



The Hillcrest School and Community College

Inspection Report

Unique Reference Number 103863
Local Authority Dudley
Inspection number 286792
Inspection dates 17–18 January 2007
Reporting inspector Michael Smith HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Comprehensive	School address	Simms Lane
School category	Community		Netherton
Age range of pupils	11–16		Dudley DY2 0PB
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	01384 816500
Number on roll (school)	884	Fax number	01384 816501
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair	Tracy Blunt
		Headteacher	Maureen Brennan
Date of previous school inspection	6 March 2003		

Age group	Inspection dates	Inspection number
11–16	17–18 January 2007	286792

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Hillcrest is an oversubscribed school and community college which became a specialist school for the arts in 2005. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is above average. The pupils come from a mixture of backgrounds and the majority are from areas of considerable social deprivation. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is well above average, as is the proportion of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds or who are learning English as an additional language.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Hillcrest is an outstanding school, with a national reputation for excellence, which really meets its aim 'to achieve the best for each individual pupil'. Standards have risen markedly over the last few years and, although still slightly below national averages, show the excellent progress pupils make whilst at the school. In particular, all pupils gained at least one GCSE pass in 2006 and nearly all gained five or more passes; both these outcomes were well above the national averages. However, the school is not complacent and leadership at all levels is focused successfully on raising standards even further. A careful analysis is made of results in external examinations to identify how further improvements can be made. The school is committed to raising standards to well above the national average.

Pupils feel very safe in school because the excellent pastoral system makes sure they receive extremely high standards of care and support. Pupils understand the problems about drugs and alcohol abuse, smoking and the inappropriate use of the Internet. Healthy living is very well understood by pupils, who respond accordingly, participating in the many sporting opportunities available and taking up healthy eating options. Many pupils either walk or cycle to school.

Pupils respond exceptionally well to the effective guidance on how to improve and are set challenging learning targets and given support to achieve them. This helps them make excellent progress. Arts college status is central to the life of the school. It has had a very positive impact upon raising standards for all pupils, including boys, who have been a particular focus for raising achievement. Outstanding teaching engages and enthuses pupils. However, sometimes time is not taken to return to objectives and consolidate the learning through skilled questioning to ensure pupils have fully understood the work.

Pupils really enjoy coming to school and the school has worked very effectively to raise attendance, which is now good. Pupils respond very well to the interesting and engaging curriculum and very stimulating lessons. The school makes excellent use of its specialist status to enhance the curriculum through the arts and pupils enjoy lessons which draw on techniques from these. For example, drama is used to demonstrate the structure of different molecules. Pupils enjoy a rich variety of extra activities, including the Duke of Edinburgh award, sports, drama, music, dance and homework clubs. Many pupils took part in the recent production of 'Grease' and enjoyed competing in a school version of a television talent show.

The school and pupils make a strong positive contribution to the local community and, through its status as a training school, the school provides excellent support and guidance to teachers from other schools. The strong emphasis on discipline in the school ensures pupils understand right and wrong and supports their social and moral development extremely well. Pupils say that they like the very high expectations of behaviour because it helps them learn and they know the school's expectations. Excellent relationships between different ethnic groups reflect the very good cultural understanding by pupils within the school.

The school has made excellent progress since the last inspection and its very strong leadership places it in an excellent position to improve further. The leadership's commitment to self-improvement and to tackling any areas which are not as good as others has brought about significant improvements in the quality of teaching and in the expertise of middle managers. This inspection confirms the school's accurate self-evaluation, which takes into account views from parents and pupils. Governance is extremely supportive and holds the school very well to account.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure teachers consistently consolidate the learning of pupils by using focused questions to check that pupils have understood what they have been taught.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Pupils enter the school with very low standards. They make outstanding progress during their five years in the school and attain slightly below-average standards at the end of Key Stage 4. At Key Stage 3, results in English and science improved in 2006 from the 2005 levels but mathematics results fell slightly and all results were below national averages. However, the progress made by pupils was good.

