

The Howard School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	118929
Local Authority	Medway
Inspection number	313155
Inspection dates	25–26 November 2008
Reporting inspector	Robin Gaff

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Boys
Number on roll	
School (total)	1330
Sixth form	162
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Carole Eatwell
Headteacher	Paul Morris
Date of previous school inspection	26 April 2005
School address	Derwent Way Rainham Gillingham ME8 0BX
Telephone number	01634 388765
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Age group	11–18
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by five Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

The Howard School is a larger than average school. The school gained the Sportsmark Award in 2007 and became a specialist sports college in September 2007. It plays a leading role in the local school sports partnership. A very small proportion of students join the school having qualified for a grammar school place. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is above the national average. The great majority of students are of White British heritage. The percentage of students known to be eligible for free school meals is below average. The sixth form works in a consortium with two other local schools.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

The Howard School is a good school. It has shown clear and sustained improvement in recent years, and this is recognised by parents and by older students. 'Dedicated', 'very positive and hard-working' are typical of parents' comments about the staff. The mother of one Year 9 boy said, 'My son's confidence and enthusiasm for life and his future have grown immensely since he started at The Howard.' School leaders have a very clear focus on raising standards, both of academic achievement and in terms of students' personal development. They have succeeded in raising students' aspirations and in bringing about significant rises in pass rates at GCSE and for advanced level courses. Students throughout the school now make good progress. The school's successful record of improvement, for example, in addressing weaknesses identified by the last inspection report, shows a good capacity for further improvement.

The sports college specialism is playing an important role in the school's development. Students have access to a wide range of activities, and the sporting facilities are well used both by students and the local community, particularly the table-tennis centre which has gained widespread regional recognition. Staff and students work productively in local schools, sharing their expertise in sport. Students enjoy learning from sports-related topics in subjects such as French and information and communication technology (ICT). The curriculum is well matched to students' interests and abilities. Work-related learning is now a strength, and students receive good preparation for their future economic well-being.

The school has worked effectively to improve the quality of teaching and learning, which is now good. Students are willing to learn, and they form positive working relationships with staff. Teachers prepare their lessons carefully to include a range of activities for students that succeed in engaging their interest. Staff carefully monitor students' progress, and give extra help and support when they appear to be in danger of underachieving. As one Year 10 boy said, 'The school is always pushing you to achieve the best you can, and they give everyone a chance to succeed.' Teachers' written comments on students' work do not always give them sufficiently detailed advice on how to improve their work.

Students' personal development and well-being are good. Attendance is above the national average, which reflects students' enjoyment of school as well as the school's rigorous and effective systems for following up unexplained absence. Students' behaviour in lessons is good. In this large and lively boys' school, there are still occasional instances of unacceptable behaviour, which cause a few parents to express their concern. Others however, comment favourably on the improvement in the school's ethos, and the ways in which it deals rapidly and effectively with students who do not meet its high expectations. Pastoral systems support students well. The school takes good care of vulnerable students, and works well with outside agencies to ensure that their needs are met. The school's contribution to community cohesion is satisfactory. Relationships among students from different backgrounds are good. However, there are limited opportunities for students to work and learn with others from more ethnically diverse backgrounds, in order to prepare for life in a multicultural society.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Students make good progress in relation to their starting points, and gain qualifications which enable the great majority to progress to higher education. Their academic performance has

risen because of improved teaching, as well as the revised curriculum. Students can access a wide range of advanced courses catering for different interests and learning styles, thanks to the close and effective partnership the school has established with two other local schools. Students enjoy their sixth form experience. They develop into mature and sensible young adults who get on well with and support each other, and make a sound contribution to the school and wider community. They are very appreciative of their teachers' approachability, and the extra help they receive from them, including after-school and lunchtime coaching. Teachers show good expertise in their subjects, and make good use of question-and-answer techniques to check on and develop students' learning, but do not always give their students enough opportunities to learn by themselves and from each other in lessons. There are effective systems for checking students' progress towards their targets, although the latter are not clearly understood by all students. Leaders have an accurate picture of the provision, which has enabled them to improve it by building on its strengths and successfully addressing areas for development.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure greater consistency in the quality of the written feedback that teachers give to their students, to help them gain a clearer understanding of their targets and of what they need to do to improve their work.
- Give students more opportunities to learn about and from different ethnic groups represented in the wider national and world community.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Students' levels of attainment when they join the school are below national averages. Their progress in Key Stage 3 has been below expectations, but it has improved significantly. In the provisional results for the 2008 national tests, standards are higher than in 2007 and this indicates that students are now making good progress. Students' achievement by the end of Key Stage 4 is also good. In 2007, students' performance was particularly strong in science, English literature, and art and design. It was below expectations in geography and history. There has been an upward trend in GCSE results in recent years, and this has been maintained in 2008, so that students' attainment is now in line with national averages. There has been a particular improvement in the proportion of students gaining five A* to C grades including English and mathematics. The school's focus on raising student achievement has helped to promote greater consistency across subjects, and in most lessons, students make good progress. More able students do not always gain the highest grades at GCSE. The relatively high proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good progress.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Students' moral and social development is good. They appreciate the importance of fair play in sport, where they learn about rules and codes of cooperation in team games. Their cultural development is enhanced by taking part in drama and musical performances, by visits to theatres and museums, and trips abroad. Students' understanding of the range of religious and ethnic traditions and practices in modern Britain and the wider world is less well developed. The very high levels of participation in sporting activities demonstrate students' willingness to adopt healthy lifestyles. They gain a good understanding of health-related issues through special

