter, damage or graffiti around the site.
- Pupils report that they sometimes hear examples of bad and inappropriate language around the school. They report that if an adult hears it, it is usually dealt with promptly.
- Leaders use alternative provision appropriately for a small number of pupils. There are good links and procedures with those providing off-site courses to ensure that pupils are safe and attend regularly. The use of alternative provision has assisted in strengthening the personal development, behaviour and welfare of these pupils.

Outcomes for pupils

require improvement

- There is a picture of improvement in progress and attainment at the school. However, outcomes have still not improved quickly enough to become good.
- Many pupils enter the school with levels of prior attainment significantly below the national average. GCSE results for 2015 show the number of pupils achieving five or more good GCSE grades, including English and mathematics, had risen from the previous year, although gaps remain between girls and boys. Boys' attainment was significantly below national levels. However, in French and media studies pupils did well, achieving outcomes that were significantly better than all pupils nationally.
- There was an improvement in the proportion of pupils achieving the progress expected of them in English in 2015, but this was still significantly below the national figure. The proportion of pupils in the school making the expected rate of progress in mathematics was similar to that of all pupils nationally. This was a significant improvement on the previous year.
- Improved teaching in a range of subjects across the school has started to improve outcomes for pupils. Results were better in some subject areas in 2015, including science and languages. However, improvements in outcomes were slow and still below national expectations.
- Inspectors looked carefully and in detail at the evidence available for current outcomes for pupils across all subjects and years since the start of the current academic year. The school's extensive assessment information currently indicates that rates of progress in English are continuing to improve in 2016. The proportion of pupils making expected progress in mathematics in 2016 is now slightly higher than the progress expected of them. Pupils' outcomes have improved in most subject areas. Inspection evidence, including inspectors' checks on the work in pupils' books, confirms that progress is starting to accelerate.
- Rates of progress for disadvantaged pupils currently in the school are improving. Gaps between the proportion of disadvantaged and other pupils in the school making expected progress in English and mathematics are narrowing. However, gaps exist between the proportion of pupils who have special educational needs or disability making expected progress and their peers.
- The proportion of most-able pupils is below average on entry to the school. However, the most able pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, make good progress and gain results that are on a par with similar pupils nationally. On occasions, these pupils are not fully challenged. However two thirds of the most able pupils at Thorns Community College achieved the English Baccalaureate in 2015, compared to just over half of similar pupils nationally.
- The proportion of pupils with low levels of prior attainment on entry to the school is above average. In mathematics, the proportion of these pupils who make the expected rates of progress is greater than for similar pupils nationally. This has not been the case in English. Despite this, the average GCSE grade achieved by pupils with low levels of attainment was almost one grade higher than for similar pupils nationally in 2015.
- Pupils who have low levels of skill in literacy and/or numeracy when they start at the school in Year 7 are well supported by programmes that focus on developing these important skills. Pupils benefit from these effective interventions and pupils who were behind in English and/or mathematics catch up with their peers.
- A small number of pupils complete some of their education at different locations. These pupils are doing well. They make good progress and achieve qualifications that are relevant and useful, preparing them well for the next stage of their education.
- The process of careers information, guidance and advice starts not long after pupils join the school. As a result, pupils make informed choices about their futures. An increasing proportion of pupils successfully continue in education, training or employment when they leave the school. However, these measures have less impact on disadvantaged pupils and a lower proportion of these pupils achieve successful destinations than others at the school.

School details

Unique reference number	103853
Local authority	Dudley
Inspection number	10012433

This inspection 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	1,068
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Dennis Hodson
Principal	Mr Andrew Cox
Telephone number	01384 816225
Website	www.thorns-s.dudley.sch.uk
Email address	info@thorns-s.dudley.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	27–28 February 2014

Information about this school

- The school is larger than the average-sized secondary school.
- The proportion of pupils who are supported through the pupil premium (which provides additional funding for pupils known to be eligible for free school meals and those who are looked after by the local authority) is just above the national average.
- The proportion of pupils who have special educational needs or disability with a statement or education, health and care plan is average. The proportion of pupils who have special educational needs or disability without a statement or education, health and care plan supported by the school is almost double the average.
- Many of the pupils are of White British background and the school has a lower than average intake of pupils of minority ethnic heritage. Very few pupils speak English as an additional language.
- The school meets requirements on the publication of specified information on its website.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress.
- There are currently a small number of pupils from Years 10 and 11 who receive part of their education with a range of other providers in the local area.
- Since the previous inspection, there has continued to be turbulence in staffing and long-term absence. This has particularly affected the senior leadership team and the English department. These issues have now been resolved, for example with the appointment of five new assistant principals to the senior leadership team.
- A new governing body was formed in summer 2015 to replace the interim executive board that was responsible for the governance of the school at the time of the previous inspection.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed teaching in 41 lessons; five of these observations were carried out with members of the school's senior leadership team. Lessons visited covered a wide range of subjects and year groups. Inspectors observed a registration session and visited the skills base and learning centre. Pupils' behaviour between lessons, at break and lunchtimes was also observed by inspectors.
- Pupils' work was reviewed by inspectors in lessons and a separate sample was considered from a range of subjects for pupils in different year groups.
- Inspectors held meetings with senior and middle leaders, the chair of the governing body, an external adviser and a representative from the local authority.
- Inspectors evaluated the 174 responses from parents, most of which were through the Ofsted online questionnaire, Parent View. Inspectors took into account the views of members of staff through three formal meetings and through discussions about lessons observed.
- Pupils met formally with inspectors on three separate occasions. Inspectors also conducted many informal discussions with pupils during lessons and in social times.
- Inspectors reviewed documentation from a variety of sources, including: the school's self-evaluation and improvement plans, school policies, school information about outcomes, teaching and behaviour and minutes from meetings of the governing body.

Inspection team

Rob Hackfath, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Derek Barnes	Ofsted Inspector
Josie Leese	Ofsted Inspector
Sally Noble	Ofsted Inspector
Andrea Quigley	Ofsted Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 4234
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
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