

Hall Cross School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	106808
Local Authority	Doncaster
Inspection number	309235
Inspection dates	7–8 November 2007
Reporting inspector	Susan Bowles HMI

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	2147
6th form	450
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr P Marshall
Headteacher	Dr K Simmonds (Executive)/Mrs B Jackson (Associate)
Date of previous school inspection	26 September 2006
School address	Thorne Road Doncaster South Yorkshire DN1 2HY
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Introduction

Hall Cross School was given a Notice to Improve in October 2006. A monitoring visit in May 2007 evaluated the progress made by the school in improving outcomes for pupils. This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Hall Cross is a very large school and its sixth form attracts students from across Doncaster. The school is on two sites 2.4 miles apart. The students come from both the affluent suburbs and some of the poorest parts of Doncaster. A slightly above average number of pupils are eligible for free school meals. The proportion of students with additional learning difficulties and/or disabilities is below average. There are fewer students than average from minority ethnic backgrounds, but the proportion of students coming from homes where the first language is not English is above average. The school has specialist status for science and mathematics and is in the process of becoming an extended school.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

In accordance with section 13 (3) of the Education Act 2005, HMCI is of the opinion that the school no longer requires significant improvement and provides satisfactory value for money.

Hall Cross School is an improving school that has taken rigorous steps to raise the achievement of all its students. Very effective leadership has led to significant changes to the curriculum and monitoring of students' progress. The curriculum and care, guidance and support are now good; the quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory and has improved. All of this has contributed to the recent improvement in outcomes and the eradication of some marked patterns of underachievement. Achievement and standards are now satisfactory.

Students join the school having attained standards that are slightly above average. Good systems introduced to check their progress over time and to target extra support where it is needed have had a positive effect on raising the achievement of targeted groups of students. The curriculum now better reflects the needs and interests of the whole school population, and this has reduced the risk of disaffection. Standards have risen throughout the school and are above average, and students in general now make satisfactory progress. For example, students who are more able make good progress in the subjects that are tested in Year 9, although the school recognises the need to help those with more average ability to make better progress. Most of the targets the school has as a science and mathematics specialist college have been met. The school's specialism is contributing tangibly to the development of the curriculum and to teaching and learning. Teaching remains satisfactory overall, with a greater proportion that is good than a year ago, but there is room for improvement. Students make better progress in their lessons than before because teachers use more strategies to engage them actively in their learning. However, lessons do not challenge them often enough to think for themselves. Marking does not consistently help students learn how to do better. Better progression routes are needed for the wider range of students continuing their studies beyond the age of 16.

Attendance has improved and the climate for learning is positive. Partnerships with other schools and agencies work well to support students' well-being and opportunities for learning. Enrichment activities promote students' personal development well, and participation in extra arts and sports activities is good. There is a secure basis for the development of the school's extended provision. Students generally get on well together and relationships with adults are based on mutual trust and respect. Sound basic skills and positive attitudes mean that students are well enough prepared for their future lives. Students value their school highly and feel they can contribute to its improvement. While many of the parents, too, are positive in their views about the school, a substantial minority have concerns about behaviour and feel the school could respond better to their views.

Leaders and managers in the school understand what needs to be done to improve the school further because they are clear about its strengths and weaknesses. They are spearheading rapid improvement and the staff are responding very positively. The governing body has an increased understanding of the effectiveness of the school's work, although its new structures and systems need embedding. Middle managers are held to account and increasingly contribute to improvement, although the skills to spread good practice in their areas of responsibility need further development. Good systems for communication ensure the whole staff works well together and that actions have a positive impact. As a result, the school has good capacity to improve further.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

The overall effectiveness of the sixth form is satisfactory. Standards and achievement are satisfactory. Despite a dip in the number of higher A-level grades in 2007, the overall pass rate has increased from the previous year. The general trend is one of gradual improvement over the past three years, in particular in English language. Art, psychology, economics and media studies have recently performed particularly well. There is a high rate of recruitment into Year 12 and retention from Year 12 to Year 13, and three-quarters of students progress into higher education.

Personal development and well-being are good. Attendance is good, and a robust system of following up absences is in place, particularly where academic progress may be compromised. Students from other schools settle well into the sixth form owing to an efficient induction process. Students enjoy being in school, feel that they are given plenty of opportunity to develop independent working skills, and are treated well by their teachers. They contribute well to the life of the school through supporting younger pupils and taking on service in the community. They enjoy a wide range of sporting and other enrichment activities. Teaching and learning are satisfactory. In most lessons students are developing greater critical, analytical and research skills, and participating in discussions and presentations with increasing confidence. They also benefit from detailed constructive feedback on their work from the majority of their teachers.

The sixth form curriculum is satisfactory. However, the school is aware that it does not yet meet the needs of those Key Stage 4 pupils who are currently following the new, mainly vocational pathway, and that additional courses of a different nature must be provided to extend the present vocational options.

