

Thurstable School, Sports College and Sixth Form Centre

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	115329
Local Authority	ESSEX LA
Inspection number	311915
Inspection dates	12–13 March 2008
Reporting inspector	Stephen Abbott HMI

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	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1166
6th form	134
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr R C Wiggins
Headteacher	Mr M A S Bacon
Date of previous school inspection	7 March 2005
School address	Maypole Road Tiptree Colchester CO5 0EW
Telephone number	01621 816526
Fax number	01621 815409

Age group	11–18
Inspection dates	12–13 March 2008
Inspection number	311915

© Crown copyright 2008

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Further copies of this report are obtainable from the school. Under the Education Act 2005, the school must provide a copy of this report free of charge to certain categories of people. A charge not exceeding the full cost of reproduction may be made for any other copies supplied.

Introduction

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

Description of the school

Thurstable School is a sports specialist school which has recently added a second specialism in vocational subjects. It serves the large village of Tiptree and surrounding areas, including some districts with significant levels of social and economic disadvantage. The local proportion of adults with experience of higher education is below average. The proportion of students taking free school meals is below average. Relatively few students are of minority ethnic groups and very few have a first language other than English. The proportions of students with learning difficulties or disabilities and with statements of special educational need are both below average. Attainment on entry fluctuates from year to year, varying from average to just above average. The school has Healthy Schools status.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Thurstable School is a good and improving school which provides good value for money. The present headteacher has instigated a series of positive changes since he was appointed in September 2006. He provides outstanding personal leadership, striking a balance between his restless desire for improvement and his understanding of how to draw the best from people. One of his first decisions was to set higher targets for examination success. The majority of staff accepted the challenge and there is now a common sense of purpose in the school. Senior and middle leaders feel empowered by a new management structure. Leadership and management are good and the school has good capacity for further improvement. The governing body provides excellent support and challenge. The school works well in partnership with other agencies to promote students' well-being, and in relation to sports in the community. The satisfactory sixth form is improving rapidly under new leadership.

The school has a three year plan for establishing itself as a good school with further aspirations to be outstanding. Initially, the priorities have concerned behaviour, teaching and learning and the support and guidance offered to students. All require efficient management information systems and these are now in place. The curriculum is also under review, with significant changes already being planned for 2009 to reflect the school's recently revised aims and its mission to 'develop independent learners who understand the need to contribute to meeting the challenges of a changing world.' The school's specialist area in sport and physical education is lively and successful, and has a positive impact on other areas.

Students' personal development and well-being are good and their attendance is above average. The extent to which they live healthy lifestyles, feel safe, work safely, and enjoy school is good. They make a strong contribution to the community and are well prepared for their future working lives. Behaviour is satisfactory and improving. The great majority of students behave well, but low level disruption still slows learning in a minority of lessons, particularly where classes have had a number of different temporary teachers. A quarter of parents are still concerned about this issue but staff, students and many other parents say that behaviour has improved. A new approach to behaviour management encourages staff to set high standards and to use the referral and rewards systems consistently, but also provides training to help them understand and manage challenging behaviour. The school has good arrangements to gather parents and students views, and consulted widely about uniform changes. Even so, a minority of parents felt that their views were not heard.

Teaching and learning are good. The independent learning envisaged in the school's aims happens in the best lessons but, as the school recognises, not yet often enough. To increase the proportion of good and outstanding lessons the school has developed a self-help approach that includes separate staff and student groups each focusing on learning and teaching. Good care, guidance and support have been enhanced to allow rapid identification of underachieving students and timely intervention to support them. In addition, the school takes a firm line on inadequate teaching. Effective support and training has ensured that very few lessons are now inadequate. The higher expectations have resulted in a handful of teachers leaving at short notice, necessitating temporary arrangements until a replacement is found.

As a result of the improvements, most students are making better progress and standards are above average and higher than last year. Inspectors assessed whether standards had improved far enough in Key Stage 4 to justify the school's claim that achievement is good. They examined

the tracking data for Year 11, taking a cautious approach that assumed some slippage. The evidence clearly shows that Year 11 students have made better than average progress since they joined the school. They are working at a significantly higher level than last year and achievement is therefore good overall.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

Inspectors agree with the school's evaluation that the sixth form is currently satisfactory. The present head of sixth form was appointed in June 2007. She has forged a common sense of purpose, aimed at improving all aspects of provision, and raising expectations. The sixth form is now following the same path to improvement as the rest of the school, but is a year behind due to circumstances beyond its control. New systems have been established to set targets for students and to track their progress, raising expectations of what they can achieve. Sixth form lessons are now monitored and evaluated systematically and teaching and learning are now good, confirming that the sixth form has good capacity to improve. On the other hand, sixth formers' attendance is too low, and has not been monitored well enough. In all other respects, self-evaluation is rigorous. The impact of care, guidance and support is satisfactory. Students appreciate the advice and information they receive when they join the sixth form and when they apply to university, college or work. The retention rate is good and most students continue in higher education.

