

Knutsford High School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	111427
Local Authority	Cheshire
Inspection number	325378
Inspection dates	17–18 September 2008
Reporting inspector	Marguerite McCloy 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 (total)	1538
Sixth form	295
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr R Armstrong
Principal	Mr K Hollins
Date of previous school inspection	18 January 2006
School address	Bexton Road Knutsford Cheshire WA16 0EA
Telephone number	01565 633294
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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

Knutsford High is a larger than average comprehensive school and sixth form situated near the town centre of Knutsford, a relatively advantaged area in social and economic terms. However, many students come from further afield as the school draws on a wider area than its immediate catchment. A much lower than average proportion of students is eligible for a free school meal. The majority of students are of White British backgrounds, with approximately 8% of students from Asian, black or mixed heritage. The school operates on two sites almost half a mile apart, with students in Years 7 and 8 based in the smaller site. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is below average, although the number with a statement for their special educational need is above average. The school houses a 27-place unit for students with moderate learning difficulties, serving the East Cheshire area.

Knutsford High has specialist school status in the humanities, with English as the designated lead subject. It has gained the International Schools Award, Artsmark Gold and the Inclusion Quality Mark.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

Knutsford High School provides a satisfactory education for its students, with particular strengths in the way it promotes their personal development and well-being. The school largely succeeds in its aims to 'inspire learning and achievement, stimulate the development of individual strengths, talents and potential, and prepare students for a successful and fulfilling life'.

Standards of attainment at the end of Key Stages 3 and 4 are just above average. Results in the 2007 national examinations maintained the school's traditionally good performance at GCSE. Taking into account some variation between subjects and particular groups of students, this represents satisfactory achievement, based on their prior attainment. An above average proportion of students gained five or more GCSE passes at grades A* to C with mathematics and English included, compared to the national average.

Teaching is good in just over half of the lessons, but not a high enough proportion to result in consistently good learning and raised achievement. There are several examples of good practice and the school is developing further its systems for staff to share and learn from this.

Students appreciate the many opportunities the good curriculum provides for them to successfully develop their individual talents and strengths. They also develop, early on in the school, the very important life skills they need to ensure their future economic well-being. Students make a good contribution to their school and local community, for example, through their charitable work, and through older students running a breakfast club and mentoring younger pupils.

The quality of care and support students receive overall has outstanding features, although academic guidance is less consistent. The school's system of recording and tracking students' progress is detailed and shared with leaders and teachers. However, it is not used effectively in classrooms to ensure that work is well planned to challenge all learners and to ensure they know exactly what they need to improve in order to meet their targets.

Leadership and management are satisfactory, with some areas of strength. The innovative structure of the school's large senior team provides a widely shared leadership and range of responsibilities. The Principal has a clear vision for the school and is well supported by the recently appointed Vice-Principal: Head of School. The school has a positive ethos and a committed, hard-working staff who are willing to 'go the extra mile' for the benefit of the students. The school's self-evaluation has been a little too generous and leaders are aware of the need to tighten up its monitoring systems further. The outcomes of self-evaluation are not used rigorously enough by the leadership team to demonstrate consistently the impact of their actions on clear measures of improvement.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

Standards in the sixth form are broadly average with some variations in subject performance. Achievement is satisfactory with most students doing as well as might be expected in relation to their earlier attainment. Students' personal development is good with some outstanding features. This is because a key strength of the sixth form lies in the way that staff ensure students are made to feel part of a community in which they are well cared for. Those joining the sixth form from other schools comment particularly favourably on the welcome they received and the high quality arrangements for their induction. As a result of the tone set by sixth form

managers, students become mature and articulate. They show great awareness of the needs of others both in their day-to-day sixth form life, where they get on very well together, and in the help that they provide for younger pupils in this and neighbouring schools. Teachers use their good subject knowledge to plan lessons well. They build on good relationships to draw a response from students. Nevertheless, on occasion teachers do too much for students, instead promoting higher achievement by developing students' own thinking and thus reaching reasoned conclusions. Students confirm that the curriculum choices provided meet their needs and career aspirations well, although there is a limited range of vocational options. The quality of care, guidance and support is good. Advice about what to do next is valued by the students and they feel well cared for. A well developed system provides good guidance for students in their choice of courses. Good pastoral support is reflected in the high proportion of students completing their courses. A particular strength is in the way that students are helped to cope effectively with the demands of A level courses. However, the use of available data is not sufficiently well coordinated to enable the school to evaluate sixth form performance accurately and rigorously.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve the overall quality and consistency of teaching so that a higher proportion is good or better to enhance learning and raise achievement.
- Improve the accuracy and rigour of self-evaluation and use the outcomes more effectively to evaluate the impact of the school's actions.
- Refine the school's use of assessment information to ensure students are set clear learning targets and understand exactly what they need to do to reach these.