Care, guidance and support are good. The academic guidance for the sixth form is very good in the way that it tracks students' progress closely, and rapidly identifies where support and intervention are required. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are well supported and encouraged to realise their potential in the sixth form and many have gone on to gain a university place or achieve other aspirations. Students speak highly of advice they received on entry to the sixth form. Well-established visits and conferences support the guidance that they receive about careers and progression into higher education and employment.

Leadership and management of the sixth form is satisfactory. The revised leadership structure has enabled many improvements to be implemented, some of which have yet to achieve their full impact.

What the school should do to improve further

- Increase the proportion of lessons that stimulate students to think independently, so that their progress accelerates.
- Consolidate middle managers' skills so that good practice is spread more effectively.
- Embed new structures for governance so that the governing body is fully effective.
- Ensure the views of parents are heard and used.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

The school has effectively dealt with the low achievements of previous years. Students enter the school with levels of attainment slightly above the national average. Results improved significantly in 2007 at Key Stage 4 with overall standards slightly higher than national averages, and this represents satisfactory progress. The percentage of students achieving five or more A* to C grades at GCSE was in line with those nationally, and the percentage of students achieving five or more A* to C grades including mathematics and English was higher than the national average. Most of the indicators at Key Stage 4 show that students made satisfactory progress; however, the small number of students leaving with no GCSE passes was greater than it should have been. The underachievement of boys in previous years has been effectively dealt with and 2007 results showed that; overall, the achievements of boys were very close to those of girls. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities made good progress owing to the good care and guidance they received.

The previous underachievement of students at Key Stage 3 has also been dealt with. Standards in the 2007 Key Stage 3 tests were higher than the national average indicating that satisfactory progress is now being made. Achievements in English, however, were not as high as those in mathematics and science, where standards were significantly higher than nationally. The most able pupils made good progress in all Key Stage 3 subjects. For example, a group of high ability students took their mathematics Key Stage 3 tests at the end of Year 8 and achieved very high standards. These students are now completing a GCSE in statistics two years early. This is one example of how the school's specialism is being used to drive up standards. Work seen during inspection showed that the improving trend over the past three years is continuing. This is largely due to the very effective systems the school has developed for monitoring students' progress. The school has correctly identified the need to do more to improve the progress made by pupils of average ability.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

This is a harmonious community. Students have a good understanding of the cultural diversity within Britain today and students from minority ethnic groups and new EU countries strongly appreciate what the school does for them. Students' awareness of spiritual, moral and ethical issues is heightened by assemblies, enrichment activities and the quality of discussions in some lessons. Students work hard and are friendly and polite. They like school, but their enjoyment of learning is only satisfactory because lessons do not always engage them. They say they feel safe and secure. There is some bullying and students know where to go for help, although there is inconsistency in the way it is dealt with. Behaviour is good overall, although students say that a small minority finds it difficult to concentrate for sustained periods and sometimes disrupts their learning.

Students know how to stay healthy: they eat healthy lunches and appreciate the wide range of opportunities to take exercise. Attendance is satisfactory and improving. There are good opportunities to contribute to the school's family ethos and take responsibility. Students have a good awareness of the needs of others and show this care by regularly raising funds to help

them. The school council gives students a voice, and has brought about improvements. Enterprise activities and the development of basic skills in literacy, mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT) help prepare students effectively for the world of work.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Teaching is satisfactory with some major strengths. There is good evidence that the quality of teaching is improving and teachers are focusing more on the quality of students' learning. Teachers plan lessons with care and manage students well. Consequently, students behave well in lessons and follow instructions willingly. They are less good at thinking independently because in many lessons they are not challenged enough to think for themselves or solve solutions. For example, in science lessons students may be asked to carry out experiments but are told the expected outcomes rather than being asked to predict them. Teachers set objectives for lessons but they are not always as clear as they need to be to guide students' learning effectively.

Worksheets are used extensively and while they are often relevant and useful, they sometimes provide too much support for students who are capable of working more autonomously. When students are in ability sets the work is broadly appropriate. In some mixed-ability classes, the work is not closely matched to individual needs. Work is assessed thoroughly through tests and examinations and the information is used well to determine students' future courses. However, day-to-day marking is usually sketchy and does not tell students how to improve. The school's specialism is having a positive impact on teaching and learning; for example, through the provision of interactive whiteboards, which students say are making lessons more interesting and interactive.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

Significant and far-reaching improvements to the curriculum since the last inspection mean this it is now good. In Key Stages 3 and 4, all students are able to follow courses that match their needs and aspirations.