Students' achievement is satisfactory: the most recent results, from the 2007 examinations, indicate that sixth form standards are average. Students make satisfactory progress from an average level of attainment on entry. Some students achieve well, but the average grade is depressed by a higher than usual proportion of U grades. Even so, the school's average score in the university entrance points system is close to the national average because Thurstable students take more subjects. Students' personal development is good. Most are mature, hard working and well motivated. Some contribute successfully to Year 9 lessons on relationships. Students help to evaluate the sixth form, contributing to the development plan. Leadership and management are satisfactory because the changes are too recent to affect outcomes. The curriculum is satisfactory. A notable feature is the elite girls' football academy, operated in partnership with Colchester United Community Sports Trust, which is linked to the sports college specialism. Most courses are GCE A or AS levels, with a smaller vocational element and little at Level 2. The school plans to offer a wider range of vocational courses through the Colchester consortium. In addition, a wide range of Level 2 courses is readily available at a local college.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that the curriculum as a whole and most individual lessons support the school's aim to develop independent and resourceful learners.
- Identify and address the causes of low level disruption that affect a minority of lessons.
- Raise standards, achievement and attendance in the sixth form to match those in the main school.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

Achievement is good. The school has worked hard to reverse last year's dip in achievement in Key Stage 4. The school's monitoring records show that standards are now above average in Year 11 and much better than last year. Better attainment on entry to the school explains a small part of the improvement. The other key factors have been the elimination of some pockets of inadequate teaching and the increased guidance and support for underachieving students. Crucially, standards have improved in English, mathematics and science, the last being confirmed by GCSE module test results. The 2007 national test results at age 14 were also above average in English and average in mathematics and science. Over the five years, overall standards have been above average more often than not. The most recent results represented good progress in English and satisfactory progress in mathematics and science. Current standards and progress are just above average overall in Key Stage 3. In both key stages, there are no substantial variations in the progress made by different groups of students. The most recent assessments show that students with lower prior attainment are making better progress than last year and that students with learning difficulties or disabilities progress well. Achievement is therefore good overall in the main school.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Students' personal development and well-being are good and they lead healthy lifestyles including regular participation in physical education (PE) and sport. Dining arrangements are good and the school is rightly proud of its high quality school lunches. Bullying and racist incidents are infrequent and dealt with effectively when they arise. Students feel safe and their enjoyment of school is reflected in above average attendance. They contribute well to the school and local community. They are enthusiastic participants in wide and varied school activities including fund-raising for charities. Several take part in sports leadership activities in local primary schools, linked to sports specialist status. The student council is developing an increasing role in decision making within the school. Some students are part of a group that undertakes research into aspects of learning and teaching.

Students' moral and social development is good. The good progress made in literacy, numeracy, work related learning and enterprise is helping to prepare students well for the future. The spiritual and cultural dimensions are satisfactory. In particular, students do not learn enough about cultural diversity. The behaviour of the great majority of students is good and there is a good system to monitor the behaviour a few potentially disruptive students. Low level disruption affects a minority of lessons, an issue that concerns some parents.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The quality of teaching and learning is good. Inspectors confirmed the accuracy of the school's lesson evaluations, which show that around 70% of lessons are good or better. The school has invested significant time and energy in equipping teachers to use assessment to support learning. In good lessons teachers use assessment information with increasing confidence to set learning targets for pupils so that real progress can be made. In most areas of the school teachers have good subject knowledge which translates into good planning and confident teaching practice.

The school has established a 'learning and teaching development group' that draws on expertise and enthusiasm from across the whole school. This group has quickly established itself as a forum for research and for the spreading of good practice. Where teaching is outstanding it is because there is a focused engagement with students, who are expected to think for themselves. In an outstanding drama lesson, students were actively involved in their learning through self- and peer-assessment.

