



Office for Standards
in Education

Inspection Report

THE HERMITAGE SCHOOL

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LEA: Durham

Inspection Number: 269311

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Reporting Inspector: Andrew Bennett HMI

Inspection carried out under section 10 of the School Inspections Act 1996, and was deemed section 12(3) under the same act

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INTRODUCTION

The inspection was a pilot of the new arrangements for inspection announced by Ofsted in its consultation paper of February 2004. It was carried out with the support and co-operation of the staff of The Hermitage School and of the local education authority.

The inspection was carried out by five of Her Majesty's Inspectors and a Lay Inspector.

Key for inspection grades:

Grade 1	Very good
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Adequate
Grade 4	Not adequate

Description of the school

The Hermitage School in Chester-le-Street is an average sized mixed comprehensive school of just over 1000 students, including a sixth form of about 170 students. Twelve per cent of students are eligible for free school meals, which is below the national figure. Most students enter the school having achieved broadly average results in their primary schools. The number of students who have special needs is about average. Very few students come from ethnic minority backgrounds; no students are at an early stage of learning English.

OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SCHOOL

The Hermitage is a good school, and is still improving. This is the view held by the school's senior managers, and inspectors agree with them. It is a confident, welcoming and inclusive community, which strives for excellence in all aspects of its work. The headteacher, other senior managers and governors have an accurate view of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Standards and progress are good and the school knows what is needed to help students do even better. Work in partnership with outside agencies and organisations strengthens students' feelings of security and their obvious determination to succeed. Nearly all students behave well and make a good contribution to the school and its broader community. Students are proud to belong to the school and recognise the very good levels of care, guidance and support that they receive. The school provides good value for money.

Grade: 2

Effectiveness of the school's sixth form

The sixth form is well-established and serves its increasing number of students well. GCE A level results improved substantially in 2003 and are now at the level that would be expected. Teaching in the sixth form is good. The school offers an increasingly wide range of academic and vocational subjects. Both types of course are seen as equally challenging and worthwhile and the results obtained in advanced vocational courses are very good. The school works productively and harmoniously with two general further education (GFE) colleges. Pastoral care is effective; students are given good advice about what to do when they leave the school, either to continue their studies or to seek work. Sixth form students speak highly of the quality of the support and care they receive; they feel that they have made the right choice in attending the sixth form at The Hermitage.

Grade: 2

Improvement since the last inspection

Examination results have continued to rise since the last inspection in 1999 and the strengths identified in the school at that time have been developed further. A new headteacher has brought fresh approaches to planning for improvement. Increased student numbers have encouraged the school to develop a broader range of courses to motivate students of all ages and abilities. Many parts of the building have been refurbished; much modern equipment has been installed, some as a result of links with local businesses. The school has signed up to recent government initiatives that allow different staff to concentrate on tasks appropriate to their positions and their skills. It is now a more efficient and coherent organisation than in 1999, one in which people work at least as hard, but where they feel that their contributions are genuinely valued.

Grade: 2

Capacity to improve

The school leadership team is relatively new, but has shown that it can identify problems quickly and then work successfully to find solutions to them. Students and their parents believe that the school has improved considerably in recent years and that it will continue to do so. They mention improving trends in tests and examination results and like the increasing involvement of students in decisions that affect their daily life in the school. Inspectors agree with these views. Governors are equally keen to develop the school's

achievements and its reputation; they hold managers firmly to account for the quality of their performance.

Grade: 1

What the school should do to improve further

As a good school, The Hermitage is well placed to improve even further through:

- continuing the improvements in mathematics and further raising standards in science;
- ensuring that all groups of students achieve their full potential;
- providing more consistent feedback to students about the quality of their work;
- improving levels of attendance.

ACHIEVEMENT AND STANDARDS

The standards achieved by students are better than the national average for Key Stage 3 and are broadly in line with what might be expected at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form. Particular success was achieved in English tests and examinations and in advanced vocational courses in summer 2003. There are inconsistencies within this generally positive picture. Boys now achieve well compared with girls, but a number of average-ability girls are not making as much progress as they should. Results in science and mathematics are improving, but remain much lower than those in English. The school is clear that raising standards and helping students to do as well as they can is both its main purpose and its greatest challenge. Managers are well aware of the weaknesses in this area and are developing purposeful strategies to overcome them. The school sets challenging targets and carefully checks the progress that individual students make towards them. Structured practice and preparation for tests and examinations are now provided so that, from their earliest years in the school, students get used to the demands they will face when they are older. Possible barriers to success are being identified in detailed individual student profiles, so that the school can help by drawing on the work of support agencies where necessary. Inspectors judge that further improvements in the students' achievement and standards can be made. However, they agree with the school that overall they are good. This view is supported by the consistent upward trends in recent results and data that show most students make good progress overall during their time in the school.

