

Inspection of a good school: Thirsk School & Sixth Form College

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

Inspection dates:

2 and 3 February 2022

Outcome

Thirsk School and Sixth Form College continues to be a good school.

What is it like to attend this school?

Thirsk School and Sixth Form College provides a broad academic education. There is also plenty of support for pupils' wider personal development. The curriculum remains broad and balanced across Years 7 to 9. An above-average proportion of pupils study the subjects that make up the English Baccalaureate. All pupils are taught religious studies to GCSE. Around half of pupils choose to stay on into the sixth form.

A feature of the school is the friendly and warm relationships between the staff and pupils. This ensures that pupils behave well and apply themselves. There is a calm and settled atmosphere. Pupils who misbehave are supported to reflect on their actions. This is helping most to improve how they conduct themselves. Occasionally, a few pupils dawdle when they should get to lessons. Pupils and staff say the standard of behaviour has improved considerably. As a result, pupils, including the youngest, feel safe in school. Any bullying gets dealt with quickly. Pupils trust their head of year to sort out any problems they may have.

The school's wider curriculum includes lessons in personal, social, health and citizenship education (PSHCE). Pupils really value these lessons. Their knowledge of personal safety, values and relationships is impressive. They can discuss topics such as sexual harassment and consent maturely. This knowledge is helping them to know what is acceptable and what is not.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

Following the last inspection in 2017, the headteacher left the school, prior to this the senior leadership team was reduced and some senior leaders left. Performance data shows that academic standards remained broadly average up until 2019. However, standards of behaviour were affected by the reduced leadership capacity. The current headteacher immediately made improving behaviour a priority. She introduced a new behaviour policy, which the staff apply consistently. This has restored a calm, settled atmosphere. The deputy headteacher has focused on the quality of the curriculum.

Curriculum planning is now more ambitious. Curriculum leaders have designed a more knowledge-rich curriculum. Content is carefully sequenced. Assessment is used thoughtfully. Teachers know what pupils have grasped and where they are less secure. In most subjects, pupils get to revisit important areas of knowledge regularly. However, some topics, such as genetics in science, are not revisited frequently enough for pupils to remember them. Staff training last term focused on the importance of teaching pupils more sophisticated vocabulary. A good start has been made in subjects such as mathematics and history. However, progress to date is variable across departments. Leaders know there is more work to do.

Teachers plan effective lessons. They introduce new content carefully, showing how it builds on what they have already taught. Teachers also explain and demonstrate clearly. In mathematics, for example, teachers break calculations down into small parts and explain the relevance of each step. Pupils, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), record carefully. They make colour-coded notes to help them when they revise. This approach is helping pupils to remember and apply their mathematical knowledge.

A small number of pupils enter the school needing to catch up in reading. The school's assessments identify these pupils quickly. These pupils receive additional one-to-one reading support. The English department also provides reading lessons in which pupils' comprehension skills are systematically checked. However, leaders are less clear about whether this support helps the weakest readers to catch up quickly.

The school's special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) makes sure pupils' needs are identified. Support plans are detailed and provide teachers with clear targets. These pupils receive suitable resources and adaptations to help them access the curriculum. These pupils feel teachers do everything they can to help them to learn.

Pupils receive excellent careers guidance information. This covers a range of possible routes, including apprenticeships. There are good opportunities to engage with employers. This guidance helps pupils to progress onto suitable courses in the sixth form. The one-year Bridge pathway successfully helps some students to revisit GCSE qualifications and improve their GCSE grades in English and mathematics. Most sixth-form students choose from a broad range of A-level courses. On average, they have attained standards in line with those seen nationally.

There are good opportunities in place across the full age range to support pupils' wider personal development. Younger pupils felt the summer school helped them to make a smooth transition from primary school. Through religious studies, pupils gain a good understanding of different world religions. Pupils explore moral and philosophical issues, such as immigration and racism. A broad range of clubs, such as the manga club, cater for pupils' interests. Older students volunteer for paired reading with younger pupils. Their commitment to student leadership shows the school's positive impact on their character development.

The headteacher has remodelled the senior leadership team. Senior leaders enjoy the backing of the staff. Leaders are aware of the pressures on staff and have made changes

to reduce their workload. The thoughtful move to 'maintenance marking' has sharpened practice while reducing the workload on teachers.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Safeguarding leaders ensure all members of staff are vigilant. They make sure staff are well trained. Recently, all the staff practised using the reporting system to log a concern. This made sure they all know what to do. The school has added more staffing to support pupils' pastoral needs. This means the staff know the pupils well. Safeguarding leaders have particularly detailed knowledge of the most vulnerable pupils. Leaders keep detailed records of the actions they take to protect pupils at risk of harm. They work effectively with external agencies, when needed, to seek a resolution.

Recently, the school has experienced two unconnected peer-on-peer physical assaults. These incidents are out of character and not reflective of the normal behaviours seen in school. Leaders have acted decisively in dealing with the perpetrators of both incidents.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Over recent years, leaders have undertaken extensive research into curriculum design. This has raised the level of ambition and improved curriculum planning. However, some variation in quality remains across subjects. This is preventing some pupils from remembering some topics taught in enough detail. Leaders should further refine curriculum planning to ensure pupils revisit essential subject knowledge in a planned way. In addition, leaders should make sure that essential subject vocabulary is clearly identified in planning, taught explicitly and utilised by pupils.
- Senior and middle leaders have increasingly ambitious plans in place to improve the school's work. However, their approaches to checking on the impact of these plans are not always clear. Leaders should ensure they use sharper and more effective approaches to checking that their actions achieve their objectives.

Background

When we have judged a school to be good, we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains good. This is called a section 8 inspection of a good or outstanding school, because it is carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. We do not give graded judgements on a section 8 inspection. However, if we find evidence that a school would now receive a higher or lower grade, then the next inspection will be a section 5 inspection. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the section 8 inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour or the quality of education, we will deem the section 8 inspection as a section 5 inspection immediately.

This is the first section 8 inspection since we judged the school to be good in March 2017.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

If you are the school and you are not happy with the inspection or the report, you can [complain to Ofsted](#).

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

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.

School details

Unique reference number	121666
Local authority	North Yorkshire
Inspection number	10211601
Type of school	Secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	944
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	112
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governing body	Nick Horn
Headteacher	Emma Lambden
Website	http://www.thirkschool.org
Date of previous inspection	28–31 March 2017, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The current headteacher was appointed at Easter 2018. Since then, there have been several changes to the membership of the senior leadership team.
- The chair of the governing body took up post in February 2020.
- The school has two pupils placed at The Sunbeck Centre, a registered alternative education provider. Their placements at The Sunbeck Centre were arranged through the area inclusion panel.

Information about this inspection

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.

- Inspectors met the headteacher, deputy headteacher and other senior leaders. Inspectors also met with the chair and four other members of the governing body and a representative of the local authority.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in mathematics, science and religious studies. For each deep dive, inspectors met with subject leaders, looked at curriculum plans, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- Inspectors also met with curriculum leaders for geography, history and art and reviewed curriculum planning in each subject.
- An inspector met the special educational needs coordinator. Visits were made to lessons to see what support was in place for pupils with SEND.
- An inspector visited the inclusion centre and the reset room.
- An inspector checked the single central record and met with designated safeguarding leaders to explore the school's work to keep children safe. Inspectors also discussed safeguarding more widely through discussions with other members of staff and with pupils.
- Inspectors considered the parental responses to Ofsted's online survey, Ofsted Parent View.
- Inspectors also considered responses to Ofsted's staff and pupil surveys.

Inspection team

Chris Smith, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Graham Findlay

Her Majesty's Inspector

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