

Thirsk School & Sixth Form College

Topcliffe Road, Sowerby, Thirsk, North Yorkshire YO7 1RZ

Inspection dates

28–31 March 2017

Overall effectiveness	Good
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Good
16 to 19 study programmes	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- The headteacher has set a clear direction and vision for the school which is shared by the senior leadership team, governors and staff.
- Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle a dip in Year 11 performance in 2016. Disadvantaged pupils and the most able made less progress than others. Leaders have ensured that these groups are now making better progress in most subjects.
- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good and improving. Pupils work hard and respond to challenging work in most lessons.
- Leaders check the quality of teaching carefully and know where to act to iron out a few remaining inconsistencies at key stage 3 that slow the progress for some groups of pupils.
- The school's curriculum matches pupils' needs well and contributes exceptionally well to pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Pupils appreciate the wide range of additional music, sporting and debating activities, trips and visits.
- Pupils behave well around the school and in lessons and most meet the high expectations the school has of them. Personal development and well-being is good. Pupils feel safe at school, are listened to and receive support quickly through a range of support services.
- All requirements of 16 to 19 study programmes are met. Students are benefiting from improvements to sixth-form provision that have strengthened the quality of teaching and extended the range of courses and subjects they can study.
- Governors make a strong contribution to the leadership of the school. They provide effective challenge and support to the headteacher and school staff.
- Leaders do not identify, plan and monitor effectively enough the support provided to all pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.
- Plans for improving the school do not always set clear enough targets and deadlines. This makes it difficult for leaders and governors to monitor carefully the difference they are making to all pupils and groups.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of leadership and management further by:
 - strengthening school plans so that they include more precise measures for leaders and governors to check that they are having the expected impact on pupils' progress
 - identifying pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities more precisely and ensuring that individual plans and adjustments to help them overcome barriers to learning are shared with all their teachers
 - ensuring that inconsistencies in key stage 3 teaching are ironed out, and building on the improvements already made to diminish further the remaining achievement gaps between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils nationally.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- The headteacher's vision and ambition for pupils to develop into fully rounded individuals with rich academic, cultural and social experiences are shared by staff and governors. He has created a strong community ethos where values of hard work, respect for others and tolerance are embedded throughout the school.
- Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is a strength of the school. Study of religious education (RE) in Years 7 to 11 is 'interesting and relevant' to pupils and it is helping to raise their awareness of moral and ethical issues. Their understanding of different faiths and beliefs is developing well. High rates of participation in an extensive range of extra-curricular activities, trips and visits demonstrate that pupils' wider education is developing successfully.
- Current Year 11 pupils speak convincingly and proudly about Thirsk School and the difference it has made to them. Parents are overwhelmingly supportive of the school and believe that it is well led.
- Senior leaders and governors have managed changes to staffing and reorganisation well over the last 12 months. Members of the smaller senior leadership team know their roles and have the interests of pupils at heart.
- Actions to tackle a dip in Year 11 performance in 2016 have been quick and decisive. A thorough and accurate analysis of data and detailed scrutiny of some departments have led to a clear understanding of the reasons for the dip. Remedial action is under way and these departments are subject to tighter monitoring and firm use of performance management.
- Senior leaders check the quality of teaching across the school carefully. They have an accurate assessment of the strengths in teaching and the aspects of teaching that need further development. Systems to manage performance are increasingly robust and lead to a comprehensive programme of support for staff, especially those in subject leadership positions.
- Middle leaders work closely together with senior leaders to develop strategies for improvement. Leaders at all levels are using performance information well to review the impact of their work. School tracking information shows an improving picture and current pupils are making good progress. Although green shoots are emerging, there is still work to do to iron out inconsistencies for disadvantaged pupils.
- The curriculum is broad, balanced and regularly reviewed to check that it provides a wide educational experience. High-quality information and guidance about careers and the world of work are strengthened by the school's 150 business partners.
- Since the previous inspection, significant changes to the organisation of the sixth-form curriculum have increased opportunities for students to study a broader range of subjects and courses. Better use of time within the school day has provided additional time for English and mathematics lessons and regular reading time in weekly tutorial sessions. Vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils are now receiving better mentoring support and facilities to undertake their work.

- Leaders and governors are not complacent and recognise that there is more to do. School plans prioritise the importance of raising standards, but are weaker in identifying specific actions and the impact they are intended to have on pupils in Years 7 to 10.
- Arrangements for the identification of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and who require school support are not as sharp as they should be. Consequently, provision to help pupils overcome barriers to learning is not planned, monitored and evaluated as well as it should be. Some pupils are learning better in some subjects than others, and strategies and resources to support pupils are not always shared with all of their teachers.

