

Fearnhill School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117504
Local Authority	HERTFORDSHIRE LA
Inspection number	312638
Inspection date	1 November 2007
Reporting inspector	Stephen Grounds 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	1065
6th form	179
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Paul Vaughan
Headteacher	Mr Jeremy Whelan
Date of previous school inspection	24 January 2005
School address	Icknield Way Letchworth Hertfordshire SG6 4BA
Telephone number	01462621200
Fax number	01462621201

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two of Her Majesty's Inspectors.

The inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues: standards and achievement in the main school in 2007, the contribution of the specialist status to the school's provision and outcomes, the monitoring of student progress and the impact of leadership and management at all levels in the school. The inspectors collected evidence from lesson observations, assessment and monitoring data, documentation, meetings with key staff, governors, students and an analysis of all questionnaires received from parents/carers. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail but the inspectors found no evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments were not justified, and these have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

Fearnhill School is a specialist mathematics and computing college of average size and with a small but expanding sixth form. It serves the south-western and south eastern wards of Letchworth Garden City with a sizeable minority of students coming from the neighbouring town of Hitchin. Students come from a wide range of social and economic backgrounds and some come from areas of relatively high social deprivation. The number of students eligible for free school meals is about two-thirds the national average. The proportion of students with special educational needs is slightly higher than the nation average. About four-fifths of the students are of White British origin and half the remainder are of Indian origin. The school shares some sixth form teaching within a consortium arrangement principally with two other schools in the area.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

The school provides a good quality of education for its students. The headteacher, senior staff and governors provide a very clear vision, which is shared across the school. Good progress has been achieved since the previous inspection. Parents are overwhelmingly supportive of the school.

Students enter the school with attainment which is broadly average. All students, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, make good progress. The overall index of value added performance from 2004 to 2006 has risen steadily to a level significantly above the national average and the school's own data indicates that the Year 11 cohort in 2007 was also above average in its progress.

At Key Stage 3, the results have fluctuated in the last four years, but indicate that students make expected progress. However, the school fell short of its target in mathematics at Key Stage 3 in 2007. At the end of Key Stage 4, there has been a rising trend in GCSE results. For example, the percentage of students gaining five or more A* to C grades is above the national average having risen from 44% in 2005 to 69% in 2007, and with an even sharper improvement for the results including mathematics and English. The school comfortably met its specialist school targets for five or more GCSE passes at grades A* to C and almost met its challenging target for GCSE mathematics at these grades. Progress is better in this key stage, so that overall, across the years of compulsory schooling, progress is good.

The school takes good care of its students. As a result, students' personal development and well-being, including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development are good. Co-operative relationships exist between students and with teachers in lessons and during breaks and lunchtimes. In lessons, students are receptive and most listen attentively and contribute to discussions. Many are able to express criticisms sensitively and thoughtfully as well as interpret criticism from others positively. There is pride in the new school uniform and students welcome the development of the school council, which gives them a voice in the management of the school, and, for example, its work in improving the school environment. While most students behave well, individual monitoring records indicate that some need the intervention of staff in order for their behaviour to be acceptable. Strategies to support these students by preventing them from risk of exclusion have a positive impact but parental questionnaires and student interviews indicate that this is time consuming and at some cost to most students who come to school ready to learn.

Students understand how to develop a healthy lifestyle; the inclusive and stimulating approaches used by the physical education department motivate students of all abilities. Students' positive contribution to the community is evident from their extensive fund raising for charities and positive ideas inspired by subjects that use the locality effectively as a context for learning. That students enjoy school is evident from good attendance, participation in lessons and the high level of purposeful activity at lunchtime that inspectors observed in the library (the book club for boys), in the practical areas, in music and on the rugby pitch. Students' preparedness for economic well-being is a strength. It results from continuous advice about course and career options by teachers and external agencies, and it is complemented by students' good progress in literacy, numeracy and skills in information and communication technology (ICT) across all abilities.

The quality of teaching and learning is good overall. The school has some very good teachers who are very confident in their subject knowledge and let their passion for their subject show. There is frequently probing questioning and a brisk pace and students understand the objectives to which they are working. There were some good examples of teachers and students using ICT as well as some missed opportunities. The school supports its teachers well, but in some aspects, such as in ICT and in assessment for learning, the dissemination of expertise across the staff is at an early stage. Some parents indicate concerns about staff turnover and the deployment of supply teachers. However, the school is aware of the strengths and weaknesses of its teachers and senior staff intervene positively to improve the consistency of the quality of what is provided.

The curriculum at Key Stage 3 meets requirements by providing a typical range of subjects and experiences. Through the specialist status, the school enhances the provision in feeder primary schools, for example through curriculum workshops in mathematics. The Key Stage 4 curriculum benefits from links with local schools, the nearby college and by the addition of BTEC courses. There is a very popular course in personal, social, health and citizenship education across all years that has further potential to widen the way students engage in learning across the whole curriculum. A good range of opportunities at lunchtime and after school enables students to extend learning. The school aims to become the centre for the specialist diploma in computer studies.

