

Hill Top School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	130942
Local Authority	Gateshead
Inspection number	319148
Inspection dates	5–6 February 2008
Reporting inspector	David Smith

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

Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	88
6th form	3
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Dorothy Dawson
Headteacher	Ms Elaine Colquhoun
Date of previous school inspection	1 June 2004
School address	Wealcroft Felling Gateshead Tyne and Wear NE10 8LT
Telephone number	0191 4692462
Fax number	0191 4384166

Age group	11-18
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one Additional Inspector.

Description of the school

All students at Hill Top School have a statement of special educational need, reflecting the significant amount of extra help they require. There are three students who exhibit autistic spectrum disorders and are over the age of 16. This is a temporary arrangement made with the local authority, pending the outcome of the Special Educational Needs Review. Nearly half of the students have moderate learning difficulties and just over a third exhibit autistic spectrum disorders. The remaining students have other learning needs including speech, language and communication difficulties or they are experiencing behavioural, social and emotional difficulties. There are far more boys than girls which is usual for a school like Hill Top. A high proportion of the students are entitled to free school meals. A significant proportion of the students are looked after by the local authority. Most students are from White British backgrounds. The school offers a range of extended services through lunchtime and after-school clubs. The school has achieved many national awards including the Basic Skills Quality Mark.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

This is a good school. Leadership and management of the school are good and this has ensured that there have been effective improvements since the last inspection. The joint teams of governors and staff, combined with the enthusiastic leadership of the headteacher, are making a strong contribution to the school's good capacity to improve.

Students' achievement is good overall. They make good progress in mathematics, science and information and communication technology (ICT). They make particularly good progress in practical and creative subjects such as art and design, drama and music. Students in Years 10 and 11 achieve well in a wide range of courses and appreciate the opportunity to opt for their favourite subjects. Students make good progress in their speaking and listening and reading, but the boys make only satisfactory progress in their writing. Also, the higher attaining students in Years 10 and 11 do not follow a sufficiently challenging course in English and therefore these students' achievement in English is satisfactory, rather than good. Students with severe learning difficulties make good progress which is an improvement since the last inspection.

Students' personal development and well-being are good. Students have positive attitudes to their work and thoroughly enjoy being at school. This is encouraged by the excellent range of activities provided during breaks and after school. Also, the school has an extensive range of links with schools in other countries which provide outstanding opportunities for students' cultural development. The students' excellent adoption of healthy lifestyles helped the school to achieve Silver Healthy School Status. Students and staff relate well to each other and this helps to promote students' good behaviour. Attendance has improved since the last inspection and is now good.

Teaching and learning are good and, as a result, students achieve well. Staff have high expectations and use a wide range of strategies to engage students in their learning. There is a careful balance of support and challenge to ensure that students' wide range of learning needs is met. The good curriculum is helped by the effective use of the spacious accommodation and local facilities, including students performing in a local theatre. Good links with colleges and work providers helps to prepare students for the next stage of their life. Students are provided with good care within a safe and supportive environment. However, the school places too little emphasis on using assessment information to let students know how well they are doing and guide improvements to their work.

The school's own view of itself is accurate and this ensures that they are aware of the priorities for improvement. However, the current development plan does not make enough use of the available information on students' assessments and progress to measure the effect of improvements on students' achievement.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

The effectiveness of the sixth form is satisfactory. Teaching and learning are good but the curriculum is only satisfactory and, as a result, the students make satisfactory progress. The provision is well led and managed and senior leaders are fully aware of how to make the curriculum more appropriate for the students. The impact of their improvement policy is hampered by the limited number of students. This means that the students share many of their activities with younger students rather than extending their own. The school is awaiting the

outcomes of the review to help guide their planning for post-16 provision. Care, guidance and support are good and, in particular, the staff team manages challenging behaviour well. Students' personal development and well-being are good and this is boosted by the additional opportunities provided for them to spend time in the community.

What the school should do to improve further

- Use assessment information more effectively to measure the effect of improvements in provision on students' achievement and to guide students' progress more effectively.
- Increase the range of opportunities provided for students to practise and improve their writing skills.
- Ensure that the sixth form provision fully meets the students' learning needs.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

Students' achievement is good and most make good progress towards challenging targets despite the complexity and diversity of their learning needs. These needs mean they are unable to meet the national expectations for students in mainstream schools. Students in Years 7 to 9 make good progress in mathematics and science and achieve well in challenging courses when they are in Year 10 and 11. However, boys make less progress in their writing and this slows down their progress in English and subjects reliant on writing. This means that progress in English is only satisfactory. Information and communication technology is used effectively to promote students' learning and students are fascinated by some of the new resources which help them to make good progress in their reading. Students across the school achieve particularly well in practical and creative subjects. Consequently, achievement at the end of Year 11 is strong in subjects such as art and design and drama. Girls, students who are eligible for free school meals or those in public care make similar progress to their peers in the school.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Students' personal development and well-being, including their spiritual, moral and social development, are good. Students' cultural development is excellent. The residential visits and trips abroad provide students with exceptional opportunities to learn about life in a wide range of cultures. Students have positive attitudes, behave well and thoroughly enjoy their learning. Students' attendance has improved since the last inspection and is now good. Students have an excellent understanding of how to lead healthy lifestyles. For example, they eat healthily and drink water at regular intervals. Also, students thoroughly enjoy their physical activities during lessons, breaks and after school and have gained the Sportsmark in recognition of this. Students make good relationships and have a good level of concern for each other and respect for their surroundings. They are well prepared for life beyond school and make a good contribution to the school and wider community. It is excellent that some of the students had the opportunity to help with the scoring at the Special Olympics in Shanghai last year. The school council has some very creative ideas and it is a challenge for the staff to keep pace with their ideas. The council has helped to improve the curriculum and are now very keen for the staff to develop a cycle track in school. The extensive after-school activities provide students