Governance of the school

- Governors are committed and have a clear understanding of their role. Together, they provide the skills and knowledge to challenge and support leaders. Minutes of meetings demonstrate that they challenge leaders and hold them to account. Discussion and questioning are robust and forthright.
- Governors know the strengths and weaknesses in the school as a result of accurate and open reporting by the headteacher.
- Following disappointing results by some pupils who were supported through pupil premium funding, governors commissioned an external review. They were keen to have a detailed understanding of the findings to sharpen the school's strategy and to be satisfied that everything was being done to improve outcomes. Governors are keeping a close watch on the specific actions and support for disadvantaged pupils throughout the school. Recent reporting shows that gaps are diminishing.
- The chair of the governing body visits the school frequently. Since her appointment earlier in the year, she has identified a need to monitor more carefully the funding received to support pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and the impact the investments in pastoral care and enrichment are having on pupils eligible for pupil premium funding. She is aware of the need to sharpen the impact of this work further but investigations are at an early stage.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Leaders and governors ensure that safeguarding is a priority. Leaders and governors are trained in safer recruitment. Appropriate processes are in place to ensure that the suitability of staff is checked and the school keeps careful records. Those responsible for safeguarding perform their duties well and engage effectively with all staff and parents to make sure that pupils are supported and safe. Staff training is frequent, comprehensive and effective. Individuals' understanding of all aspects of safeguarding, including radicalisation and extremism, is checked regularly. Staff are vigilant and they know how to report concerns they may have about a pupil. Leaders act quickly and follow up with other agencies where pupils may be at risk. Age-appropriate education for pupils, and students in the sixth form, supports them in feeling safe and managing risks.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Most pupils benefit from good teaching across a range of subjects, especially in key stage 4 and in the sixth form. Evidence in books and from discussions with pupils demonstrates that they are developing knowledge, understanding and skills well.
- Teachers have a good understanding of the skills necessary for examination success. They are using knowledge from recent training and assessment moderation with local schools well to prepare pupils for examinations and tests.
- Strong teaching takes place across a range of subjects. Highly effective questioning and guidance lead pupils to apply their knowledge and be successful in key stage 4 and the sixth form in history, business studies, religious education (RE) and physical education (PE).
- Teachers mostly set and maintain high expectations of pupils' learning and behaviour. In lessons, pupils show high levels of interest. They are appropriately challenged in most subjects by tasks that require them to work hard and to think for themselves. For example, in science and mathematics, pupils are developing their confidence to tackle new material due to plenty of opportunities to practise and extend their skills.
- Most pupils confidently acquire knowledge and discuss and debate ideas because opportunities to do so are structured well and increase as they move through the school. The most able pupils, including the most able disadvantaged pupils, are starting to acquire these skills well. For example, commanding speaking and listening was evident in top sets in English.
- In all key stages, most pupils said that they feel challenged in many of their lessons and they enjoy opportunities to stretch and test their learning at the end of a unit or sequence of lessons. They also welcome the personal challenge they have across the wider curriculum so that their interests in music and sport are developed effectively.
- Teaching varies across year groups in English and art and design in key stage 3. Teaching in these subjects does not always build well on what pupils already know, understand and can do.
- In most cases, the school's standards for the presentation of work are met. However, some teachers, particularly in key stage 3, do not challenge the quality of written work, correct spellings or ask for presentation to improve. Where they do, pupils respond and the quality of pupils' presentation improves as they mature and move through the school. It gets better in key stage 4, and better again in the sixth form.
- Senior leaders are aware of these weaknesses from their own reviews, and actions to focus on spelling, punctuation and grammar and to secure writing techniques in English are planned.
- Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are benefiting from resources and aids to help overcome individual learning difficulties. However, this is not consistently so. Useful advice and feedback are helping some pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities to know how to improve their work.
- Relevant homework tasks support pupils' work in school. Strong links were noted in German, English, history and PE. As a result, pupils are learning to manage their time and are developing study skills well in key stages 3 and 4. Additional support for