The school's provision in care, guidance and support is a strength. The arrangements for child protection meet the government's requirements. Safeguarding is strongly underpinned by extensive pupil monitoring and exemplary individual support programmes for students with emotional, behavioural and learning difficulties and disabilities. The school analyses the impact of its actions on improvement rigorously. The role of the form tutor in supporting academic monitoring is valued by students but is an area of inconsistency. Nevertheless, systems are in place that enable staff to evaluate students' performance regularly, within and across different subjects in terms of outcomes and attitudes to learning. These systems are used particularly well to tackle underachievement.

The leadership and management of the school are good. In particular, the headteacher working with the deputy provides the school with outstanding energy and vision. The governors' identification of the need for the avoidance of students being excluded has been strongly promoted. At the senior level, effort has been devoted to building up teams so that a common approach is evident across the school. The head has developed the leadership expertise of those in the senior leadership team. Governance has improved and past lessons about the need for vigilant scrutiny of the school's finances have been learned with the consequence that the school now provides good value for money. Senior staff have a good understanding of the quality of the staff and use pupil monitoring information across subjects to inform their knowledge of how well different subjects are taught. Managers at all levels have a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in their areas of responsibility. The school has good links with other local schools and support agencies, in part through the specialist status. Its own self-evaluation shows that the school has a good self-awareness of what it needs to do to improve. The school has a good capacity for further improvement because it has successfully tackled the issues from the previous inspection and has identified, in its development plan, the right priorities to improve learning opportunities in partnership with its neighbouring schools and colleges.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Although broadly in line with national averages, examination results over the last three years have shown the steady improvement seen also in GCSE at Key Stage 4. Given students' starting points and a policy of open entry to the sixth form, the achievement of students is good. Retention rates through successive years are good; students enjoy their experience at the school and are motivated to succeed. By exploiting the links with other local schools, the sixth form offers a good curriculum for those wishing to continue in the school. Since the previous inspection, the numbers of students on vocational courses have increased. Further developments are imminent which will make up the school's contribution within the local consortium plans for a new specialist diploma.

Students are well supported by subject staff and they are given good guidance as to how to improve their work. Students speak highly of the individual help they get in preparing for university entrance, as, for example, in the drafting of personal statements and preparing for supplementary tests. There is good monitoring of individual performance leading to very high and improved pass rates. Students have all the opportunities for extra-curricular activities that are available across the school and exercise leadership roles by acting as mentors with younger pupils. The sixth form is well led: there is an extensive programme of monitoring and analysis and increased sharing of good practice across subjects.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve the consistency of teaching across subjects by sharing good practice more frequently and effectively
- Develop the curriculum further to promote personalised learning and fulfil individual needs and aspirations.

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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?	2	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	2	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	2
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	IE ²
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1	
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?	2	IE ²
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	IE 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.

² IE - denotes that insufficient evidence was available to inspectors for a judgement to be made.

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	1	
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	1	
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	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

5 November 2007

Dear Students

Inspection of Fearnhill School, Hertfordshire, SG6 4BA

My colleague, Ian Middleton and I, were very pleased to meet some of you during our brief one-day visit on 1st November and to hear the many positive things you had to say about the school and the sixth form.

We judged that the school is providing you with a good education. Under its new headteacher, it seemed to us to be a lively and vibrant place. We were impressed by the urgency with which the head and the senior leadership team are trying to move the school forward and the extent to which that vision is shared with you and recognised by you. In our view, the head and the senior staff of the school know what it does well, and why, and know what they need to do to make it even better in the future.

You make good progress and, as you know, examination results are on an upward trend. The orderly and tranquil environment for learning impressed us as we went about the school. We know that the school is trying to include those who find good behaviour difficult and we accept that some of you find such behaviour irritating, but we feel that it is well handled by the school. It was evident that the overwhelmingly majority of you enjoy your time in the school.

We only saw a little teaching. We know it varies in quality across the subjects but it is generally good. The lessons we saw were brisk, lively, and challenging. We were very impressed by the support systems in place to guide you and the many opportunities that there are to do things outside lessons. We know that the Children in Need initiative is imminent and I, personally, was impressed by what the sixth form were planning to do to support this cause. This seemed typical of much wider activity. Considering that the school has a good track record of steady improvement, we think it has good capacity to improve further.

We have said to the school that in order to improve it should:

- Redouble its efforts to spread good practice in teaching across the board;
- Develop the curriculum in order to better meet your individual learning needs.

We wish you well with your studies and your futures,

Yours sincerely,

Stephen Grounds , HMI Inspector