



Thorns Community College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number 103853
LEA Dudley

Inspection number 274804
Inspection dates 3-4 May 2005
Reporting inspector Dr David Biltcliffe

Inspection deemed to have been carried out under section 10 of the School Inspections Act 1996 according to section 12(3) of the same act.

Type of School	Community	School address	Stockwell Avenue
School category	Secondary		Brierley Hill
Age range of pupils	11 - 16		West Midlands
			DY5 2NU
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	(01384) 816 225
Number on roll	1,349	Fax number	(01384) 816 226
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair of governors	Mrs J Jessup
Date of previous inspection	18-22 October 1999	Headteacher	Mr D N Mountney

Age group	Published	Reference no.
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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 Thorns Community College and of the local education authority.

The inspection was carried out by five additional inspectors.

Description of the school

The school has 1,349 pupils on roll and is larger than the typical secondary school. Around five per cent of pupils (a low proportion) enter or leave the school mid-year. Approximately 13 per cent of pupils (an average proportion) receive free school meals.

Pupils' overall attainment on entry in 1999 (the 2004 GCSE group) was a little below average. Recent entries have been at least average. About 18 per cent of pupils (an average proportion) are identified as having special educational needs. The school educates eight looked-after children.

Ninety-three per cent of pupils are White British. The remaining seven per cent of pupils come from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds. There are 24 pupils who are at an early stage of learning English as an additional language.

The school gained Performing Arts College status in 2002. It has also received the Healthy Schools Award (2000 and 2003), the Arts Gold Mark (2001 and 2004), Investors in People status (2002) and the Sports Mark Award (2003). It offers an extensive adult education programme.

The present principal took up duty in January 2000.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Thorns is a good school. Senior management, modestly, sees the school as satisfactory with good features. The vast majority of parents and pupils rightly feel that the school is doing a good job.

The school's strengths are in academic achievement, pupils' attitudes to work, its friendly atmosphere and the care given to pupils. Its weaknesses are mainly in aspects of management, gaps in teaching information and communication technology (ICT) and insufficient challenge for high attainers.

Pupils' overall standard of work is average; this represents good progress for the majority of pupils. Most teaching is good. As a result, pupils learn well, with commitment and confidence.

The school is a warm, friendly and welcoming place. Pupils are very well looked after: all are equally valued. Outside agencies are used well. The performing arts of dance, drama and music make a major contribution to school life.

The school is well led and satisfactorily managed. The principal is an enthusiastic and engaging leader. Senior management is satisfactory, but does not always notice, and sort out, weaknesses quickly enough. Middle management is good. Staff morale is high.

The school has improved satisfactorily since its last inspection in 1999. Most of the main weaknesses identified six years ago have gone. Collective worship, however, remains very inadequate and ICT is still not provided for all pupils in Years 10-11.

Senior management is committed to improvement. Provided that it focuses hard on thorough checking and quick, corrective action, it has the capacity to achieve further improvement in performance. The school gives good value for money.

Grade: 2

What the school should do to improve further

- Monitor and evaluate its academic performance rigorously and precisely
- Ensure that higher-ability pupils achieve more
- Provide ICT for all pupils in Years 10-11
- Live up to its good intentions for healthy eating and drinking
- Tackle seriously its non-provision of daily collective worship

Achievement and standards

The school regards pupils' academic achievement as good. Inspectors agree. In 2004, the school's Year 9 national test results were in line with the national average in English, mathematics and science. These results represented a good achievement and good rate of progress from Year 7.

The 2004 GCSE results were in line with the national average. These results and other data, indicate that most pupils progressed well. Pupils did particularly well in German. They tended to do a little worse in mathematics and science than in their other subjects. The school was only a whisker away from the challenging GCSE targets it set for itself.

Pupils' standard of literacy is average. Written work is generally well organised. Spelling and punctuation are often weaker elements, but still close to average. Handwriting and presentation are good. The overall standard of girls' written work is slightly higher than that of boys'. The majority of pupils speak clearly and confidently. Most listen carefully. The majority explain their views clearly and at length.

The low proportion of pupils gaining the highest A* grade indicates that the school has further to go in stretching its brightest pupils. The proportion gaining at least grade C in English as well as in mathematics and science is a little lower than it should be. Pupils with special educational needs and those for whom English is an additional language usually make good progress. Looked-after children generally do well.

Grade: 2

Personal development and well-being

The school tries very hard to make every child feel valued. It is highly successful in this central aim: the personal development and well-being of pupils are good.

