

# The Towers School

## Inspection report

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<b>Unique Reference Number</b>	118822
<b>Local Authority</b>	Kent
<b>Inspection number</b>	313104
<b>Inspection dates</b>	20–21 May 2008
<b>Reporting inspector</b>	David Butler HMI

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

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<b>Type of school</b>	Modern (non-selective)
<b>School category</b>	Community
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	11–18
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Number on roll</b>	
School	1362
6th form	303
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	The governing body
<b>Chair</b>	Rita Hawes
<b>Headteacher</b>	Malcolm Ramsey
<b>Date of previous school inspection</b>	22 September 2003
<b>School address</b>	Faversham Road Kennington Ashford TN24 9AL
<b>Telephone number</b>	01233 634171
<b>Fax number</b>	01233 628326

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## Introduction

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

## Description of the school

This is a non-selective school, located in an area where there are several selective schools. The number of students on roll, including those in the sixth form, has increased substantially since the last inspection. The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups is slightly below average but there has been a significant recent increase in students from Nepal. Around a quarter of students have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The school was designated as a specialist business and enterprise college in 2006. As part of its Full Service Extended School status, the school provides adult education and a youth centre and hosts a privately-funded nursery. The school's vocational centre includes a restaurant and hairdressing and beauty salons that are used by the public.

## Key for inspection grades

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

## Overall effectiveness of the school

### Grade: 2

The last inspection evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school as being satisfactory and making rapid progress. The school has continued to improve and now provides students with a good standard of education and care. It has many strengths and no major weaknesses. The excellent leadership of the headteacher has been a major factor in bringing about this significant improvement. He is well supported by a dynamic and motivated senior leadership team and a highly committed staff and governing body. The good record of progress demonstrates that leaders and managers at all levels are fully capable of bringing about further improvement.

The school provides a very caring, safe and welcoming learning environment. The great majority of students enjoy their education and have excellent relationships with their teachers and with each other. The school is highly inclusive and does not give up trying to help students succeed, even when their behaviour presents major challenges. No student has been permanently excluded in the last two years and the school has experienced considerable success with students who were at risk of exclusion in their previous schools. Students with a statement of special educational needs, those whose first language is not English and most children looked after by the local authority, achieve well. The school has recently welcomed and successfully integrated 68 Nepalese students into the school.

Students enter both the main school and the sixth form with below average levels of prior attainment. They make good progress and achieve examination results by the end of Year 11 and in the sixth form that are broadly in line with national averages. Results in GCSE and equivalent courses have improved very considerably since the last inspection and the proportion of students attaining five or more A\* to C passes is now close to the national average. However, too few students attain A\* to C passes in both English and mathematics. Weak writing and reading skills hold back the progress made by some boys in Years 7 to 9. Achievement and standards have risen because of better teaching, improved systems for tracking students' progress and the development of a curriculum that better matches the needs and interests of learners. The quality of teaching is good and students feel well supported in their learning. As one student said, 'Teachers care about us and do their best to help us succeed.' While there is some good practice in ensuring that students are clear about how well they are performing and what they need to do to improve their work, this is not yet consistently good enough across all teaching.

Effective care, guidance and support have led to students' good personal development. Students in the main school value the mixed-aged tutor groups, known as 'advisories', which have done much to promote the good relationships that exist between students. Students are well aware of how to lead safe and healthy lives. They are very actively involved in the life of the school and their views are taken seriously. The work of the student council is particularly impressive. For example, it is involved in the appointment of staff, the evaluation of lessons and bringing about improvements to the school environment.

The business and enterprise specialism has made a major contribution to the improvements that have taken place in the vocational curriculum, in accommodation and in the provision for information and communication technology (ICT). An enterprising culture permeates the school, encouraging staff and students to be innovative and take calculated risks to bring about improvement. Students are very well equipped with the skills they need for employment through the strong programme of careers and enterprise education and the extensive links the school

has with local employers. The extended services are well used and valued by the local community. The vocational centre and nursery provide excellent opportunities for giving students relevant and practical experiences.

Only a small proportion of parents returned the Ofsted questionnaire for this inspection. The great majority felt that the school was well led and managed and that students were well cared for and supported. As one parent said, 'The school keeps improving year on year and is increasingly serving the local community.' Evidence from the school's own surveys confirms these views of parents.