However, the quality and frequency of marking is not always strong enough to guide teaching and learning. For example, a good lesson on graphs would have been even better if the teacher had directly addressed a misconception that was clearly visible in work from previous lessons. In satisfactory lessons, students are given less to do or think about and work is less challenging. As a result, some students become restless or disengaged.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

The curriculum caters well for the needs and interests of most students in the main school. It provides flexibility and choice of subjects at Key Stage 4, including the '3+2' college/school based alternative programme. Progression routes for most courses currently on offer are clear. Following the 14-19 consortium review, a wider range of vocational subjects is planned for 2009, including greater flexibility in option choices. The Key Stage 3 curriculum is being reviewed to ensure that students develop the skills they will need. The school's recently revised aims are reflected in an increasing emphasis on personal learning and thinking skills. These are being taught as part of the Year 7 tutor programme. There is good provision for literacy, numeracy and information and communications technology. The good personal education programme includes strong elements of citizenship and enterprise. Sports college specialist status has had a significant impact on 14-19 curriculum provision, including courses in dance, sports leadership and BTEC sport. All students have two hours of good quality PE. The curriculum is strengthened by a good range of extra-curricular activities and students enjoy taking part in sport, music and drama and a wide range of other activities which extend their learning.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

Care, guidance and support are good and reflect positively on the school's efforts to improve this aspect of its work. The school is rigorous in ensuring that child protection and health and safety requirements are met and that all staff are sufficiently well trained in these aspects. It works effectively with outside agencies to ensure students' well-being. Much has been done to improve attendance, which is now above average. Training and guidance that help staff to understand the causes of indiscipline have helped to improve their management of behaviour. Strategies to promote good behaviour are developing well, but they are not always used consistently. The school continues to reduce the rate and length of student exclusions. Pastoral staff focus on students' overall progress and subject leaders monitor progress in their subjects. This has been made possible by clear guidance procedures and better use of computers to record and analyse students' progress. The school recognises the need for this good practice to be used consistently well across all subjects.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

Leadership and management are good overall. The headteacher provides an outstanding vision and commitment to improvement. The governing body makes an outstanding contribution to the school. They know its strengths and weaknesses, are actively involved in setting the direction, and are skilled in the role of 'critical friend'. The school has recently adopted new aims which combine an expectation of high standards with a mission to increase independent learning capacity to cope with the changing world. These values are shared by the staff and governors of the school, bringing an increased sense of common purpose. A good start has been made in raising standards.

The headteacher has put in place robust procedures for monitoring and reviewing the work of the school and these are being ably implemented by the senior team and middle managers. At the heart of this work is the commitment to ensure the progress of learning and the creation of consistency across the different areas of the school. The school now carries out self-evaluation at all levels and this is well linked to performance management. Even in its early stages, the new culture is bearing fruit. One member of the senior team described the new approach thus: 'The new direction in the school involves honest challenge - leaders at all levels are involved in the process of learning.'

Unusually, the governors directly employ a consultant, who also acts as clerk. She expertly keeps them up to date with guidance and statutory requirements, ensuring they are compliant with key issues. This is a key role and enhances the effectiveness of the governing body's work.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaints about school inspection', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

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
---	----------------	-------

Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	2	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?	2	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	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	3	
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	3	
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	2	

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?	2	3
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	3

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	2	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	2	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1	
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

14 March 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Thurstable School, Sports College and Sixth Form Centre, Tiptree CO5 0EW

I am writing to tell you about your school's recent inspection. Before I do that, I would like to thank you, on behalf of the inspection team, for your helpfulness in answering our questions and guiding us around the school.

We found Thurstable School to be a good and improving school. Mr Bacon's leadership is excellent. He is very keen for the school to keep on improving. He and the outstanding governing body have made very clear that their view of a good school is one where students not only get the best results they can, but also develop into independent and resourceful adults, with skills that impress employers. We agree and have recommended that the school gives you more opportunities to think for yourselves and learn independently in lessons. We also agreed with the school that the sixth form is satisfactory, but improving fast. We recommended further work to improve achievement and standards in the sixth form. One way you can help as sixth form students is to attend all lessons, because low attendance puts you at a disadvantage compared to other schools.

The outcome of the inspection was quite close. What clinched our judgement of 'good' was the big improvement in standards of work in Year 11 compared to last year. Year 11 students are now making better progress than similar students in other schools. We also thought teaching was good overall. You confirmed that things like teaching and behaviour were improving, but said that some problems remain. Some of you and many of your parents are concerned that some classes have had several different temporary teachers, which has slowed down progress and led some students to mess around. Confidentiality rules mean that schools cannot always explain things publicly, but we talked the problems through with senior staff and they convinced us that they were doing all they could to improve the situation.

One of the important improvements to the school has been two types of training that staff have had. One has helped them to use assessment to improve their teaching and your learning. The other has helped them to understand the emotional aspects of learning, and to stay calm if pupils get angry or misbehave. This has helped to improve the atmosphere in the school. We were impressed with the consideration and positive attitudes that the great majority of you showed, but we have recommended that the school continues working on behaviour.

I wish you all the best for the future.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Abbott HMI