Most pupils attend well and are punctual. They work hard in class. Many take part in extracurricular activities. They enjoy their education. Most behave very responsibly, showing respect and consideration for others. They welcome the school's stance on promoting good behaviour. They feel that their school is a safe place.

Pupils readily take initiative and shoulder responsibility. The school believes in giving pupils independence, but does not involve them enough in issues that affect them directly – although pupils do feel that, when consulted, note is taken of their views.

Pupils' social, moral and cultural development is good. Staff are good role models. Pupils' spiritual development is satisfactory, but should be stronger.

The school provides pupils with adequate opportunities to understand the rights and responsibilities of living in a community. They have few opportunities, however, to make a contribution to their local community.

Pupils are greatly helped to live a healthy lifestyle through first-rate lessons in personal, social and health education (PSHE) as well as in PE. In strong contrast, the school does very little to ensure that all pupils eat a healthy lunch or have access to free water – two major weaknesses. Pupils are prepared adequately for their future lives as citizens and earners. The school is a good place for pupils to study and grow up in.

Grade: 2

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Teaching varies in quality, but is good overall. The fact that management feels its teaching is not quite as strong as this, even though pupils achieve well, shows that the school needs to evaluate pupils' learning more systematically and precisely. Difficulty in recruiting suitably qualified staff, despite the school's efforts, holds some subjects back.

Pupils learn conscientiously. Good relationships are a pronounced strength of classroom life here. Pupils display mature attitudes in nearly all lessons – a major factor in the progress they make. They contribute willingly to class discussions and consider the views of others thoughtfully. Most display a good level of independence in their work.

Pupils with special educational needs are well supported. They make good progress. The school has begun to identify pupils with special gifts and talents, but, overall, these pupils make less progress than they should, because they are not challenged enough in all of their work. Pupils with disabilities are very well integrated and make similar progress to others.

Boys and girls progress equally well, an improvement since the last inspection. ICT is well used, but equipment is not always reliable. The assessment of pupils' work is done satisfactorily: marking is good, but measurements of progress are too vague to underpin the drive for higher standards. Overall, however, parents are right – their children get a good education here.

Grade: 2

Curriculum and other activities

The school provides the typical range of courses for pupils in Years 7 to 9. The range provided for pupils in Years 10 and 11 is impressive: it mostly reflects well a determined attempt by the school to meet the needs of all pupils. Courses such as business education meet the needs of local commerce well.

Pupils taking vocational courses are well prepared for working life; this is not always the case for pupils who do not opt for one of these courses. A major, long-standing gap is that the school does not teach ICT to all pupils in Years 10 and 11; despite this the rest of the curriculum is good.

The school provides a good range of activities outside lessons. These contribute much to pupils' academic achievement and enhance their personal and social skills. The school does not, however, fully assess what impact this programme has on raising pupils' achievement.

The school's provision makes a generally good contribution to pupils' capacity to stay safe and healthy. A good range of well-used sporting activities, for example, helps pupils to follow a healthy lifestyle. The curriculum reflects well the specialist arts status of the school.

Grade: 3

Care, support and guidance

As at the time of the last inspection, the school's provision for pupils' care, advice, guidance and support is good. All the required procedures for health and safety and for child protection are in place. Both parents and pupils feel that, through the school's help, a wise choice of courses can be made for Year 10. Pupils are well advised on future educational and career choices.

The school's thoughtful systems of personal support and guidance have the full confidence of most pupils. They are backed up well by a well-organised teaching programme of PSHE and citizenship. This very good picture of care is let down by poor lunchtime arrangements and the difficulty of getting free drinking-water.

Tutors take their guidance role seriously. Looked-after children and other groups of vulnerable pupils benefit from the school's extensive use of external, professional services. The school is justly proud of the good support and guidance available to all its pupils.

Grade: 2

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are good overall: pupils achieve well and are very well looked after. Not all management, however, is as sharp and effective as it should be. This explains the school's very honest judgement that its management performance is closer to satisfactory than to good.

The governing body has many good features. Governors offer strong support and interest. They have ensured that most of the weaknesses at the last inspection are no longer there. They do not, however, have a reliable enough method of judging accurately the school's strengths and weaknesses and have not sorted out the gap in ICT provision in Years 10 and 11 or collective worship. Their overall effectiveness is therefore inadequate.

