Thornhill School Business & Enterprise College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	108860
Local Authority	Sunderland
Inspection number	324850
Inspection dates	4–5 December 2008
Reporting inspector	Simon Richards

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	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1065
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Jim Clarke
Headteacher	Mr John Hallworth
Date of previous school inspection	1 December 2005
School address	Thornholme Road Sunderland Tyne and Wear SR2 7NA
Telephone number	0191 5537735
Fax number	0191 5537740

Age group	11–16
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by four additional inspectors.

Description of the school

Thornhill School, Business and Enterprise College is located in the Thornholme area of Sunderland, one mile south of the city centre. It is larger than average in size, although numbers have declined reflecting the general reduction in the secondary school population in the city. A rising proportion of pupils are eligible for free school meals. The percentage of pupils from minority ethnic groups is broadly average, although most of these pupils have English as an additional language. Almost a third of pupils have learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Thornhill School, Business and Enterprise College provides its pupils with a good quality of education. It excels in the outstanding pastoral care that it offers and the excellent curriculum that it provides. The overwhelming number of parents who made their views known to the inspection team were fully supportive of the school and its work.

Most pupils enter the school with below average standards, particularly in mathematics and English. By the end of Key Stage 4, the proportion of pupils attaining five or more good GCSE grades is above average although this reduces to below average when English and mathematics are included. Nonetheless, the large majority of pupils make good progress in their learning because much has been done to improve pupils' performance in English and mathematics in recent years. Attainment in a range of other subjects is high.

The school's curriculum is outstanding. It provides all pupils, including those interested in work-related learning, with an opportunity to pursue their own interests and to succeed. The school's specialist business and enterprise status makes a successful impact on many aspects of the school's work. Most lessons observed were at least good. Teachers make sure that all pupils are engaged by their work through innovative and challenging tasks. In a small proportion of lessons, progress is slower because work is not sufficiently matched to pupils' learning needs and teachers' marking does not help them to understand what is required to improve. In addition, the quality and frequency of homework varies markedly across the school. It does not provide pupils with enough opportunities to extend their learning or consolidate key skills.

The school makes significant efforts to ensure that pupils make a positive contribution to the community both in school and the local area. Its work in promoting community cohesion is exemplary. The proportion of pupils from ethnic minorities has increased in recent years and is now above average. The pupil population is now representative of many cultural and faith groups. Great efforts are made by the school to ensure that cultural groups work very effectively together. There is genuine respect for each other's culture and beliefs, and pupils are encouraged to share their knowledge and experiences to enhance the learning experience of everyone.

The personal development and well-being of the pupils is also good and a real strength of the school. The behaviour and attitudes of the pupils, as demonstrated in the way they behave in lessons and around the school, is good. Attendance is broadly average although a small number of persistent non-attenders adversely affect overall attendance rates despite the best efforts of the school.

The school provides excellent pastoral support and this underpins pupils' confidence in the provision it makes. Procedures for safeguarding are in place and meet current requirements. Pupils say that bullying is rare, but when it does occur, staff deal with it effectively.

The school is well led and managed. The clear and effective leadership of the headteacher has ensured there is a secure focus on raising standards and meeting the needs of all pupils. Senior leaders have a good understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses and this accurately informs improvement planning. Middle leaders work hard and strive to make the changes necessary to improve departmental performance. While some have detailed knowledge about what requires improvement and act diligently on this information, this does not apply to all. This is particularly noticeable in the different practice towards the marking of pupils' work, the accuracy of tracking their performance and the setting of challenging targets.

The sustained improvement in a number of areas, including the most recent GCSE results demonstrates there is good and strengthening capacity to improve.

