

Knowles Hill School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	113559
Local Authority	Devon
Inspection number	311316
Inspection dates	30–31 January 2008
Reporting inspector	Paul Dowgill

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

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1039
6th form	213
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Don Paterson
Headteacher	Gareth Davies
Date of previous school inspection	29 September 2003
School address	Old Exeter Road Newton Abbot TQ12 2NF
Telephone number	01626 367335
Fax number	01626 331369

Age group	11-19
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by four Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Knowles Hill is a slightly larger than average secondary school and has specialist status in technology. The percentage of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is above average and the proportion with a statement of special educational needs is slightly above average. Almost all the students are of White British heritage. The percentage eligible for free school meals is below average. The school's sixth form works collaboratively with neighbouring schools and has increased in size in recent years. The school has Investors in People status, Investors in Careers Award, Investors in Work Related Learning Award and holds the Sports Mark, Healthy Schools and Eco Schools awards. The school appointed a new headteacher in September 2007.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

Knowles Hill is a rapidly improving school that provides its students with a satisfactory education. The recently appointed headteacher has quickly instilled a drive for improvement across the school. Through his restructuring of the senior leadership group, the headteacher has built a team that is capable of ensuring that his vision for the school becomes a reality. Although only in post for just over a term, the headteacher has already made his mark through improvements to students' behaviour, attendance and aspects of the sixth form. The following views are typical of many parents and reflect the impact of the headteacher, 'I am happy with the way the school is run, there have been many improvements lately and discipline has greatly improved. Communication between the school and parents is also improving.' The capacity for further improvement is good.

In 2007, students' attainment was above average on sixth form vocational courses but below average at A level and GCSE. Given their starting points, students overall made satisfactory progress. Improving students' academic performance is the key priority for the school. Senior leaders, through their rigorous monitoring, clearly understand the school's strengths and weaknesses. They have implemented a range of strategies for improvement and these are beginning to have an impact, as seen in the recent improved examination results in mathematics and technology. In order to raise standards, the school knows it has to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Too much teaching is satisfactory rather than good because the strategies used too often do not effectively meet the needs of all learners or present them with sufficient challenge. The curriculum currently meets the needs of students but the school has a planned review to determine how it can do this more effectively. The sixth form curriculum is good. There are good opportunities for extra-curricular activities that many students choose to take up.

The students' personal development and well-being are good. Students are friendly and welcoming and have good relationships with the staff. They enjoy school and understand what it means to lead a healthy life and stay safe. Many students make a good contribution to the school and wider community. Preparation for their future economic well-being is satisfactory. The school provides its students with good care, which they value. The school effectively supports students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those that are vulnerable or disaffected. It has good working partnerships with outside agencies to provide further support where required. Students welcome being a member of a house group as it provides a sense of community. They also appreciate the Year 7 to 11 tutor groups as these provide a sense of whole school cohesion. Students, overall, are provided with good academic guidance. The school has introduced a system of target setting and tracking progress and most students know what their targets are. Guidance on how best to achieve these though is variable. Teachers' marking is not focused enough on indicating to students the steps they have to take to improve their work and make progress towards achieving their targets.

Specialist Technology College status has a positive impact on the school. It has made available new resources for technology, mathematics and science and helped support curriculum development. It has provided a stimulus and funding for the broadening of the sixth form curriculum, including the development of an on-site hair and beauty salon. It has also helped promote inclusion through part funding of the school's inclusion centre. Through its specialist status, the school is working closely with partner primary schools on developing areas of the curriculum.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

The sixth form is rapidly developing due to good leadership. Vocational courses have very high pass rates and students make good progress. Standards in A-level courses have lagged behind but are improving and are now broadly in line with national averages, representing satisfactory progress. Teaching is satisfactory overall but improving. Where teaching is most effective, students have good opportunities for independent learning. Increasing student numbers across the range of courses and improved retention rates are a reflection of recent developments in the curriculum, which is matched closely to student needs. There is close collaboration with partner schools and outside agencies, which further enhances the curriculum.

