

Thirsk School and Sixth Form College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	121666
Local Authority	North Yorkshire
Inspection number	314076
Inspection date	16 January 2008
Reporting inspector	Susan Bowles 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	1106
6th form	178
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr G Cressey
Headteacher	Mr J Lewis
Date of previous school inspection	31 January 2005
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Introduction

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

Inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated three areas demonstrating how it ensures quality. These were: students' achievement; students' personal development and well-being; and the school's response to underperformance. Inspectors gathered evidence from meeting staff with relevant responsibilities, students and governors, from observing lessons and extra activities and reading pupils' work, parents' questionnaires and other documents. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but inspectors found no evidence that the school's own assessments, as given in its self-evaluation, were not justified, and these have been included in the report.

Description of the school

Thirsk School and Sixth Form College is a larger than average comprehensive school and an average-sized sixth form, which serves a market town and rural community in North Yorkshire. Students come from a variety of backgrounds, including the armed services. Socio-economic circumstances and mobility are broadly typical. Fewer than typical numbers of students take free school meals. The great majority of students are White; about 2% come from minority ethnic backgrounds. The small number learning English as a second language are often from Eastern Europe. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is above average, but an average proportion has a statement of educational needs. The school has had specialist Mathematics and Computing College status for three years and is a hub school for physical education. Its many awards include Artsmark Gold, Sportsmark, the Inclusion Quality Mark and the Healthy Schools Award.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Thirsk School and Sixth Form College is a thoroughly good school with some outstanding features. Its students make good progress in learning and develop exceptionally well as individuals. This is because of good teaching and outstanding care, guidance and support. Parents are overwhelmingly satisfied with what the school provides. The leadership and management of the school are good with outstanding features, notably the very clear direction given to improvement. Its specialist status as a mathematics and computing college has had a positive influence on standards and achievement overall, although students' performance in information technology examinations has not yet met its challenging targets.

Children join the school with broadly average levels of attainment. Helped by very good induction arrangements, they enjoy their new school and get off to a really good start. By the end of Year 9 they reach well above average standards in English, mathematics and science. They make solid progress in Years 10 and 11. Standards at GCSE are consistently above average: the proportion of students who gain five top grades including English and mathematics has steadily climbed and was well above the national average in 2007. With good reason, the school prides itself on getting the best out of every student, including the significant minority who are vulnerable or have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. All students who left in 2006 went on to further education, training or employment. Though achievement is good, it is not yet outstanding, because of some lack of consistency. As the school is well aware, sometimes boys with lower starting points make slower progress than is expected and there has been some underperformance by subjects, for example in design technology and information technology.

The students in this school develop exceptionally well as confident, well-informed, open-minded and considerate individuals. Through a wide range of influential experiences the school very successfully broadens the spiritual, moral, social and cultural horizons of the young people. These include many cultural events and purposeful educational visits which virtually all take part in. Relationships are very good throughout the school. Attendance is consistently above average and improving, and behaviour is civilised and cooperative. All students spoken to, including those new to the school, say they find it a welcoming, safe and mostly enjoyable place. The school listens to and values the views of students, and most students willingly make a positive social contribution. Younger students appreciate the support given by trained 'listeners' from the older year groups. The school takes seriously its duty to educate the whole person. One notable example is in raising the bar in healthy living: students enjoy nourishing meals in a civilised atmosphere. They show strong awareness of health risks and the effects of nutrition and exercise. They participate well in opportunities for developing fitness and take their physical and health education seriously. As well as good sporting opportunities, the school provides a vast range of other activities during and after the school day: these boost motivation, confidence and enjoyment and are effectively inclusive. As students and parents said, 'There is something for everyone', and many students with all types of talents and interests make the most of the opportunities provided.

The inspection confirmed the accuracy of the school's own evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning. Both are good: typically, teachers ensure all learners make good progress by planning on the basis of good information about what individuals already understand and should be expected to achieve. They set out suitably challenging objectives, although occasionally students need a clearer idea of what learning is expected, rather than what tasks are to be done. Where possible, teachers make learning practical or vivid, for example by using

electronic whiteboards or projectors to demonstrate and explore new concepts. Students are attentive, responsive and work at a reasonably good pace. When encouraged, they offer thoughtful contributions. Homework is purposeful and usually done well. Marking is regular and informative so that all students know their targets and current standards. The best lessons featured imaginative use of information technology to support and monitor independent learning. Other occasionally-seen strengths were the effective use of clear curricular targets which gave students a really good grasp of how to do better, and very thorough and motivating reviews of the learning achieved in the lesson which challenged learners to go further.

The curriculum offers good breadth and balance and an appropriate match to students' interests and local needs. Basic and work-related skills and cross curricular elements such as citizenship, enterprise and financial capability are incorporated effectively. Subject evaluation pays good attention to how well schemes of work meet the needs of different students. Students' confidence in using information and communication technology has improved; helped by better resources and increasing use across the curriculum. Numbers progressing to post-GCSE mathematics courses have increased. The impact of extra curricular enrichment is impressive. Carefully tailored provision and extra support begins early for identified students and this has made a significant contribution to their achievement. Despite the school's efforts, the development of the curriculum for 14 to 19 year olds faces problems typical for a rural school. Nonetheless, new vocational and college-based courses and work-related learning through partnerships with local businesses mean that the curriculum matches the needs and interests of the students better than at the time of the previous inspection.