What the school should do to improve further

To ensure that pupils make better progress in their learning and attain higher standards the school should:

- Improve the quality and consistency by which teachers and departments mark pupils work and provide them with feedback so they know what is required to improve and meet their targets.
- Establish a consistent approach to homework that effectively supports pupils' learning and the consolidation of key skills.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Most pupils enter the school with standards which are below average. This is particularly so in English and mathematics. Pupil's mathematical skills are particularly weak at the start of Year 7. During their time in school, all groups of learners make good progress and particularly at Key Stage 4. Over time, pupils' attainment has shown sustained improvement and 2008 unvalidated test results show that this trend has continued. The percentage of pupils now attaining five higher grades at GCSE is above the national average. This falls to below average when English and mathematics are included, although this represents a marked improvement on previous years.

The school's leadership has taken effective action to improve on past performance. Standards in English are rising with most pupils making good progress. The percentage of pupils achieving a higher grade at GCSE in English is now close to the national average. Standards in mathematics improved sharply in 2008, but remain below average. Particularly high standards were reached in a number of other subjects at GCSE in 2008; for example, art & design, business and communications and a wide range of vocational studies including information and communication technology (ICT) national awards. A particularly strong contribution to this progress is made by the outstanding, well planned curriculum designed to meet pupils' individual interests and aptitudes.

The school's specialist status makes a good contribution to progress and standards. There is no underachievement by particular groups of learners. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good progress.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Pupils' personal development and well-being are good. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is excellent and is reflected in pupils' commitment towards their studies and each other. Most pupils enjoy lessons. They are highly motivated and keen to do well. They benefit from an excellent curriculum, which is well matched to their needs and aspirations and provides them with both interest and enjoyment. The behaviour of most pupils in class and around the school is good, showing awareness of the safety of others. Relationships between pupils are particularly strong. Pupils from different faiths and cultures mix extremely well and benefit enormously from the school's excellent community cohesion work. Pupils' attendance is broadly average. Despite the school's best efforts to improve matters, it is adversely affected by a group

of persistent non-attenders. Pupils demonstrate a positive attitude to healthy eating and healthy lifestyles that is promoted through the curriculum and a popular, wide and varied extra-curricular programme which includes a range of sports.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teaching and learning are good overall and sometimes outstanding. The school has correctly improved teaching and learning to align with intensive efforts to improve the curriculum. These changes have combined well and have resulted in much better rates of pupil progress and higher standards. The pace of learning in most lessons is brisk. Pupils are inspired and motivated to build upon their learning by taking responsibility for charting their own progress. In the lessons where pupils assess their own or each others' work, they develop responsibility for their learning and are able to identify what they need to do to improve. Good planning underpins the best lessons because it is correctly focused on individual learning needs and includes a range of exciting and challenging activities which keeps pupils interested. The pupils thrive in these lessons because activities are chosen to constantly challenge their understanding and raise expectations. Consequently, the large majority enjoy lessons, behave well and are appreciative of the time teachers take to listen to their views and opinions. In lessons judged to be satisfactory, activities are not always well matched to the pupils' needs, and the use of ICT is ineffective. Pupils are sometimes unsure about exactly how to improve their work or reluctant to ask for help, which restricts the progress that some, especially the more able, make. The marking of pupils' work varies in quality. Although most marking is effective and provides adequate guidance for pupils, some lacks the detail necessary to inform them what it is required to do to improve.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The school offers an outstanding range of academic and vocational opportunities. At the heart of this exceptional curriculum is a clear focus on matching courses to pupils' individual needs and expectations. It builds effectively upon their primary school experience because of the excellent transition arrangements. Learners who are experiencing difficulties are well supported by taking part in a range of 'learning challenges'. Pupils who have particular skills, or pupils who speak languages other than English, have strong support and quickly make good progress.

Older pupils are delighted with the excellent choice of academic and vocational courses on offer, some of which are delivered in off-site provision. The school's status as a Business and Enterprise College has a good impact on both the school and the community. A very high proportion of pupils achieve a GCSE in business and communication studies. The curriculum is enriched with an outstanding range of visiting speakers, educational visits and after school clubs. The pupils particularly appreciate archery and canoeing.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

The pastoral care and support provided by the school is exemplary. Staff exhibit a very high degree of care towards pupils resulting in them feeling safe and secure in school. The majority are confident and articulate and engage effectively in 'Pupil Voice' initiatives. They feel that

staff are very approachable and supportive. Child protection and health & safety procedures are in place and meet legislative requirements.