## **Effectiveness of the sixth form**

### **Grade: 2**

The sixth form is open to all students, regardless of their level of attainment. It provides a good standard of education and care, and effectively meets the wide range of needs and interests of students. Considerable improvements have taken place in the provision made in the sixth form since the last inspection and this is reflected in the very substantial increase in the numbers attending it. Achievement is good on vocational courses, which are taken by the majority of students, and satisfactory in GCE courses. Completion and retention rates are high on most courses and have risen since the last inspection. An increasing number of students are going on to Level Three (advanced) courses after obtaining Level Two qualifications in their first year in the sixth form. The quality of teaching and learning is good and is underpinned by the very good relationships which exist between students and their teachers. Students appreciate the balance struck between taught time and independent study. Effective support promotes students' personal development and well-being. There is good development of the skills, including independent learning, that are vital for students to succeed in further education, training and employment. The sixth form is very well led and managed. The newly-appointed head of sixth form is making a significant impact, for example through better monitoring of teaching and learning, a tightening up on students' attendance and a sharp analysis of performance data.

## **What the school should do to improve further**

- Raise the standards of literacy for boys who enter the school with lower levels of attainment, particularly in Years 7 to 9.
- Increase the proportion of students attaining GCSE passes at grades A\* to C in both English and mathematics.
- Ensure all students know how well they are doing in their work and what they need to do to improve.

## **Achievement and standards**

### **Grade: 2**

#### **Grade for sixth form: 2**

The evidence presented by the school and that gathered by inspectors show that students are making good progress and achieving well in relation to their prior attainment, both in the main school and the sixth form. Achievement is particularly good on vocational courses and is better in Years 10 and 11 than in Years 7 to 9. Students are set challenging targets and most are making good progress towards achieving them. There is some underachievement by boys, particularly by those who enter the school with lower levels of literacy. Results in GCSE and

equivalent qualifications have improved substantially since the last inspection, and the challenging targets set for business, mathematics and ICT in relation to the school's specialism have been exceeded. However, the proportion of students attaining five or more GCSEs or their equivalent at grades A\* to C including both English and mathematics remains too low.

## **Personal development and well-being**

**Grade: 2**

**Grade for sixth form: 2**

Students' personal development and well-being are good in both the main school and in the sixth form because of the high quality of care and guidance they receive. Students develop well socially and demonstrate this through their good relationships with adults and with each other. Their moral, spiritual and cultural awareness is well developed through the curriculum and through a range of social activities. Students say that incidents of bullying and other forms of harassment are rare and dealt with effectively when they do occur. A small number of parents expressed concerns about students' behaviour in lessons. The evidence from the inspection confirms the school's view that disruptive behaviour is confined to a small minority of lessons and that students generally behave well in lessons and around the school. Students have positive attitudes to learning and generally enjoy their lessons. Fixed term exclusions have fallen significantly in the past three years and are now low. Attendance in the main school has improved significantly since September 2007 and is now around the national average. Attendance in the sixth form is generally satisfactory but there is considerable variation between courses. Students make a significant contribution to the school community, with many taking on positions of responsibility. Students also contribute effectively to the local and wider community, for example through extensive charity work and links with developing countries.

## **Quality of provision**

### **Teaching and learning**

**Grade: 2**

**Grade for sixth form: 2**

Teaching and learning are good in both the main school and in the sixth form. Observations confirmed the school's view that teaching is good or better in around two thirds of lessons and unsatisfactory teaching is rare. Teachers have good subject knowledge, plan well and use a range of strategies to engage and maintain students' interests. Well-structured support from teaching assistants helps students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those who are at an early stage of speaking English to make good progress. Teachers make good use of ICT to support learning. Opportunities are missed in some lessons to help lower attaining students develop their literacy skills. There is considerable variation in the quality of teachers' questioning to check students' understanding and encourage them to think more deeply. Although there is good practice in helping students understand how well they are doing and how to make progress in their work, it is not effectively developed in all lessons. Assessment in the sixth form is generally good but students are not always clear about their individual targets within lessons.