events included in the personal development programme. Students adopt safe practices in school, for example, in science and technology lessons and as they move around the school, often along crowded corridors and staircases. They are not unduly concerned about bullying, and they recognize the benefit they gain from the school's peer mediation scheme, as well as from the services of the school counsellor. Students make a sound contribution to the school and wider community through, for example, the help they give to Year 7 students to settle in to the school and the money they raise for charities, including a local children's hospice. However, some students feel they do not have sufficient opportunities for their voice to be heard through the school council. Students are well prepared for future work and study through the qualifications they gain, as well as their development of teamwork and problem-solving skills.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teachers show that they share an understanding of what constitutes effective learning, and are prepared to share good practice in teaching by observing each other's lessons. Teaching and learning are consistently good or better across the school. Lessons are characterized by skilful use of questions, which enables students to provide thoughtful responses, and by secure subject knowledge and good expertise. Well-focused assistance from teaching assistants provides good support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Teaching is often brisk, and students benefit from regular group and paired work. Practical activities, for example, in science lessons in Years 10 and 12, and in a Year 8 geography lesson, help to engage students actively in their learning. When students are encouraged to assess their own and each other's work, for example in a Year 10 ICT lesson, this also helps to reinforce their learning. The pace of learning in some lessons is slowed by a lack of up-to-date, computer-based resources. Marking is regular and thorough, but does not always give explicit guidance about the next steps students need to take in order to make further progress.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum meets statutory requirements in all areas, and has improved since the last inspection, particularly in the provision of vocational courses. It now makes a good contribution to students' academic and personal development by providing them with opportunities in all key stages to follow courses that match their interests and abilities. The school recognizes that students learn in different ways and at different paces, for example, by enabling a significant minority to take GCSE examinations in one or more subjects in Year 10. It provides students with good opportunities to make useful connections between subjects through cross-curricular work, for example, during themed enrichment days. Students benefit from well-prepared work-experience placements and workplace visits, and from mock job interviews in Year 11, as well as from a good range of well-attended out-of-school activities. The school has been successful in enhancing the learning environment, but some of its facilities and resources are outdated and limit the opportunities available to students.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Staff are suitably vetted and trained to safeguard students. A robust set of procedures ensures that suitable risk assessments are regularly carried out for potentially hazardous areas such as laboratories and workshops, and for school trips and visits. The school co-operates well with parents and with outside agencies such as educational psychology services and the police. The number of students who have to be excluded because their behaviour presents a barrier to their own and others' learning has been greatly reduced, and the school has developed good systems and facilities which enable them to stay in school. Students confirm that they receive good quality advice about their options for Key Stage 4 and the sixth form from school staff and the Connexions service, and benefit from the links the school has established with local universities. There are well-established systems for monitoring students' academic progress, but guidance given to students does not always translate target-setting information and data into helpful advice about the next stages of learning.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The principal leads with determination and commitment, ensuring that the whole school focuses on enabling students to succeed and enjoy their success. Senior leaders have worked hard and effectively to develop a culture where achievement is the norm. Members of the leadership group maintain a high profile around the school, promoting mutually respectful relationships and effective teamwork among staff and students. This has been a key factor in enhancing the personal development and well-being of students. The school has a clear and accurate understanding of its strengths and weaknesses. Self-evaluation is rigorous and its outcomes are used effectively to produce well-targeted, whole-school plans for ongoing improvement. Middle leaders are actively engaged in a well thought-out programme of self-evaluation within their areas of responsibility. They have high expectations of their colleagues, and they appreciate the clear, consistent and rigorous accountability procedures that exist across the school. As a result of these procedures, areas of underperformance are quickly identified and tackled. The governing body plays an active role in the life of the school. Governors receive informative reports from the principal and they know the school well. Like the staff of the school, they are committed to raising attainment. Governors, and senior and middle leaders all have the same high aspirations for the students, and this permeates the ethos of the school. This adds to the good capacity of the school to go on improving.

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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	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/or disabilities make progress	2	

¹Grade 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.

Personal development and well-being

How good are 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	
The extent to which 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	3	
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 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

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 eliminated	2	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	3	
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	

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

27 November 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of The Howard School, Gillingham, ME8 0BX

On behalf of the inspection team who visited your school recently, I would like to thank you all for your contribution to the recent inspection. We all enjoyed meeting you and listening to your views. I am writing to you to tell you what we found.

The Howard is a good school, which is well led by the principal and his senior staff. Many of you told us how much it has improved in recent years. You are rightly proud of the school's status as a specialist sports college and you value the increased opportunities that this provides. Students make good progress at school, and they gain skills and qualifications that will stand them in good stead later on in life. Teaching is good, and you appreciate the way the staff work hard to help you to succeed. Most of you behave safely and sensibly in lessons and around the school, but a few of you need to try harder to live up to the school's high expectations.

You say you enjoy school, and your good attendance and attitude show that this is the case. You get on well with each other and with your teachers, and you understand the importance of teamwork and fair play. The way so many of you take part in sport shows that you understand how important exercise is for keeping healthy. You think that bullying is not a major issue, and you can reduce it even further by using the school's systems, such as the peer mediation scheme. We think you would benefit from learning more about how different sections of this community and people abroad live and what they believe.

We have asked the school to concentrate on the following issues to make it even better.

- Make sure all teachers give students enough detailed written advice in their marking to help them know what to do to improve their work.
- Give students more opportunities to learn about different cultures in this country and around the world.

We wish you all the very best for the future!

Yours sincerely

Robin Gaff Lead inspector