

The Westlands School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	118906
Local Authority	Kent
Inspection number	291284
Inspection dates	6–7 February 2008
Reporting inspector	Heather Yaxley HMI

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

Type of school	Modern (non-selective)
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1623
6th form	229
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Keith Woolley
Headteacher	Jon Whitcombe
Date of previous school inspection	12 November 2001
School address	Westlands Avenue Sittingbourne ME10 1PF
Telephone number	01795 477475
Fax number	01795 479461

Age group	11-18
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Introduction

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

Description of the school

This is a much larger than average secondary modern school. There are fewer students at the school within the higher ability range because these pupils traditionally attend the local grammar schools. The school gained specialist status for mathematics and computing in 2003. The Pyramid Centre on site supports pupils with dyslexia and physical difficulties. The sixth form has expanded in recent years. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, at 38%, is double the national average. The majority of pupils are of White British heritage and come from a range of social backgrounds. A slightly lower proportion than average are eligible for free school meals.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

The Westlands School provides an outstanding quality of education and care for its pupils. The headteacher is a very strong driving force for change. He leads a very dedicated team whose relentless focus on raising standards has made a significant difference to the amount of progress that pupils make. Over the past three years, examination results show that pupils make consistently outstanding progress by the end of Key Stage 4 and good progress in their sixth form courses. Pupils attain standards that are in line with national averages. Those pupils with additional learning needs, in particular, make excellent progress in relation to their starting points. The school has identified that the small proportion of more able pupils do not always make the outstanding progress of which they are capable and have quite rightly prioritised the needs of this group in their improvement plans.

Actions taken since the last inspection have effectively improved the quality of teaching and the sixth form, which are now good. In addition, the school has used its specialist status for mathematics and computing effectively to increase opportunities and improve resources. The impact of these improvements puts the school in an excellent position to develop further. The outstanding curriculum is key to the progress that pupils make. At Key Stages 3 and 4, the curriculum is particularly responsive to pupils' individual needs and aspirations. For younger pupils, the content of the curriculum is particularly well focused to help them settle quickly when they transfer from primary schools. For older pupils, it provides additional opportunities for study that enable them to achieve higher grades in a range of subjects. An important feature of the curriculum is that, whilst it appropriately offers vocational courses for some pupils, the focus remains on acquiring good skills in literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT). This equips all pupils very well to go on to further education or employment. The overall quality of teaching, whilst good, has room for further improvement. Teachers' marking of work, pupils' recording of what they have learned, and opportunities for them to extend their skills and understanding vary in quality.

The care, guidance and support that pupils get from staff are outstanding. The school's focus on raising standards is matched by an equally high priority for pupils' personal and emotional well-being. For example, the decision to reorganise the school into three smaller learning communities has had a very good effect on pupils' personal development. Staff in each community know their pupils very well and are able to keep track of their progress and needs more effectively. This has improved pupils' behaviour, their relationships with staff and with one another, generating an improved atmosphere for learning. Behaviour in lessons and around the school is good. The way in which pupils move around the extensive school site and get to lessons on time is particularly impressive. Pupils, their parents and carers like the rules and boundaries that the school sets for pupils' conduct, and respect the way in which staff enforce them with rigour and consistency. This contributes significantly to the orderly and purposeful atmosphere within such a large school. The school is oversubscribed and the pre-inspection questionnaires show that parents and carers are overwhelmingly positive about the work of the school.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The overall effectiveness of the sixth form is good. The school has coped well with the large increase in numbers in recent years. Leaders and managers monitor the provision and the

progress of students effectively. Senior staff have an accurate view of the provision's strengths and weaknesses, and have taken effective steps to bring about improvement, for example, in modifying the curriculum so that it provides a closer match to students' needs and interests. Students choose from a good range of subjects and courses at different levels, and the school cooperates well with other local providers to ensure that students can gain access to subjects that the school does not offer itself. Students confirm that they benefit from reliable and unbiased information about future options for study and work.

