

The County High School Leftwich

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	111415
Local Authority	Cheshire
Inspection number	310591
Inspection dates	11–12 December 2007
Reporting inspector	Sue Harrison 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	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	900
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Allison Massey
Headteacher	Miss Julie Brandreth
Date of previous school inspection	1 December 2003
School address	Granville Road Northwich Cheshire CW9 8EZ
Telephone number	01606 333300
Fax number	01606 331483

Age group	11-16
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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

The school serves a mixed catchment area. Over half the students come from areas of relatively high socio-economic background. Attainment is above average on entry to the school. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including those with statements, is around the national average. Almost all the students are White British. Due to retirement and ill-health, there have been a number of changes to the leadership of the school in recent years. The present headteacher took up the post in January 2006. The school gained specialist status in media and arts in 2005. The local authority recently confirmed it as an Extended School which, in partnership with other organisations, opens many of its resources to the wider community. This also enables the school to offer additional subjects and enrichment activities to its students.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

This is a satisfactory and improving school, with particular strengths in student support, their personal development and the curriculum on offer. The school went through a period of instability following the retirement of the previous headteacher and students' achievement deteriorated. Actions to address this have been successful in raising standards and the majority of students make satisfactory progress overall, and good progress in some subjects. However, there is still too much inconsistency across the school. Teaching and learning are satisfactory but there is insufficient teaching that is good or better. The school is developing a shared understanding of what constitutes a good lesson and implementing a staff development programme to spread practice from the best lessons. There are targets for student progress but the rigour with which they are applied and monitored varies across the school.

Attendance and behaviour are good. There is an ethos of mutual respect between staff and students. The school is effective at developing well-rounded individuals, who leave the school with a range of skills to help them in their future lives. The majority of students enjoy coming to school. They receive effective guidance to help them make choices and pastoral support is good. The curriculum is good, with particular strengths in Key Stage 4. There is strong partnership working, which has helped the school to develop its curriculum and other aspects of the services it provides. The school uses its specialism and extended services well to enhance the curriculum. Students appreciate and benefit from a wide range of additional activities and their contribution to the community is outstanding. Parents are positive about the school; they particularly like the support new students receive and the high quality concerts and performances. The school's specialism has enabled it to provide good resources for music, drama and multi-media work.

Leadership and management are satisfactory. The headteacher provides strong leadership and a clear vision of what the school needs to do to improve further. Training for managers is in place to help them deliver the improvements outlined in the school improvement plan. The school uses self-assessment increasingly well as a tool to identify strengths and weaknesses. It has identified appropriate priorities for further development. Robust action plans are in place and the school has good capacity to bring about further improvements.

What the school should do to improve further

- Increase the proportion of teaching and learning that is good or better.
- Ensure that targets set for students are used effectively across the school.
- Ensure students reach their full potential in all subjects.

A small proportion of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Student achievement is satisfactory and improving. There have been fluctuations in achievements since the last inspection. Actions taken to address poor performance in 2005 are showing positive impact. Standards are above average. The proportion of students achieving higher grades in five or more GCSEs, including English and mathematics, was above the national

average in 2007. Students make satisfactory progress overall from their starting points on joining the school. However, some are not reaching their full potential in all subjects. Students generally make good progress in English and satisfactory progress in mathematics. Achievement within the school's specialist subjects is satisfactory overall. The school is aware of this issue and actions taken are beginning to show results. There is a narrowing of the gap in terms of progress made in different subjects.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Personal development and well-being are good. Students' enjoyment of school is reflected in their improving attendance, which is now above average. The school helps students successfully to develop into well-rounded young people, with an appropriate range of personal and work-related skills to ensure they are well prepared for their future lives.

All aspects of students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development are good. Students relate well to each other and to adults, and have good attitudes towards their learning and life in school. They generally behave well both in lessons and around school, although sometimes opportunities are missed in lessons to promote their self-confidence and independence. Students know well how to stay safe. The importance of a healthy lifestyle is reinforced through their strong participation in sporting activities and eating and drinking healthily in school. The main strength of students' personal development resides in their outstanding contribution to the community. Students make excellent use of the many opportunities they have, both inside and outside school, to boost their self-esteem, acquire new skills and talents and develop a strong sense of loyalty towards school.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Teachers have good subject knowledge. In most lessons objectives are shared with students but, because teachers do not take sufficient account of the learning needs of individuals and groups within the class, students do not always progress as well as they might. In a few lessons a lack of structure and pace, and too much teacher input, leads to students losing attention and not making good use of their time. In other more dynamic lessons, teachers challenge students; they provide opportunities for individuals or groups of students to contribute their own ideas and encourage them to assess their own progress. As a result, students feel more directly involved in their learning and make good progress. The school is developing a range of strategies to monitor the quality of teaching and to spread good practice.

The school makes good use of its specialist school funding to provide high quality information and communication (ICT) resources. Students are making increasingly good use of these and are developing skills which enhance the quality of their work across the curriculum.