with, for example, the opportunity to follow the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme. Students develop good levels of self-confidence and this is very evident in their high quality singing and acting. However, too few opportunities are provided to develop students' decision making skills and teamwork through enterprise-based activities.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Teaching and learning are good. Typically, teaching is enthusiastic with high expectations for students' learning and behaviour. Because of this students are engaged and they achieve well. The staff team work well together and ensure that no learning time is wasted and the teaching assistants provide a good blend of support and challenge. The staff are skilful at pitching their questions at the right level of challenge for each student and this gives them the confidence to answer and learn from their mistakes. Students are keen to take an active part in learning and enjoy, for example, their involvement in role play. Particularly skilled teaching promotes very good progress in drama and, as a result, students perform very well in the school and local community. Resources are carefully tailored to meet the learning needs of the students exhibiting autistic spectrum disorders. The older students are particularly enthusiastic learners in their chosen courses, such as hairdressing and food technology. Interactive whiteboards are used extensively to engage students in their learning during lessons and assemblies. Where introductions are too long, the pace of learning slows and this limits students' progress to satisfactory rather than the good progress found in most lessons.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

The curriculum is good and provides students with an enjoyable education. Displays throughout the school are used effectively to celebrate achievement and support learning. The photographs of ex-students at work and at play provide a stunning reminder of their contribution to the school community. Most aspects of literacy and numeracy are promoted effectively across the curriculum. However, there are limitations in the opportunities provided for students to practise and extend their writing skills in different subjects. The accredited course in English for students in Years 10 and 11 is not challenging enough for higher attaining students. Good use is made of ICT to help motivate students to, for example, improve their reading skills. Students thoroughly enjoy the practical activities provided in many subjects including music, art and design and drama. They make particularly good progress in these subjects and the quality of the students' creative work helped the school to achieve the Artsmark award. The enrichment and extension of the curriculum are excellent and make a strong contribution to students' enjoyment and achievement. The wide range of clubs, visits and visitors supports and empowers the students in all areas of their learning and well-being. Typical comments from students include, 'What a great morning, it was wicked. I want to play Kurling again.' Work experience placements and college links are good and help the students to become more independent learners.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Care, guidance and support are good. The staff team work hard to provide students with high levels of care. Relationships between students and staff are good and consequently students have confidence in the support available should they feel at risk. Procedures for the safeguarding of students are in place and the staff are particularly vigilant in checking the identity of visitors to the school. An imaginative range of breaktime activities are organised to meet students' needs and interests. For example, some prefer to be very busy while others take the opportunity to relax and this helps to promote positive relationships. Some students carry out tasks that help to care for the school environment. The school council show concern for the care of students by stressing the importance of them staying safe. The staff team manages the wide range of students' learning and personal needs well. This is helped through good links with other providers. The school has a wealth of information on pupils' progress but this is not used well enough to let pupils know how well they are doing and to guide their improvements. Parents are very supportive of the school and appreciate that their views are listened to and acted upon. Their positive views are illustrated very well by a parent who wrote that, 'Every child matters – it is not something the school talks about, but it is what the school does'.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Leadership and management are good and, as a result, students make good progress towards their challenging targets. This a school that quite rightly takes pride in its extensive links with schools around the world and this has led to them gaining a British Council International Award. The introduction of development teams including staff and governors is a particularly good initiative. This collaborative approach ensures governors know the school well and the various teams make a strong contribution to the school's good capacity to improve. Their Investors in People Award reflects the strength of shared leadership across the school. Also, high quality professional development has equipped the staff to meet the students' increasingly complex learning needs and helps to provide good value for money. Self-evaluation involves senior and middle leaders and provides an accurate analysis of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. This process informs clear priorities for development. However, information on the assessment and progress of students is not used well enough to measure the effect of new initiatives on students' achievement. This is an inclusive school and ensures that students have equal access to activities. For example, they have introduced an initiative in the locality to promote sporting activities for girls.

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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	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	4	4
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	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	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	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.

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	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	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

7 February 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Hill Top School, Gateshead, NE10 8LT

I thoroughly enjoyed my visit to your school. Thank you for making me feel so welcome and taking the time to tell me all about your school. In particular, thanks to the school council and I hope that you get your wish for a cycling track in the school grounds.

Hill Top is a good school. You make good progress in your learning because of the good teaching. It is clear that you enjoy your time at the school. All of the staff work hard to provide you with an interesting range of activities during lessons, breaks and after school. It is excellent that you work so hard to follow the school's advice and guidance on how to stay healthy. I was particularly impressed with the lovely displays in classes and around the school which highlight the wide range of your activities and achievement. You are all rightly proud of the many national awards that you have helped the school to achieve. The senior staff and governors run the school well and make sure that you are happy, safe and busy during your lessons and breaks. The school has many exciting links with schools in other countries and this provides you with outstanding opportunities to learn about life in other cultures.

Even a good school can improve and I have three suggestions to make. You do not have enough chances to improve your writing and your teachers will give you more help with this in the future. Also, it would be good for the older students to have their own facilities and courses. Finally, the school has lots of information about your progress and this information is going to be used by the school to make sure that you make even better progress. You can help by continuing to work hard.

All the very best for the future

David Smith

Lead inspector