Students enjoy the sixth form and demonstrate positive attitudes towards learning. They play an active part in the life of the sixth form and school, for example through supporting younger students, community action service, and involvement in 'challenge' days. The sixth form council works actively to improve student facilities and liaises closely with staff. Students receive good guidance that helps develop their academic and personal well-being and they value the support of their tutors and teachers.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve achievement and standards by ensuring teachers use strategies that better meet the learning needs of all students and provide them with suitably challenging work.
- Use marking more effectively to provide students with clear guidance on how they can improve their work and make progress towards meeting their examination targets.

A small proportion of 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

Grade for sixth form: 3

Students' performance at GCSE has been below expectations over a number of years, particularly in English and in technology. The school has identified the reasons for this underperformance, and has strategies that are resulting in an improvement in standards. Currently, most students are on track to meet their targets. The standards they are attaining are now broadly in line with national averages and their achievement is satisfactory. There is no significant variation in attainment between boys and girls, or between different groups within the school. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are performing as well as their peers due to the support they receive. The school has been successful at ensuring that a good proportion of those students whose examination results fell well below expectations have developed good personal skills and have remained in education.

The progress students make between Year 7 and Year 9 has been improving steadily in recent years, particularly in mathematics and science. Although attainment remains below average overall, given the starting points of the students, this represents satisfactory achievement. In 2007, students with a statement of special educational needs made good progress. Recently, boys have performed slightly better than girls. The school has recognised this and is working successfully to reduce this difference.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The majority of students enjoy school; as one said, 'there is always something to look forward to'. They identify with the school as a community, and welcome recent improvements. Students are open, friendly and approachable, and they value the good relationships that characterise the school. Students feel safe in and around the school. They report that bullying is in decline and that the school deals with any incidents effectively. In reacting to staff, student and parental concerns, the headteacher has led a drive to improve students' behaviour. This has had rapid success, which students appreciate. Overall student behaviour in lessons and around the school is good and improving. The school has also had considerable success in improving students' attendance, which is now in line with the national average, and is working hard to improve this further.

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural understanding is good. Students are open and thoughtful in discussion, and engage well with those from other cultures. An equal opportunities forum specifically celebrates diversity. Students have a good understanding of healthy lifestyles. The take-up of healthy food options is improving and there are good levels of participation in physical activity. Students make a significant contribution to the wider community through individual initiatives, charity fund raising and participation in environmental projects. Years 7 to 11 tutor groups and mentoring by sixth formers reinforce cohesion within the school. There is an influential and developing student voice through the school council, and students value election to this body. The school prepares students well for their economic future in terms of enterprise and team building, although their skills in literacy, information and communication technology (ICT) and financial awareness are less developed.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Senior leaders, in the drive to improve standards, have focused on improving teaching and learning across the school. Senior and many middle leaders are actively encouraging teachers to take risks in their teaching and provide training where required. Good practice in teaching and learning is shared regularly with all staff. Although the quality of teaching and learning across the whole school is improving, there is not yet enough consistently good teaching to ensure that all students make good progress. Not enough teachers are taking advantage of the improved students' behaviour to actively engage them in their learning. Too many lessons have a limited range of activities and do not challenge sufficiently pupils of all abilities. Teachers are not providing enough opportunities for students to develop independent learning skills or take responsibility for their own learning.

Where teaching is most effective, teachers have high expectations of the students. They use the assessment information available about each student effectively to inform their planning and are aware of students' learning styles. They set clear learning outcomes and ensure lessons meet the needs of all students. Teachers actively involve students in assessing their own work and that of their peers. Where relevant, they make creative use of ICT to support student

learning. Across the school, teaching assistants provide good support for students with specific learning difficulties.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

The school has modified the curriculum since the last inspection so that it now meets statutory requirements. In the main school, the curriculum satisfactorily meets the needs of most students. In the sixth form, collaboration with two local schools has provided a broad range of choice for students. The school has introduced new vocational courses and these are becoming increasingly popular. In Years 7 to 9, the curriculum is enhanced by a range of activities aimed at developing students' learning, and the impact of this is seen in improving progress. Specialist status has had a positive impact in supporting developments in the curriculum particularly in technology, mathematics and sixth form vocational courses.

