

Inspection of a good school: Thomas Gainsborough School

Wells Hall Road, Great Cornard, Sudbury, Suffolk CO10 0NH

Inspection dates:

13 and 14 September 2023

Outcome

There has been no change to this school's overall judgement of good as a result of this ungraded (section 8) inspection. However, the evidence gathered suggests that the inspection grade might be outstanding if a graded (section 5) inspection were carried out now. The school's next inspection will be a graded inspection.

The headteacher of this school is Helen Yapp. This school is part of the Unity Schools Partnership, which means other people in the trust also have responsibility for running the school. The trust is run by the chief executive officer, Tim Coulson, and overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by Christine Quinn.

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils and students in the sixth form are proud of their school. They understand the values that are at the heart of the 'Thomas Gainsborough Way'. This is reflected in their positive approach to learning and in the typically high standards of behaviour. Pupils feel safe in school. They are taught how to stay safe and to manage risks.

Inter-house competitions are popular events. Pupils like the community spirit that these challenges promote. Many pupils take advantage of the extensive range of clubs and after-school opportunities offered. Everyone is encouraged to join in. Achievement beyond academic studies is recognised through the 'Ribbons' rewards scheme. Pupils wear their ribbon badges with pride. They explain enthusiastically about how they achieved them. The opportunities to become a pupil leader, such as becoming a subject ambassador, reading mentor, house captain, or to get involved in charity fundraising, are valued. Local care home residents were delighted by the Valentine's lunch that pupils organised for them.

Pupils and sixth-form students are well prepared to take the next steps in education, employment and/or training. The careers education programme is successful in helping them to make informed choices as they move on to the next stage.

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

Leaders, governors and the trust, working closely together, are ambitious for all pupils to achieve well. In Years 7 to 9, the school ensures that the curriculum remains broad, while tailored towards pupils' needs and interests. This flexible approach provides a secure stepping stone to success and to further studies. Ongoing improvements to support mean that most pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) make similar progress to their peers. Many more pupils are studying a modern foreign language at GCSE than in recent years.

Subject teams work together on a journey of continuous improvement. The curriculum is well thought out and taught in a logical order. Pupils have many opportunities to revisit previous learning and apply it to new ideas. Important vocabulary is identified and taught. The connections between topics across subjects are made clear. For example, in food technology, pupils learn the scientific connections between cooking food and nutritional changes. In English, pupils are reminded of the historical context of superstition and witchcraft as they explore the scenes of a Shakespeare play. These opportunities to connect learning mean that pupils know and remember more over time.

Curriculum change is well informed by recent research and guidance. Subject teams are typically knowledgeable and up to date. The school's special educational needs team works closely with staff to secure the help that pupils with SEND need. Teachers check regularly for gaps in pupils' knowledge and skills so that pupils can be supported to keep up.

A love of reading is well-promoted, including for students in the sixth form. Pupils access a wide range of high-quality fiction and non-fiction texts. The 'TGS 50' provides a list of recommended reading for pupils in all year groups. Pupils who have fallen behind with their reading are helped to catch up, including by using phonics.

The school's high expectations are reflected in pupils' typically positive behaviour and attitudes to learning. The few pupils whose behaviour falls short of the expected standard are supported to improve. Attendance, which dropped following the pandemic, continues to improve. Pupils' personal development is well promoted and is an exceptionally strong feature of the school's offer, as is the wealth of extra-curricular activities available. The personal, social and health education curriculum (PSHE) ensures that pupils understand important principles, such as staying safe, building healthy relationships, tolerance and respect. In the sixth form, students continue to build their understanding as they prepare for adult life. Pupils are well equipped to move on to further studies, including apprenticeships. Many opt to join the growing number of students staying on in the school's high-quality post-16 provision.

While positive relationships are maintained with parents overall, a few parents, including some parents of pupils with SEND, feel that communications between school and home are not as strong as they should be. These parents sometimes feel that their voice is unheard, or they are unclear about why decisions are taken. Improving communications remains an important development priority in school improvement plans.