Students make good progress in their studies, although there are considerable variations in attainment between subjects and courses. The success rate for AS Level courses declined in 2007, but students' performance in mathematics improved significantly. Results for intermediate level vocational courses have been consistently above average. Students enjoy their time in the sixth form, and in particular the relaxed atmosphere, which they feel helps to motivate them to achieve, although they rightly complain about the lack of space in which to socialise. They benefit considerably from the good academic and pastoral support they receive and are very appreciative of their teachers' approachability and willingness to give extra help. The school works well with other agencies, such as a local counselling service, in order to ensure students receive good specialist support where necessary.

What the school should do to improve further

- Provide more challenges for the most able pupils to accelerate their progress and attain higher standards.
- Improve feedback to pupils about what and how they have learned in lessons, and ensure that activities match the range of abilities more precisely.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 2

Performance at GCSE and at the end of Key Stage 3 over the last three years has been consistently better than expected, given pupils' below, and sometimes well below, average attainment on entry to the school. Students in the sixth form make good progress overall with pass rates close to national averages, although the proportion gaining the higher grades is below average. In 2007, pupils' GCSE results represented outstanding progress by the end of Key Stage 4 and the school had the sixth highest value added score in Kent. Particularly noteworthy was the increase in the proportion of pupils gaining five or more A* to C grades including English and mathematics and the continuing above average proportion of students gaining five or more A* to G grades. This outstanding achievement is a result of the very good monitoring of pupils' progress, the high level of additional support pupils receive to ensure they reach their targets, and the excellent curriculum. The school recognises that there is the potential for higher attaining students to achieve more of the highest GCSE grades. The school met or exceeded its whole-school GCSE targets in 2007, including those in English and mathematics, and is on course to do so for summer 2008. However, in science, the 2007 GCSE A* to C target was not reached, but changes in courses and the school's tracking information indicates that there will be improved performance this summer.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The personal development and well-being of pupils are good. Although they express some concerns about bullying and behaviour, pupils are very clear that behaviour has improved and that bullying is dealt with speedily. They recognise that the rigorous enforcement of the rules has had a positive impact on behaviour and appreciate this. Periods of exclusions have reduced and the school continues to work hard with the small minority of pupils who misbehave. Pupils enjoy undertaking responsibilities. For example, Year 11 students mentor younger students and members of the sixth students help with extra-curricular activities in sport and music for younger pupils and in local primary schools. They also coordinate fund-raising activities for a range of charities. The school council undertakes its responsibilities seriously and its representations to the senior staff have led to improved toilet facilities and healthy food at lunchtime. They appreciate the opportunity to have an input in to the school development plan. Pupils participate well in music and drama events and recently, a group performed a play aimed at developing cultural understanding. The school has worked hard to develop pupils' understanding and awareness of other faiths and cultures and plans to develop more opportunities within the curriculum.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The monitoring of lessons and pupils' work by the senior leadership team is thorough, grounded in checking pupils' progress and effective in helping teachers to improve their teaching. The system for setting pupils according to their ability works well. Teachers have good subject knowledge but the quality of teaching varies too much. The best teaching is characterised by different activities to suit different levels of ability within each set, with practical opportunities for pupils to apply skills that they have learned. Inconsistencies occur in the way that learning is assessed in lessons. Time at the end of lessons is not always used well to help pupils explore how well they have learned and understood a task, and what they need to do next. The presentation of work in books and the quality of handwriting is not as good as it should be. Nevertheless, overall good teaching enables pupils to make consistently good progress in lessons. The additional support provided by the curriculum, in addition to excellent academic guidance that they receive from staff, enables pupils to make outstanding progress over their time at the school.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 2

The school offers an excellent broad and balanced curriculum that meets the varying needs of the pupils very effectively. Literacy skills are developed well throughout the curriculum. The mathematics and computing specialist status has had a very positive influence on the curriculum. The provision and subsequent achievement in mathematics has benefited particularly well. The

use of ICT across the curriculum, whilst good, has not developed quite as well because of a number of changes in personnel. However, staff use the enhanced multi-media resources confidently. Curricular links with local primary schools are very good, which helps pupils in their transfer to the school. Provision for students with additional learning needs is particularly outstanding. The school offers a good range of alternative awards and vocational courses in Key Stage 4. This includes excellent provision through the school farm and through the construction skills centre. Good links with local colleges and providers of post-16 education ensure that the curriculum covered in school allows students to gain access to a range of further education courses. There is an extremely strong programme of extra-curricular activities and events including external visits, performances, festivals, concerts, sports and a variety of clubs, including those for homework and revision. Extension classes are helping to challenge the abilities of the most able students, although it is too soon to judge the impact these are having on their attainment.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 2