At Key Stage 4, progress accelerates and results in 2006 showed the excellent achievements of pupils. The number of pupils gaining five or more good GCSE passes, including mathematics and English, was just below the national average. All pupils gained at least one GCSE pass, with almost all pupils gaining five or more passes. This was above the national average. Pakistani pupils make better progress than others and girls tend to achieve more highly than boys. Pupils with learning difficulties make very good progress, as do looked-after children. The school worked very hard with a small group of mixed-race pupils who arrived after the start of Year 7. Although these pupils tended to achieve less well than their peers, they remained in school and achieved sufficiently high grades to enable them to continue their education at college.

The school carefully analyses results to look at trends and to ensure all pupils achieve as well as they can. The majority of pupils reach challenging targets and the school met most of its targets, including those for being a specialist school. GCSE results already in for 2007 show that standards in mathematics have risen.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Pupils' personal development and well-being are outstanding. Pupils enjoy their education and have very positive attitudes towards learning. Pupils treat adults and other pupils with respect and their behaviour is outstanding. Permanent exclusions have been small in number in the last few years as a result of the school's strenuous efforts to support disaffected pupils. Fixed-term exclusions are low. Pupils have a clear sense of right and wrong. They act safely and responsibly in lessons and around school.

and have a very good understanding of the dangers from drugs and alcohol abuse and the misuse of the Internet. The pupils from different ethnic groups get on very well together. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding.

Pupils welcome opportunities to take on responsibility, particularly Year 11 pupils, who are active in mentoring younger pupils and in maintaining the school's supportive ethos. Year 7 pupils find this 'friendly and supportive.' Pupils feel safe and valued.

The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles is exceptional. Many of them participate enthusiastically in dance, sporting activities and drama productions. The improved security to the cycle shed has enabled many pupils to cycle to school. Pupils respond well to the school canteen's provision of healthy eating options.

Pupils make a very good contribution to the community by their involvement in charity work. The school council is very effective. Pupils take it seriously and believe their views are valued by the school, including their contribution to staff appointments.

Very good personal qualities, sound key skills and the very effective work-related learning programme, including enterprise activities, ensure that pupils are well placed to take their place within the world of work.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 1

Teaching and learning are outstanding because pupils thrive and make exceptionally good progress. Lessons engage and motivate pupils through the use of a wide range of learning styles that actively involve them in their learning. Pupils respond well to teachers' good subject knowledge. Lessons are well planned to meet the pupils' learning needs. Pupils with learning difficulties receive excellent help with their work from the learning support staff.

Relationships between teachers and pupils and between pupils are excellent and pupils' behaviour and attitudes to learning are very good. Pupils are very appreciative of the way in which teachers make lessons interesting and how many adapt activities from the arts to help them learn. They enjoy their lessons and flourish in the very good classroom atmosphere.

Assessment of pupils' work is regular and there are some very good systems for keeping track of the progress pupils make. Pupils are usually told the level at which they are working and how to improve. Some very good questioning is challenging and helps pupils to develop their understanding. However, occasionally opportunities are missed to probe pupils' understanding further and consolidate their learning by checking what has been learnt at the end of the lesson.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The curriculum and other activities that the school provides are outstanding. It is highly responsive to the needs of the local community and enables pupils to enjoy their learning and make outstanding gains in achievement. The curriculum is very well matched to the needs of pupils so that nearly all leave school with suitable qualifications and are keen to continue their education, with the vast majority going to college.

The school has been very successful in adapting the curriculum to match the agenda of 'Every Child Matters'. All departments incorporate activities into their schemes of work to ensure the work supports pupils in each of the areas. Every pupil follows an excellent programme of personal, social and health education, including a GCSE short course in citizenship that helps develop their personal qualities. Specialist teaching of sex and relationships education ensures that pupils receive an excellent understanding of this most personal aspect of their development and helps ensure they know how to remain safe and healthy.

The provision at Key Stage 4, where all pupils follow both academic and vocational courses, is finely tuned but also subject to careful review and continual development. The provision within and beyond the school for the needs of the children, their families and the community is exemplary, with a range of activities that is impressive in both variety and amount, including support for parents to learn key skills.