The school's local governing body is skilled and experienced. Together with the trust board, they fulfil their responsibilities to challenge and support school leaders at all levels. Governors are regular visitors to the school, checking, for example, on the quality of education and safeguarding. Leaders' approach to managing workload and well-being is appreciated by staff.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Communications between home and the school are sometimes not consistently as strong as they should be. This means that, occasionally, relationships can be strained because a few parents do not recognise how leaders take account of their views. Leaders, including governors and the trust, should continue their work to improve communications further. This is so that all parents feel that their views are listened to and understand the reasons sitting beneath the decisions that are made.

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 an ungraded inspection, and it is carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. We do not give graded judgements on an ungraded inspection. However, if we find evidence that a school would now receive a higher or lower grade, then the next inspection will be a graded inspection, which is carried out under section 5 of the Act. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the ungraded inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour or the quality of education, we will deem the ungraded inspection a graded inspection immediately.

This is the first ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be good in September 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.

Further information

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

In the report, 'disadvantaged pupils' is used to mean pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND); pupils who meet the [definition of children in need of help and protection](#); pupils receiving statutory local authority support from a social worker; and pupils who otherwise meet the criteria used for deciding the school's [pupil premium funding](#) (this includes pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years, looked after children (children in local authority care) and/or children who left care through adoption or another formal route).

School details

Unique reference number	141639
Local authority	Suffolk
Inspection number	10268430
Type of school	Secondary comprehensive
School category	Academy converter
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	1576
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	200
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Christine Quinn
Headteacher	Helen Yapp
Website	http://tgschool.net
Dates of previous inspection	19 and 20 September 2017, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The school is larger than the average-sized secondary school.
- It is part of the Unity Schools Partnership, a multi-academy trust.
- The headteacher was appointed in 2020, following a period in the role of the school's acting headteacher.
- Leaders work with one registered provider of alternative education to meet the needs of small number of pupils.
- The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 8 to 13 with information and engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.
- There are a growing number of pupils entering the school with SEND since the pandemic.

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 the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- The inspectors conducted deep dives in the following subjects: English, mathematics, science, history, drama and religion, philosophy and ethics.
- To complete each deep dive, they discussed the curriculum with subject leaders, visited a sample of lessons and spoke with teachers. They also spoke with pupils and sixth-form students about their learning and looked at samples of their work.
- A wider sample of curriculum plans were considered beyond the deep dives, including physical education and food technology.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, inspectors looked at safeguarding policies, the school's record of pre-employment checks on new staff and a sample of child protection files. They took account of the views of leaders, staff and pupils, and considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils' interests first.
- The lead inspector spoke with a group of governors, including the chair of governors, the safeguarding governor and the governor with oversight of provision for pupils with SEND. She also met with trust leaders and the designated safeguarding lead. Inspectors spoke with other staff about safeguarding practices at the school.
- Meetings were held with the headteacher and other leaders, including the special educational needs coordinator, members of the learning support team and leaders with oversight of pupils' PSHE provision and careers education.
- A range of documents were checked, including behaviour logs, attendance records, minutes of governors' meetings, school improvement plans and school policies.
- The lead inspector held a telephone discussion with a senior member of staff from the registered alternative provision used by the school. She also spoke with a local authority representative with oversight of provision for pupils with SEND.
- There were 193 responses to the online questionnaire for parents, Ofsted Parent View, which were considered alongside 185 free-text responses from parents.
- Inspectors gathered pupils' views through informal discussions and meetings with them during the inspection. They also took account of 34 responses to Ofsted's questionnaire for school pupils.
- The 117 responses to Ofsted's questionnaire for school staff were considered. Inspectors also spoke with staff throughout the inspection to gather their views.

Inspection team

Christine Dick, lead inspector	Ofsted Inspector
Daniel Leonard	Ofsted Inspector
Robert James	Ofsted Inspector

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