The care, guidance and support offered to students make an extremely good contribution to their well-being. Students are known as individuals by the very caring staff and inclusion is a strength. Staff conscientiously act upon the policies for safeguarding and equality. Transition arrangements are first class, so that all students, including the more vulnerable and those who join later than normal, find their feet quickly. There is very good liaison with external agencies to ensure students get the right support at critical points in their lives. Parents and students make very clear they are highly satisfied with the response of staff who are 'always there', readily give their time and make each individual's development their priority. Academic and pastoral aspects of the school's work are well linked, as illustrated by the efficient communication systems which pre-empt many problems before they cause disruption or distress. Systems to guide students to make good progress work well on the whole, and are illustrated by, for example, students' serious regard for their targets and current levels or grades, and the emphasis given to achievement in tutorial time. However, as noted above, teaching varies in how well it conveys to students what they need to do to improve.

A particularly striking feature of the school's good leadership and management is the clarity of direction given and the positive impact this has on the quality of care and education. The senior team provides a strong impetus for raising standards and demonstrates clear and consistent expectations. Governors know the school well and play a strategic and responsible part in its development. Very effective use is made of monitoring information to set challenging targets and evaluate performance. This helps staff tackle problems proactively and as a team. For example, the needs of a recent cohort of students with an unusual proportion of learning difficulties were identified early and risks were mitigated by investing in personalised provision. In such ways, as well as by rigorously monitoring the progress of groups and individuals, the school translates the principles of its equality policy into practice. It ensures good value for money, deploying resources to priorities which ensures good outcomes for all. The work of all areas is rigorously evaluated, and middle managers are held to account for performance. Detailed

subject reviews lead to constructive support and professional development. Good use is made of in-house and external expertise. The school's specialism has helped to improve the quality of teaching and learning, particularly in spreading the purposeful use of new technology. Although challenges remain in a few subjects, these approaches have a good track record of strengthening middle leadership, ensuring consistent practice and improving outcomes in others. They demonstrate the school's good capacity for further improvement.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

The school welcomes and encourages students from a range of backgrounds to continue their education in the sixth form. As a result, their starting points are varied but broadly average, overall. Students make satisfactory progress and reach average standards. As the school recognises, performance varies across subjects. The quality of teaching and learning, taken as a whole, is satisfactory, whilst much of the teaching is good. The sixth form is as well monitored and evaluated as the rest of the school and appropriate steps are being taken to improve achievement. For example, the curriculum has been broadened to better match the interests of students with the introduction of some applied, vocational and less traditional courses. One well-regarded feature is the ethical and religious education element of the general studies programme. Reflecting the impact of the school's specialism, more students are taking mathematics courses in the sixth form and in higher education, and a promising innovation is the short courses to support the understanding of statistics or mechanics for non-mathematicians. Students greatly appreciate the help and support they receive from teachers which help secure their grades: in 2007, no student left without a pass grade. The personal development and well-being of students is strong, because they are known and supported very well as individuals. Attendance is good and retention and completion rates are sound. Careers advice and preparation for university interviews are regarded by students and parents as really good. The spirit of inclusiveness present in the main school extends into the sixth form. Its harmonious and supportive atmosphere was captured in one student's description of a 'together sixth form'. This is felt by those who enter from other schools, who find their reception welcoming, and those who go through difficulties and uncertainties. Students continue to be involved in the wider life of the school and the community, maintaining their interests in music and sport, taking part in community events such as entertainment for old people or acting as counsellors.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve levels of student achievement and the consistency of the quality of teaching and learning in the sixth form.
- Iron out inconsistencies between subjects at GCSE.
- Further develop the curriculum for 14 to 19 year olds.

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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	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	3

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1	1
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1	1
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	2
How well learners enjoy their education	2	2
The attendance of learners	2	2
The behaviour of learners	2	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	3
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?	1	1

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	1	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	2
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2	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**

I would like to thank you for your contribution to the recent inspection of your school. You offered a warm welcome and my colleague and I greatly appreciated the conversations we had with you around the school. I write now to let you know what we found.

Thirsk School and Sixth Form College is a good school with some outstanding features. You make good progress because you are well taught and work hard. You enjoy a broad, balanced curriculum with lots of extra activities and good support when you find life or work hard. You move ahead particularly strongly in Years 7 to 9, and progress well from that point to reach higher than average standards in your GCSE examinations in Year 11. Students in the sixth form make satisfactory progress.

The school is really special in the way it knows and supports you, and you develop exceptionally well as individual people. You told us how the school helps you stay safe and how people look after each other. You behave considerately, and appreciate how the school has helped some of you overcome difficulties and become more independent and responsible. Coming to school is a pleasure for most of you. We were particularly impressed by your lively interest in the wider world, and your respect and concern for other people. You show particularly good awareness of what makes a healthy lifestyle and the school is helping you to stay healthy.

Those who lead the school do a good job of making sure it works well and continues to improve. There are a few areas where this good school could improve further. These are to:

- improve levels of student achievement and the consistency of the quality of teaching and learning in the sixth form
- iron out inconsistencies between subjects at GCSE
- further develop the curriculum for 14 to 19 year olds.

Your part in this is to be the best possible learners in all your subjects.

I would like to wish you all well for the future.