Specialist status as an arts college has not only brought the provision for the arts to the point of excellence but has also enhanced the school's provision as a whole. The school has adopted its own award system, at bronze, silver and gold levels, for achievement in the arts, and pupils wear their badges with pride. The school provides, and pupils take up, a wide variety of extra-curricular activities, including GCSE courses in community languages, the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme and many sporting and performance activities.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

The quality of care, guidance and support is outstanding. Highly committed staff, including senior managers, heads of house, form tutors and teaching assistants, help make up a wide-ranging support network across the school. This support is focused and effective and greatly appreciated by pupils.

Support for the most vulnerable pupils is outstanding and it makes a vital contribution to the exceptionally good progress made by these pupils in reaching their educational goals. The school's approach is highly systematic, building on very good links with support agencies and close liaison with families. This has a very positive benefit on pupils' academic progress and personal development. Child protection and health and safety procedures are robust. Pupils say they feel safe and secure and confident that any incidences of bullying are dealt with effectively. Pupils know where to go if they have concerns and have confidence that they will be dealt with sensitively.

There is very good academic guidance, including regular review periods and reporting to parents. The school works hard to make pupils responsible for their actions and to realise the implications on others if they are not responding as expected.

New pupils settle into school well through very effective procedures and support. Pupils are advised very well on their choices at the ages of 14 and 16 and feel they are very well supported as they progress to the next stage of their education.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Leadership and management at all levels are of the highest standard and make an outstanding contribution to raising attainment within the school. Senior leaders do not accept any excuses as to why their pupils cannot achieve well and they give a very strong lead on how, and why, to improve. They accept only the best from staff and they support subject and pastoral leaders well to ensure they achieve this. Subject leaders take very effective responsibility for improving the quality of the provision and raising standards. They monitor the work within their areas very well and are able to bring about, and embed, improvements. They make sure the ethos of the arts is used very well in lessons to enhance the engagement of pupils and improve learning.

The school has very effective and established systems to evaluate its own effectiveness and to support all pupils to maximise their potential. This is used very well to identify suitable training so that teaching improves and pupils make better progress. The school uses its training school status exceptionally well to improve the quality of teaching both within the school and for other schools. Subject leaders and senior managers have a very good understanding of strengths and areas for development through effective departmental evaluations. Pupils and parents are regularly questioned on issues about the school but a very small minority feel they are not always adequately consulted. The governing body hold the school very well to account and challenge when appropriate. Suitable training has ensured they are extremely efficient and knowledgeable. They carefully monitor the work of the school, including making sure all pupils have an equal opportunity to succeed.

The school has made extremely good progress since the previous inspection and has demonstrated an excellent capacity to improve further.

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall
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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?	1
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	1
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	1
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	1
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	1

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1
The behaviour of learners	1
The attendance of learners	2
How well learners enjoy their education	1
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	1
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1

¹ Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average to below average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	1
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets	1
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	1
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

We visited your school recently and met with some of you at lunchtime and talked to others during lessons and at break. We were very impressed with the friendliness you showed us and how helpful you were. Your pride in your school was very obvious and you told us how you really liked the way in which you were taught and how you felt that your teachers really cared about how well you were doing. We agree with you that you attend a really outstanding school

Staff support and guide you very well and you said you appreciated this. This helps you make excellent progress in the school and results in GCSE examinations show that nearly all of you gain five or more passes when you leave. The school council told us how they can influence what happens in the school. We thought teaching was excellent and helped you learn. We also felt that the outstanding curriculum engaged and enthused you and enabled you to follow appropriate courses. Many of you told us how you liked the way in which teachers used elements from the arts in different subjects. You also take part in a wide variety of extra-curricular activities.

Many of you have a very good understanding of what you need to do to remain healthy and you take part in sports. Many of you cycle to school. Your exemplary behaviour and attitudes show that the school works very well to develop you as individuals. Your attendance is good but some of you still do not attend as often as you should.

Your school is extremely well led and managed and it ensures it gains the views of yourselves and your parents to see how it can improve further. It is constantly looking at how it can improve and tries very hard to make sure all of you reach as high standards as possible. We have suggested that teachers make sure they know how well you have done in lessons by checking at the end. We wish you well in this very caring and supportive school and thank you again for your cooperation.