Teachers use homework effectively to reinforce and extend learning. Marking is well used to monitor the quality of students' work and reward their efforts. However, it is not used consistently to inform them of what they need to do to improve.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum is good overall with particular strengths in Key Stage 4. The school is currently reviewing provision at Key Stage 3 to ensure that it better reflects the school's specialism and meets changes in the national framework.

At Key Stage 4, students access a wide range of courses, provided both in school and through links with local colleges. The extended day gives students the opportunity to study additional subjects after school. All students complete either a basic skills or GCSE ICT programme. The award of media and arts specialist status brings a number of benefits for students and the community the school serves. It has extended the range of subjects studied, improved facilities for art, drama and music, and is beginning to encourage teachers to develop creative and innovative approaches to teaching. The school is playing a leading role in working with others to introduce a diploma course in creative and media studies.

Many students choose to study at least one course associated with the school's specialism, either in lessons or as an extra-curricular activity. There are many high quality school productions and musical performances that have been performed in front of large audiences. In addition the many activities at lunchtime and after school are well used by students to extend their learning, enhance their social development and promote their physical fitness. The curriculum makes good provision for students' personal development through the work of its Every Child Matters faculty.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Care, guidance and support are good and make a strong contribution to students' well-being in school. Parents commend the quality of the induction arrangements, which help students make new friends and settle quickly into Year 7. At later stages students receive clear guidance regarding the suitability of option choices for GCSE and other courses and are prepared well for the next stage of their education or the world of work at the end of Year 11. There is an appropriate range of sanctions and an increasing range of incentives to promote students' attendance. The school sets students achievable targets and parents receive regular progress reports. This system is in its second year and the school is evaluating its effectiveness to ensure best practice is shared across departments. Arrangements for safeguarding students' welfare and health and safety are in place and meet current government requirements. The recently established LINC centre has made a good start in strengthening the school's capacity to meet a range of students' needs, for example by helping them to meet coursework deadlines. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are satisfactorily supported.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Leadership and management are satisfactory. The headteacher has brought stability to the school after a period of uncertainty. The drop in standards in 2005 has been reversed and the majority of learners are making at least satisfactory progress. The headteacher's vision for the school's future is clear and staff and managers increasingly share the aims she has set. The school has a clear understanding of its strengths and areas for improvement. There is an

appropriate focus on bringing about further improvements in teaching and learning to ensure all learners achieve their full potential. Training is in place for managers and staff to underpin these priorities. The improvement agenda is driven by realistic, and increasingly challenging, targets for the whole school and for individual learners. Attendance is rising. Behaviour management strategies are effective. The school's specialism and extended status are well used to enhance students' personal development.

The school recognises there is more to be done. For example, the use of targets to drive learner progress is rigorously applied in the best performing subject areas, but not yet across the whole school. Strategies to further improve teaching are in place but have not yet had sufficient impact.

The governing body is committed to the school and support it well. Governors have started to provide an appropriate level of challenge to school managers. There are plans in place for them to have links with specific areas in order to increase their ability to fulfil this role. The school is inclusive and promotes equality of opportunity well in terms of developing a culture of respect. Resources are effectively used. Specialist status enabled the provision of up to date technology for classroom and other use. It has led to the school becoming a centre of learning for the local community and further strengthened the school's partnerships with a range of other organisations. The school gives satisfactory value for money.

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

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	3

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 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	2
The behaviour of learners	2
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	2

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	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?	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	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
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

Inspection of The County High School Leftwich, Northwich, CW9 8EZ

As you know, your school was recently inspected. Thank you for your warm welcome and your help in finding our way around and giving us your views about the school. We really enjoyed visiting your school and I am writing now to tell you about our findings.

We think County High is a satisfactory school, with particular strengths in student support and the wide range of activities you benefit from. The school has made a number of improvements in recent years. You told us you enjoy coming to school and there is a positive culture of respect between staff and students. You reach above average standards, for example in the proportion of students gaining five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics. For most of you, this represents satisfactory progress against your starting points on entering the school. However, you make better progress in some subjects than others. You generally work hard in lessons; in the most effective ones the work is lively and interesting and challenges you to do the best you can. In some lessons, your interest is not sustained or you find the work too hard or too easy. You now have targets in all subjects but they are used to monitor your progress better in some subjects than others.

Behaviour is good; you are polite and helpful to staff and visitors. We think you make an excellent contribution to the wider community through concerts, performances and other activities. There is a good range of subjects for you to study in Years 10 and 11 and the school's specialism gives you access to very good multi-media resources. The school helps students successfully to develop into well-rounded young people, with an appropriate range of skills to help them prepare for their future lives.

The school has a clear view of what it does well and what it needs to do to improve further. We think the headteacher gives strong leadership to the school and we are confident that it will become even better! We have asked the school to focus on three main areas for improvement:

- increase the proportion of teaching and learning that is good or better
- make sure your targets help to improve your progress
- ensure you reach your full potential in all subjects

May I take this opportunity to wish you every success for the future.