While some pupils feel well informed about their progress through the academic guidance they receive, there is significant variation between departments in the feedback provided for them. Good practice is evident but this is not consistent. The quality of marking, for example, varies, ranging from detailed and informative which helps pupils to improve, to work which is completely unmarked and does little to help pupils reach their targets.

External partnerships are exemplary having a positive impact on the school and community, through for example, learning support provision for pupils and vocational and industry links. Business links, enterprise and innovative community activities are providing good essential life and leadership skills. Transition arrangements with partner schools strengthen achievement, having an impact on the progression of all pupils but particularly the more vulnerable.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Through effective strategic leadership, the headteacher and senior leaders have implemented important changes which have improved the school since the time of the previous inspection. There is a secure focus on raising standards and improving pupils' achievement.

Recent improvements to the curriculum have impacted well on pupils' motivation and engagement in their studies. This has helped pupils to succeed. The rise in GCSE examination results in 2008 are a direct result of actions taken so far.

Senior leaders have created an environment in which pupils are well cared for and this has provided a secure basis from which pupils can pursue their studies. Equality of opportunity is commonplace for all pupils and the exceptional commitment of leaders and governors to community cohesion has resulted in high quality provision. The school and the local community frequently work together through innovative projects. These provide a variety of opportunities for pupils to gain knowledge and understanding of cultural differences through the knowledge and expertise of pupils, the use of visits, visitors, events and links with the wider community.

The school's monitoring and self-evaluation are satisfactory, but vary between departments. In some departments such as religious education, technology and English, self-evaluation is done well. Middle leaders' understanding of departmental performance is accurate and leads to well judged actions which help pupils to make good progress. However, while target setting has been developed satisfactorily since the previous inspection, it is not yet used rigorously enough by all staff and all departments to focus pupils on what is required to improve. Likewise, homework is not used consistently well by all teachers and all departments to ensure that it fully supports pupil learning.

The resources of the school are well deployed and have done much to develop the learning areas and enhance teaching. Governors are knowledgeable about the school and provide suitable support and challenge to the headteacher and staff. There are excellent links with outside agencies and other learning partners, who rightly regard the school as a centre of good practice in moving pupils successfully from primary education to further education and training. In addition, the school provides a good range of community facilities which enables parents and others to attend courses and obtain qualifications. Value for money is good and the school has good and strengthening capacity to improve further.

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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**

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
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well being?	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2
The standards[1] reached by learners	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	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.

Personal development and well-being

How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1
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	3
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 learners' needs?	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	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	3
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	1
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	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
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

5 December 2008

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Thornhill School Business & Enterprise College, Sunderland, SR2 7NA

I would like to thank you for all your help last week when the team inspected your school. Our meetings with you provided useful evidence to make sure our judgements were fair. We agree with you that Thornhill School Business and Enterprise College is a good school. You reach standards that are about the national average and you make good progress. You behave well in lessons and around the school. Teaching is good, as is the way the school is led and managed. The curriculum you are offered is outstanding because of the way it has been matched to meet your needs. The new work related courses offer a useful alternative to the more academic courses and the business and enterprise specialism has a good impact on many areas of school life. You receive good support from staff and feel safe in school. Bullying is rare and when it happens is dealt with effectively.

There are some areas in which the school can improve further, and we have asked Mr Hallworth and the staff to concentrate on the following in order to help all achieve more and reach higher standards:

- improve the quality and consistency of marking and feedback that you receive about your work so that you know what is required to meet your targets
- improve the rigour and consistency by which departments conduct self-evaluation so that all perform to the level of the best
- establish a consistent approach to homework that effectively supports your learning and the consolidation of key skills.

I am sure that you can think of ways in which you can support the staff in their work to improve in these areas. Thank you again for your help and support, please accept our best wishes for the future.