## **Curriculum and other activities**

**Grade: 2**

**Grade for sixth form: 2**

The curriculum meets the needs and interests of learners effectively across the whole school. The business and enterprise specialism and the extended services provision have been important factors in extending the opportunities for students to take vocational courses and develop their skills for working life. Students are given a good range of options to choose from in Years 10 and 11 and in the sixth form. Good provision is made for students who experience difficulties coping with the normal curriculum, including extended work experience placements. The provision for gifted and talented students is underdeveloped. The school is aware of this and has it as a priority for development. Students' personal development is strongly promoted through the programme of personal, social and health education, which makes effective use of the expertise of external agencies. Students value and appreciate the excellent range of extra-curricular activities they are offered, including those provided through the school's youth club and the 'children's university'. The 'competency curriculum', introduced in Year 7 to develop students' skills in learning and provide a transition from primary education, is innovative and generally enjoyed by students. The school is rightly evaluating its effectiveness, including the reduced time for history and geography in Year 7.

## **Care, guidance and support**

**Grade: 2**

**Grade for sixth form: 2**

The quality of care, guidance and support provided for students is a strength throughout the school and is a key factor in enabling students to make good progress. There is a very strong focus on meeting the individual needs of all students. The mixed-aged advisory groups, introduced in September 2006, are proving to be effective in promoting the care and well-being of students. This is supplemented through very good specialist support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, those who speak English as an additional language and children looked after by the local authority. Robust systems to ensure the health and safety of students are in place and operate effectively. Students are given good guidance in choosing their options in the main school and in the sixth form, and all students have access to high quality careers guidance. The academic progress of students is closely monitored and appropriate interventions are made when difficulties are identified. However, students are not always aware of their targets and what they need to do to achieve them.

## **Leadership and management**

**Grade: 2**

**Grade for sixth form: 2**

Leaders and managers at all levels have a very good understanding of the strengths and areas for development in the school and set clear direction for improvement. This understanding is based on a thorough analysis of data, monitoring of teaching and learning, feedback from students and parents and external evaluations. The views of students and parents are taken very seriously but a minority of parents feel that more could be done to communicate with them. Much has been done to improve the effectiveness of subject leaders in raising achievement

since the last inspection, although some variation in the quality of their practice remains. Good systems are in place for reviewing and monitoring performance in subjects and this is underpinned by a strong programme of professional development and support for all staff. The school's involvement in initial teacher training and its close links with other providers have been key in securing specialist teachers in all subjects. Governors provide very effective support, have a good understanding of the issues facing the school and are prepared to ask challenging questions about its performance. Their developing involvement with subjects through the process of departmental reviews is proving to be valuable. Efficient use is made of resources, including the additional funding received for the school's specialism. Financial management is sound and the school provides good value for money. The good progress that has been made since the last inspection in many areas of the school's work demonstrates that the school is fully capable of bringing about further improvement.



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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 <sup>1</sup> reached by learners	3	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	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	2
The attendance of learners	3	3
The behaviour of learners	2	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2	2
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2	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	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	2

<sup>1</sup> 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**

<b>How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?</b>	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	2
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2	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	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	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

22 May 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of The Towers School, Ashford TN24 9AL

Thank you for helping us with the inspection of your school and for making us feel so welcome. I should like to share some of our findings with you. We feel that your school has continued to improve since it was last inspected. It is now a good school and one you are right to be proud of. Your headteacher provides excellent leadership and management and is very well supported by the staff and governors. Many of you told us that what you liked most about your school was its friendly and caring nature and the way that your teachers do their best to help you succeed. You value being part of mixed-aged advisory groups. We agree that these are major strengths in the school. We also feel that the school is very enterprising in that it encourages everyone to seek new and better ways of doing things. Most of you make good progress because you are well taught and given very good support. You have a good range of courses to choose from in Years 10 and 11 and in the sixth form. Your personal development is good. We were impressed by your behaviour in lessons and around the school and the way you get on with each other. Most of you attend well and enjoy your education, including the excellent range of after-school activities. You know how to lead safe and healthy lives and are very well prepared for adult life. Many of you take on extra responsibilities and most of you are involved in raising money for charity. Your views are taken seriously and the work of your student council is impressive in bringing about improvements in your school.

We have asked the school to make the following three improvements.

- Some of you find reading and writing difficult and this holds back your progress in many subjects. More needs to be done in all subjects in Years 7 to 9 to help you improve these skills.
- Although GCSE results have improved a great deal in recent years, more students need to get A\* to C passes in both GCSE English and mathematics.
- Teachers need to make sure you are all very clear about how well you are doing in your work and what you need to do to improve.

We are confident that the school can become even better and hope that you play a full part in achieving this. I wish you every success in the future.

Yours sincerely

David Butler Her Majesty's Inspector