disadvantaged pupils is making an increasingly strong contribution to their learning.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- The school ensures that pupils' physical and emotional well-being are given high priority. Activities to foster and support pupils' responsibility as members of their local community are extensive. Pupils readily volunteer to lead charity events, visit the elderly and apply for roles on the school council. Inspirational and motivational quotes around the school encourage pupils' wider sense of responsibility and inspire them to raise their aspirations.
- Most pupils who completed the online questionnaire said that they are encouraged to look after themselves. Physical fitness is valued and pupils' participation in sport and team games is high. Few pupils miss games or PE.
- Challenges for pupils in Years 7 and 8 encourage them to try things they would not normally do at home and in school, for example to give a talk to a tutor group, to take part in the Year 7 walk with enthusiasm and determination, or to become a school council member or sports leader.
- The majority of pupils frequently take part in activities. Pupils say that they are encouraged to be independent and to take on responsibilities. Pupils are increasingly resilient and are adopting the school's values. Many pupils are also proud to represent their school by playing in the orchestra or by participating in theatrical events, debating competitions and sports teams.
- Pupils trust adults in the school and know who to turn to if they have a problem or something is worrying them. Parents state that the pastoral support for pupils is effective and their children are well looked after.
- Developments within the school's 'Student Services' provision are having a positive impact on the most vulnerable pupils at critical points in their lives. One pupil summarised the key factor leading to his success eloquently as 'Staff did not give up on me.'

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good. Pupils are polite, friendly and well behaved. They arrive equipped and ready to learn in lessons. They complete homework, dress smartly in uniform and all bring their kit to PE lessons.
- Pupils act responsibly, particularly at break, lunchtime and changeover of lessons. Movement around the school is sensible and calm even in narrow corridors. Positive attitudes to learning are evident in all year groups.
- Staff manage pupils' behaviour consistently and have high expectations of behaviour in lessons. Generally, pupils meet them well, and rewards and sanctions are clearly understood. In most lessons, pupils listen well and discussions in group activities are focused on the task in hand.

- Pupils are aware of bullying in all its forms through a range of anti-bullying assemblies and discussions in tutor-group sessions. Consequently, pupils are well educated about the importance of respect for others. Bullying is rare and most pupils say that any incidents are resolved speedily by staff.
- The number of pupils who are excluded for serious behavioural incidents has reduced significantly since the previous inspection. However, leaders acknowledge that numbers are too high, especially for boys and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Leaders are monitoring this situation closely and they are working in a coordinated way with parents and families to help individual pupils with managing their emotions.
- Attendance is above average. Leaders' actions to change the organisation of the school day have increased the demands on pupils to structure and manage their work, to be punctual and to meet higher expectations of attendance. Most pupils are responding to the greater challenge.

Outcomes for pupils

Good

- Pupils enter the school with levels of attainment in line with the national average. From their starting points on entry to the school, most pupils make progress that is above that of pupils nationally.
- Since the previous inspection, pupils' progress in mathematics has remained high and is above average in science. Progress in modern foreign languages and humanities has improved steadily and consistently. Pupils' achievement in religious education, a compulsory subject in the school, is successful and above average.
- A small number of pupils, including some disadvantaged pupils, who arrived from primary school with expected levels of attainment made slower progress by the time they left school in 2016 in English, art and design, health and social care and engineering. Robust action has been undertaken to identify the reasons and to modify courses and monitor teaching and learning more assiduously. Leaders and managers have taken effective action to address weaker progress in 2016.
- School tracking data shows an improvement in current Year 11 pupils' progress, particularly in subjects where outcomes were not as strong last year. Work, as seen in books and through discussions with pupils about their learning, shows stronger progress than in 2016. Current Year 10 pupils' progress looks stronger still, and they are on track to meet the targets the school has set for them. Inspectors' review of pupils' targets found them to provide suitable stretch and challenge to pupils.
- The progress and attainment of disadvantaged pupils have been below those of others nationally from similar starting points. Differences between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and others from similar starting points are diminishing, and especially for the most able disadvantaged pupils. However, leaders accept that this needs to happen more rapidly across the school.
- The school's strategy to promote reading is good. Pupils' engagement in reading is well demonstrated in their independent reading, and library lending rates have increased significantly. Pupils receiving help to catch up are reading more fluently and they feel that their reading has improved as a result of the programme.

- In 2016, some of the most able pupils did not make the progress they should. Additional support arrangements are in place in mathematics and English to help them towards achieving at the highest levels. Work in books and discussions with them about their learning found that they are being challenged in lessons and particularly in mathematics and science.
- Where the support is well focused in classes, and adapted to their needs, pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and those who enter the school with attainment below the national average are making better progress than other groups. However, variations in outcomes for individuals remain, especially in English at key stage 3. Support for these pupils is not always targeted effectively because leaders do not monitor pupils' progress from their starting points carefully enough.
- The proportion of pupils who secure a place in further education, training or employment after they leave the school is high. Numbers accessing apprenticeships are rising.