The school is quite rightly proud of the support and guidance that it provides for pupils. Parents, carers and pupils value the caring ethos that the school embodies. Teachers, learning leaders, support staff and form tutors contribute significantly to pupils' progress and positive attitudes to learning. Central to this are the mixed-age tutor groups within the three learning communities. Staff have good systems for tracking the progress of all pupils. Pupils have realistic, individual targets for each subject. They know what they need to do to achieve them and that they will get the help that they need to do so. Targets are shared with families and monitored regularly in 'learning conversations' between pupils and tutors. Pupils with additional learning needs receive strong and effective help, enabling them to progress extremely well. For those pupils with physical needs and others with dyslexia, the Pyramid Centre offers excellent support. Individual programmes effectively ensure that pupils successfully access lessons in the main school. The pupils' support provision for those with behavioural difficulties offers well targeted intervention from specialist staff. This has helped to reduce exclusion, reintroduce the pupils to class successfully and maintain good behaviour in lessons.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 2

The leadership and management of the school at all levels are outstanding. The delegation of responsibilities within the senior leadership team not only ensures the smooth day-to-day running of the school, but also that each member contributes to the strategic development of the school. They are all very clear about the direction in which they are heading because they share the vision for raising standards. For these reasons, pupils do very well during their time at the school and staff are confident to approach new challenges. The self-evaluation by subject coordinators and learning leaders is supported and challenged by the headteacher and his deputies. This adds rigour to the monitoring and evaluation process and ensures high expectations for further development. The way in which leaders, managers and governors use

this information helps them to identify strengths and weaknesses and to ensure consistency of approach.

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Annex A

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?	1	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1	1

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	1	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	1	2
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?	2	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
How well learners enjoy their education	2	
The attendance of learners	3	
The behaviour of learners	2	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2	
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?	2	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1	2

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.

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1	2
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 leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	1	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	2
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, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2	
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes	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

7 February 2008

Dear Pupils

Inspection of The Westlands School, Sittingbourne, ME10 1PF

You may remember that we came to inspect your school recently. On behalf of the inspection team, I am writing to thank you for your help and to let you know about the judgements that we made about your school. It was a pleasure to spend time in your school, to look at the work that is taking place in lessons and to speak with some of you. Our special thanks go to those that we met in groups, including the school council. You were very positive about the education that you receive at Westlands and realistic about some other things that you can see are improving. We also received questionnaires from your families and have considered their comments. Please pass on our thanks to them.

We judge that The Westlands School is an outstanding school. You do very well in examinations and this is because the staff know you very well and are able to give you the help that you need. The curriculum, including the specialist support for mathematics and computing, is very effective in equipping you to continue your studies when you leave school. It was good to hear that many of you aspire to go on to university and that others gain good practical work skills to take forward into employment. We think that you get excellent preparation for the future. This can only happen if the school is well run, and we consider that your headteacher is an excellent leader. He has a vision for the future that has your achievement at its heart. As importantly, the support that you get from other staff, including tutors and learning leaders in each of the Tudor, Stuart and Norman Learning Communities, helps you to know how well you are doing and how you can improve your work.

As always, there are always things that a school can improve upon and we have asked your headteacher to do two things: first, to ensure that the most able pupils make as much progress as other pupils. Second, to give you better feedback about what and how you have learned in lessons, and to match learning activities more closely to your abilities. We think that this will help your school to continue to improve its excellent provision.

We do hope that you will read our full report (it's not too long!) and that you will continue to play an active part in the development of your school. We wish you well in all that you hope for in the future.

Yours sincerely

Heather Yaxley Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex B

7 February 2008

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Her Majesty's Inspector