The principal is a good, hands-on, encouraging leader. He has ensured that there is a strong focus on teaching and raising achievement. The senior leadership team provides satisfactory direction to the school's work, but requires a greater, corporate drive to make sure that it always sorts out weaknesses quickly. It has the capacity to improve the school's performance further. Middle management ranges from outstanding to satisfactory and is good overall. Under the guidance of the principal, it is the main driving force for the school's good academic achievement.

The school runs smoothly. Management has ensured that the school is very pleasant, inside and outside. The leadership does not exaggerate its performance – if anything, the reverse. This realism is a good basis for future improvement – particularly in improving the ways it measures its progress. The school keeps parents satisfactorily informed about school life and children's progress. It realises it has more to do – as, for example, through its website and ensuring that annual reports are free from educational jargon. The school is a welcoming place and uses outside expertise very well.

The staff believe deeply that every child matters. As a result, most policies for pupils' education work well. Accommodation and learning resources, with minor exceptions, are good. The school has struggled to fill some teaching posts. National changes in working arrangements for teachers have already brought many benefits to the school. The school manages its below-average funding very capably. It consistently seeks to get the best value out of its spending.

Management's success so far in raising achievement and providing a good standard of education augurs well for the future. Thorns is justifiably popular with both pupils and parents.

Grade: 2

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INSPECTION JUDGEMENTS

Key to judgements: Grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate.	School Overall	16-19
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OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	2	
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2	
The quality and standards in the Foundation Stage	n/a	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	4	
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	Yes	
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	

ACHIEVEMENT AND STANDARDS

How well do learners achieve?	2	
The <i>standards</i> reached by learners	3	
How well learners make <i>progress</i> , taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	2	

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2	
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2	
The behaviour of learners	2	
How well learners enjoy their education	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	3	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	3	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3	

THE QUALITY OF PROVISION

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	2	
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	3	
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	
How well does the provision promote the well-being of learners?	2	

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2	
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2	
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets, through quality assurance and self-review	3	
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	2	
How effectively and efficiently resources are deployed to achieve value for money	2	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	4	
The adequacy and suitability of staff to ensure that learners are protected	Yes	

The extent to which schools enable learners to be healthy	Yes/No/NA
Learners are encouraged and enabled to take regular exercise	Yes
Learners are discouraged from smoking and substance abuse	Yes
Learners are taught about sexual health risks	Yes
Learners are encouraged and enabled to eat and drink healthily	No
The extent to which providers ensure that learners stay safe	Yes/No/NA
Procedures for Child Protection meet the requirements of <i>Working Together to Safeguard Children</i>	Yes
Learners are taught about key risks and how to deal with them	Yes
How well learners enjoy and achieve	Yes/No/NA
Support is given to learners with poor behaviour and attendance	Yes
Learners' personal and academic development are monitored	Yes
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution	Yes/No/NA
Learners are helped to develop stable, positive relationships	Yes
Learners, individually and collectively, are consulted when key decisions affecting them have to be made and their views are listened to	Yes
Action is taken to reduce anti-social behaviour, such as bullying and racism	Yes
The extent to which schools enable learners to achieve economic well-being	Yes/No/NA
There is provision to promote learners' basic skills	Yes
Learners have opportunities to develop their enterprise and financial skills, and work in teams	Yes
Education and training for all learners in 14-19 is co-ordinated to give experience of work-based learning	Yes

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The College Council
Thorns Community College
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5 May 2005

Dear Pupils

Thank you for what you had to say to us during the two days we were with you. We enjoyed meeting you and were impressed by the way you explained your views to us. We would like to tell you what we think about your school.

Overall, we think that **Thorns is a good school.**

Here is a list of what we consider to be the main strengths of your school. We hope that it gives you pleasure to read them and that you keep up the good work:

- most of you make good progress in your studies
- the vast majority of you work hard and try your best and behave well
- nearly all of you attend well and are punctual for school and lessons
- you receive the sort of teaching that makes sure you can learn a lot
- you are well cared for in school: staff make sure you are safe and free from major harassment.

There are also a few things that need to be better. Please think carefully about them and play your part in making your school even better:

- sometimes, problems should be sorted out quicker by the school
- some of you who are very able can reach even higher standards
- you all need the experience of daily collective worship and to be taught ICT in all year groups.
- too many of you do not eat and drink healthily. The school is going to make sure you can get drinking-water when you need it – and free!

We wish you all the best in the future.

David Biltcliffe

Lead Inspector