There is now good provision for the range of abilities in Years 7 to 11. For example, in Year 7, some students who find the transition to secondary school difficult are taught partly in small groups with the same teacher for most lessons. In Year 9 pupils with exceptional aptitude for mathematics take their SAT papers a year early and will sit an extra GCSE in statistics at the end of Year 9. Both these groups are making good progress. In Key Stage 4, students are given a good choice of courses, including vocational, academic and foundation courses. This is much wider than at the time of the previous inspection when the diet was chiefly academic. Good assessment and tracking is helping students to make the right choice of courses and the impact is already seen in improved attendance and GCSE results. Links with other schools as part of the specialism are helping to enrich the curriculum through shared resources and joint projects.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Key members of staff know the students well and are aware of their needs and how to meet them. Support for vulnerable students, including students in care and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, is both sensitive and effective. There are good relationships with the many outside agencies who work with the school. The health and safety of all students are paramount and all necessary child protection and safeguarding requirements are met. A good personal, social and health education programme supports students' personal and emotional development well and is raising their awareness of how to keep fit and healthy and to manage their finances. Close social and academic links with the local primary schools, colleges and universities, as well as with local employers and training agencies, ensure students are well prepared for all stages of their education and employment.

Academic guidance has improved and is generally good, although day-to-day marking is not yet informative enough. Reports for parents are clear and informative about students' progress and set increasingly informative targets for improvement. The school's systems for tracking the progress of students are comprehensive and sophisticated and are used increasingly effectively by all teachers to plan work and to support students' learning.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

The executive headteacher, associate headteacher and the restructured senior team provide good leadership, and this is increasingly well supported by middle leaders. They have communicated a very clear sense of direction. Skilful strategic management has galvanised improvements and is transforming the culture of the school. As a result, staff and students see how they can achieve high quality and are taking the necessary action. This has had a rapid and positive impact on outcomes and trends look set to improve further.

The school's development plan shows a strong grasp of priorities based on accurate appraisal of strengths and weaknesses and a clear vision and values. New structures and good systems introduced since January 2007 have released considerable potential to identify and tackle weaknesses. High expectations are made clear to all and professional development is firmly aligned with the development plan. Comprehensive and rigorous monitoring gives leaders and managers at all levels a clear understanding of performance, and interventions with both staff and students are prompt and effective. The school runs smoothly and resources are deployed appropriately to support learning. A great deal has been achieved in a short time, notably in the more personalised curriculum and better monitoring of progress. Both have helped more pupils to fulfil their potential. Having reached or come close to most of its targets for 2007, including its specialist college targets, the school's thorough monitoring demonstrates that it is on track to reach its challenging targets this year. The school has moved ahead well in all the areas identified in the previous inspection, and at an accelerating pace. It is currently providing satisfactory value for money.

Senior staff are clear about the challenges that remain if improvement is to be sustained. Some improvements need consolidation and more time to have their full effect. Middle managers are accountable and empowered to lead, but they are not yet securing consistency in the quality of teaching and marking which is essential to sustained improvement. Governance is satisfactory and fulfils its statutory duties. The governing body is now better informed about the effectiveness of the school's work and is beginning to ask appropriately challenging questions about outcomes for all pupils. Governors' committees are being reshaped to play a more useful role in the school's self-evaluation and to aid the governing body in exercising its responsibilities in the development of the school.

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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?	3	3
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	2	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3	3
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	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	3	
The attendance of learners	3	
The behaviour of learners	2	
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	2	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	3	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	3
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	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?	2	3
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 leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2	
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	3	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	3	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	3	
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

Thank you for contributing to the recent inspection of the school. We enjoyed meeting you and appreciated your helpfulness. I am writing to you with a summary of our findings.

We think your school has improved, as it was asked to do at the last inspection. It no longer needs a 'Notice to Improve'.

More of you are working hard and overall you are now making the expected progress. Results at Key Stage 4 improved significantly in 2007. The number of students at the school getting five or more GCSE A* to C grades has continued its steady rise, and there has been a reduction in the number who do not get five GCSE passes.

There is now a wider choice of courses to fit your individual interests and aspirations, including more practical and vocational alternatives to GCSEs, and extra subjects like statistics in Year 9. The school knows how well you are doing and tells you; it also steps in with help when needed. All of this has helped to improve your progress and attendance.

Your behaviour and work habits are good and you generally treat each other with care and respect, though these things sometimes cause some of your parents concern. You say you feel safe and we feel the school successfully helps you to develop as considerate and open-minded individuals. It provides good care, support and guidance for all of you. The senior staff lead the school well.

Other aspects of the school are satisfactory. This includes the sixth form and the teaching you receive. Teaching is improving, but we think you could do more thinking for yourselves in some lessons. We have asked the school to:

- increase the proportion of lessons that stimulate you to think independently so that your progress accelerates
- help more of the managers to assist in improving the school
- help the governors play their part in making the school effective
- ensure the views of your parents are heard and used.

We heard very clearly from you that you like your school because it is a friendly place and, as one person put it, 'you learn lots'. We hope you will want to do your bit to improve lessons by being responsible and independent learners.