Grade: 2

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

The students' rate of attendance is average compared with all secondary schools, but the school is keen to improve attendance and has extended its range of measures to do so. Their punctuality, however, is good both at the start of sessions and to individual lessons. The students behave very well at break and lunch times, and inspectors found no evidence of bullying. Behaviour in lessons is almost always good, largely because of the high quality relationships between adults and students and among the students themselves. Most students are calm, open and friendly, and a culture of respect for others' points of view is evident throughout the school. Moral issues are raised and tackled well in some lessons and in tutor periods, although opportunities to develop the students' spiritual understanding are sometimes missed. The school sets clear boundaries for behaviour. The school perseveres with a small minority of students who challenge the rules, using a range of methods to improve their behaviour and giving them the chance to put things right. In most classes, the students concentrate keenly on

their work; they respond well to high aspirations and are eager to make their own contribution to the overall success of the school. Students enjoy the improved facilities for physical activity and appreciate the school's attention to healthy lifestyles. Students are proud to point out that vending machines around the school sell only healthy snacks and drinks. They contribute actively to the life of the school and to its broader community through the extensive and well-planned range of extra-curricular activities.

Grade: 2

QUALITY OF PROVISION

The teaching seen in lessons, improved rigour in student assessment, and the support provided to students to help them achieve their targets, all indicate that the quality of teaching is good.

Many of the lessons seen by inspectors were graded good or better and very few were judged unsatisfactory. In the sixth form, nearly all lessons were at least good and half were very good. In the best classes, teachers have high expectations of all students, set them challenging tasks, and allow them to take responsibility for their own learning, for example in group discussions or in choosing their own ways to complete tasks. Probing question and answer sessions check the students' knowledge and understanding and keep them on their toes. They make good progress and understand how to improve their work. In the less productive lessons, students are not always clear about the purpose of activities and their learning is not sufficiently tested. Very occasionally, inadequate classroom management leads to poor progress and disruptive behaviour. Students most likely to be reluctant learners are patiently guided by learning support assistants so that they take an interest in lessons and increase their skills. A range of additional activities beyond the school day, including music, summer schools and sporting activities, further helps to motivate this group of learners.

A more rigorous approach to assessment has resulted from the introduction of a new policy. Information about the students' progress is shared with subject departments and form tutors so that they can weigh up the students' progress and set appropriate targets for them. The 'aiming high' initiative provides effort grades for the students. These are recorded each term and are sent home to parents. If students receive low grades, they are provided with intensive additional support. The school identified that students were not consistently given enough information about ways of improving their work. Inspectors agree with this; while some teachers mark work in detail and provide helpful advice to the students, this approach is still patchy and inconsistent. A new marking policy has been agreed and is beginning to address this weakness. Students confirm that homework is set regularly and that they are set an interesting range of tasks, including projects spread over several weeks; many students enjoy this challenge, relishing the opportunity to organise their own time.

At the last inspection, the school was judged to provide a broad and balanced curriculum and that remains a strength. Younger students follow a common programme but those who need it benefit from extra help, for example, additional language support. The curriculum for students aged 14 to 16 has been extended to offer a range of interesting choices so that each student, in consultation with their parents, chooses a personal curriculum designed to meet their current and future needs. Some students are guided towards the 'bridge project', which supports younger students who need specific support, or onto 'pathways plus' which includes a half day at college for students aged 14 to 16. The best teachers adapt the curriculum so that it effectively challenges gifted and talented students and builds up the skills of those with special educational needs, but the extent of this good practice is inconsistent. Although the school has an impressive

amount of up to date computer equipment, the statutory requirement to provide a programme of study in information and communication technology (ICT) for all students aged 14 to 16 is not met. This is unfortunate, since where students do have ICT lessons, they enjoy a high-quality experience.

The school makes very good provision for students' care and welfare. Staff are constantly alert to the needs of students who may experience difficulties and there is an excellent range of support systems in the school. Student counsellors are an important element in this, showing how school managers work hard to involve the students in helping others. External agencies are contacted as appropriate and provide a consistently high level of support. Students told inspectors that they know who to go to for help and that they would always be able to find a trusted adult to tell of any problem. Year 7 students appreciated the thorough induction programme which helped them to settle quickly into their new school. Child protection procedures are securely in place; they ensure that vulnerable students are helped and supported. The school takes a responsible approach to health and safety matters; it is a safe and secure learning environment for all students.

The school considers that the quality of provision is very good overall. Inspectors agree that the school's commitment to providing appropriate care, advice, guidance and support is first-class. However, senior managers acknowledge that the proportion of very good teaching could be improved. While the range and quality of the curriculum has improved since the previous inspection, some parts of the jigsaw are incomplete. For these reasons, inspectors judge that the quality of provision is good overall, with some very good aspects.

Grade: 2

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

The school judges that the quality of leadership and management is very good, and inspectors agree. The leadership of the school, including governors, has successfully communicated a clear vision and high expectations of success to the broader community. Improvements in performance have been secured, but not at the expense of care for individuals. Morale is high. A palpable sense of trust and mutual respect is sustained by the high ideals and aspirations of senior managers. Planning is cogent and coherent and is relentlessly focused on raising attainment. Senior managers check carefully that plans are actioned and policies are followed. Some middle managers are less effective in driving improvement but they are being helped to develop the necessary skills. Very good links with external agencies and providers give learners every opportunity to develop their skills and interests. Care agencies are welcomed into the school and are valued as full members of the community; school managers regard it as their duty to provide facilities for projects that support vulnerable learners and their families. The school is very well staffed with qualified teachers; there is little staff absence and students benefit from the improved continuity in teaching. The accommodation is skilfully managed; considerable effort goes into maintaining and improving facilities that make the students' learning more interesting and relevant to the twenty-first century. The school does not provide a daily act of collective worship for all students.

Grade: 1

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