16 to 19 study programmes

Good

- The leadership of the sixth form is good. Leaders ensure that each student has a wide range of opportunities, both academically and through a programme of enrichment and community involvement that prepares them well for their next steps.
- The new collaborative sixth form is at an early stage, but already the broader curriculum in Year 12 and strengthened assessment and quality assurance procedures are securing benefits for all students, including those who are disadvantaged. Current students are on track to achieve well.
- The requirements of the 16 to 19 study programmes are met. From their starting points on entry to the sixth form, the majority of students achieve very well. Achievement in academic courses is strong. By the end of their programmes, over half of students gain A* to B grades in two or more subjects. The small number studying vocational courses also achieve well and make good progress.
- Support for the development of English and mathematics skills is good. Students who need to take GCSE resits in English and/or mathematics make good progress.
- Small numbers of students who undertake 'the bridge course' – a programme in which work experience is a key element, combined with vocational qualifications and English and mathematics resits – are successful in progressing to employment or apprenticeships. As a result, the number of students who leave their programmes at the end of Year 12 is higher than average.
- The quality of teaching is good. Lessons are purposeful and challenging, and teachers' high expectations of students are demonstrated in students' attendance, punctuality and attention in lessons. Teachers provide good opportunities for debate and discussion which build students' confidence effectively.
- Students take pride in their work and develop good work habits. Work in their folders is well presented and reflects a good level of engagement. Students are very positive about the opportunities to study with a wider range of learners from different schools. They relish the challenge in learning that the diversity of views and different

perspectives bring.

- Pastoral support for students' welfare is effective. Staff care for each student and support them to achieve well. Tutors monitor each student's progress carefully and regularly check to make sure that they are managing their workload. Students said that they are very happy with the support they receive.
- Students are encouraged to aim high and they benefit from a comprehensive programme to enable them to learn about the world of work through the school's extensive network of business partners. The school supports students in applying to universities and also in finding employment and apprenticeship opportunities.
- Students value the independent careers advice and guidance they receive. Students feel that it helps them to make the right choices when they join the sixth form and when they plan to leave.
- Sixth-form students make a good contribution to the life of the school and wider community. They lead the school council, volunteer widely to lead charity events, visit the elderly and support learning in key stage 3 classes. They mentor younger pupils and use their training to help these pupils with their reading. In these ways, the school prepares them to be good citizens who give back to the local community.

School details

Unique reference number	121666
Local authority	North Yorkshire
Inspection number	10023959

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 comprehensive
School category	Maintained
Age range of pupils	11 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in 16 to 19 study programmes	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	898
Of which, number on roll in 16 to 19 study programmes	139
Appropriate authority	Local authority
Chair	Mrs Gill Donald
Headteacher	Mr Stuart Mason
Telephone number	01845 522024
Website	www.thirkschool.org
Email address	stuart.mason@thirkschool.org
Date of previous inspection	20–21 September 2012

Information about this school

- This is an average-sized secondary school.
- The school sixth form operates in a collaborative partnership with two local schools, Easingwold School and Boroughbridge High School. Around 55 sixth-form students follow at least one course at one of the partner schools.
- The proportion of pupils who are disadvantaged and therefore supported by the pupil premium is below the national average.
- The proportions of pupils from minority ethnic groups and those who speak English as

an additional language are well below the national average.

- The proportion of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is well below the national average.
- At the time of the inspection, one pupil from the school had alternative arrangements for part of their education at Bridge Farm equestrian centre in Thirsk.
- 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.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed teaching and learning in lessons across a range of subjects and all three key stages. Some of these observations and learning walks were undertaken jointly with senior leaders. In addition to examining work in lessons, inspectors also examined pupils' books separately. Inspectors also undertook learning walks to evaluate pupils' progress and behaviour.
- Inspectors held discussions with staff, including senior and middle leaders and teachers. Inspectors also met with the chair of the governing body and other governors, and with a representative of the local authority.
- Inspectors met formally with eight groups of pupils to listen to their views and discuss their learning, and talked with others informally. They also considered 111 questionnaire responses from pupils.
- Inspectors scrutinised a range of documentation, including the school's own self-evaluation, the school development plan, minutes of governors' meetings, pupil progress information and safeguarding records.
- Inspectors looked at 95 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire (Parent View) and 86 free-text responses from parents.
- Inspectors considered 70 responses to staff questionnaires.

Inspection team

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In the report, 'disadvantaged pupils' refers to those pupils who attract government pupil premium funding: pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years and pupils in care or who left care through adoption or another formal route. www.gov.uk/pupil-premium-information-for-schools-and-alternative-provision-settings.

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