There are a number of enrichment activities planned throughout the school to enhance the curriculum, for example, enterprise days and an ethics day in the sixth form. The school's international links with countries in Africa also help enhance the curriculum. There is a good range of extra-curricular activities available before school, at lunchtime and after school, some of which are led by students. These are well attended and add greatly to students' enjoyment of school.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Care and guidance are strong features of the school and they make a good contribution to students' personal development and well-being. Students appreciate the support the school provides. Most parents agree that their child is safe and well cared for and the 'Keeping Kids Safe' initiative results in effective parental communication. Procedures for ensuring pupils' safety and child protection are secure and effective. The school has well established links with a wide range of outside agencies to ensure good quality care is in place for different groups of students, including looked after children. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities receive good support and this positively influences their achievement. The needs of disaffected and vulnerable students are met very effectively through the school's inclusion unit and 'Chances' programme. The school provides good support for all students at transition stages and careers advice is valued. Students appreciate being a member of a house as this adds to their sense of belonging to a community. The new tutor groups, containing students in year groups 7 to 11, have been well received and provide an effective support structure.

The school has introduced a rigorous system of target setting and tracking students' performance. This allows teachers to identify specific student underperformance and supports their timely intervention. Most students are aware of their targets and know what they have to do to achieve them. The quality of guidance provided by staff through marking however is variable. Short-term targets and written comments are not always sharp enough to ensure that students understand exactly what they need to do to improve their work.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The headteacher and the governing body share a clear vision for the future of the school and have well focused priorities to achieve this. The headteacher has successfully communicated this vision to staff, students and parents. There is a common desire amongst the school community to bring about rapid improvement. Change is being driven forward on a number of fronts and at a good pace. Senior leaders have accurately evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the school. They have put in place measures that already have had a significant impact on students' personal development, particularly in improving behaviour. Their prime focus though is improving students' academic performance. The school is using challenging yet realistic targets to set goals for each subject area. Senior leaders are carefully monitoring progress towards achieving these goals. These strategies are having an impact as standards are improving.

Middle managers are committed to playing a key role in ensuring the drive for school improvement is a success and are working well through 'change teams' to bring this about. They are sharing good practice in teaching and learning and most managers are evaluating the quality of the work in their areas accurately. They know what they have to do to bring about improvement but the implementation and impact of planned strategies is not yet consistent across all subjects.

The governing body has been proactive in ensuring statutory requirements are met, in confronting underachievement, and in setting challenging targets for improvement across a range of school activities. They are working well alongside the new headteacher and senior team to bring about the necessary improvements.

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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?	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	3	

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	3	

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?	3	2
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	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 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	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

1 February 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Knowles Hill School, Newton Abbot TQ12 2NF

On behalf of the inspection team, I would like to thank you for your contribution to the recent inspection of Knowles Hill. We very much enjoyed meeting you and listening to your views of the school. This letter is to inform you of our findings.

Knowles Hill is a rapidly improving school that provides you with a satisfactory standard of education. The good leadership of the headteacher and senior team are beginning to bring improvements to the school, which you told us you welcome.

Overall the standards attained in Year 9, at GCSE, and in the sixth form have been a little below the national average and the progress made was satisfactory. The school wants to improve this and you can help by working hard to meet the targets you have been set. We saw examples of improvement in recent modular examination results. Teachers want to improve teaching so you are set more active and challenging work. You need to respond to this by working towards becoming independent learners.

You enjoy school, understand what it means to live healthily and stay safe. Many of you make good use of the opportunities the school provides, such as the extra-curricular activities, and give back to the school in various ways. You value the care and support the school provides and welcome being part of a community. Although your behaviour and attendance have improved, it would not take much effort on your part for them to be even better.

The senior staff, governors and teachers are keen to improve the school further and we believe that, with your help, they can achieve this. We have asked them to focus on the following.

- Improve your achievement and standards by ensuring teachers use strategies that better meet your learning needs and provide you with suitably challenging work.
- Use marking more effectively to provide you with clear guidance on how you can improve your work and help you make progress towards meeting your examination targets.

We wish you the best of luck in the future.

Paul Dowgill Lead inspector

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Paul Dowgill
Lead inspector