A small proportion of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Students' attainment on entry to the school is just above average, although this fluctuates from year to year. It is affected by the number of young people in the area who take up selective education places in a neighbouring authority. This has the effect of reducing the overall proportion of students who are attaining at the highest levels.

The progress made by students in Key Stage 4 appeared to have shown a downward trend in 2006 and 2007. Weaker progress was made by a particular group of lower ability girls and a small number of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The school identified issues which contributed to this, such as the below average attendance of some of these students. Senior leaders also analysed the particular circumstances affecting the overall progress measures, including underperformance in science examinations. They have taken action to remedy this and the unvalidated GCSE results for 2008 show that the apparent decline in progress measures has been reversed. Most Year 11 students in 2008 made satisfactory and sometimes good progress across Key Stages 3 and 4. Early analysis also shows no notable variation in the progress of different groups of learners, whether by gender, ethnicity or learning difficulties.

Another factor affecting the 2007 results had been the weaker progress made in Key Stage 3, particularly in science and mathematics, which was identified at the time of the last inspection. Effective action by the school resulted in the improved achievement now evident in Key Stage

3. Standards in the 2007 tests for 14 year olds were above average and indicated at least satisfactory progress overall and good in some areas, for example, English. There is as yet no reliable information about the outcomes of tests for Key Stage 3 students in 2008, due to the difficulties with national marking systems. The school's own assessments show a further improvement in standards in English, mathematics and science.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

The good personal development and well-being of students results especially from the very strong care and support provided by the school. Students benefit from good spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, and feel valued at the school. They understand their opinions will be listened to, for example, through the school's parliament, where issues important to the school community are researched and debated. Students enjoy school and the majority attend regularly. As a result, overall attendance is above average. However, in the last academic year, the attendance of a small number of students became a concern. Despite the school's appropriate actions to deal with this, the weaker engagement and attendance of a small minority of students continues to limit their progress.

Students demonstrate consideration towards each other and members of staff as a result of the positive relationships and ethos around the school. Students' mature and positive attitudes reflect the impact of the school's efforts to promote equality and prevent discrimination. Opportunities to undertake international exchanges to countries such as China and America contribute well to their understanding of race equality and cultural diversity. Students have a good understanding of how to keep safe. They do not see bullying as an issue at the school and say that incidents are dealt with effectively if they do occur. Students similarly are well aware of how to keep healthy and are able to eat healthily in school and be involved in the many sporting activities on offer.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Teaching and learning are satisfactory overall. A strong element in all lessons is the good relationships between teachers and students. Attitudes to learning are positive and the students contribute confidently. There are examples of good practice across all key stages where lessons are well planned and structured with clear outcomes, meeting the needs of all students. In good lessons, the use of a range of resources stimulates interest, and opportunities are provided to develop the students' independent learning skills. Students are actively involved and are challenged to develop their own ideas. Teaching is lively and moves along at a brisk pace, with teachers conveying their own knowledge and enthusiasm for their subject to the students. In some lessons, however, there is an over reliance on teacher-led activities, and assessment information is not used to plan lessons that enable all students to work at different and appropriately challenging levels. Expectations for some students are too low and there is little ongoing assessment of progress. Too much time is given to some tasks so that the pace of learning slows and students are too passive. Teaching assistants make an effective contribution to students' learning in lessons where they are actively involved and not restricted by too much teacher input.

The school has recently reviewed its learning policy and recognises the need to develop further the use of assessment for learning. The impact of this is evident in good lessons when the teachers' skilful use of questioning techniques helps to assess students' progress and challenge them to extend their answers.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The school's good curriculum meets national requirements and contributes well to students' personal development and well-being.

In Years 7 and 8 students complete a number of extended projects, such as creating a community development plan, through which they develop literacy and other skills that enhance their ability to work independently and to communicate with others. In Year 9, while continuing to study the core and foundation subjects, students devote a significant amount of time to studying subjects of particular interest to them, and this contributes to preparation for future studies in Key Stage 4. This recent development appears to have been well received by students and their parents, but the school has yet to evaluate fully the impact that this initiative is having on students' progress.

At Key Stage 4, students choose to follow either an academic or vocational pathway. Both offer a good range of subjects to meet learners' needs, although the school recognises the need to extend its vocational options. It is doing so through, for example, increasing its offer of diploma courses.

The acquisition of specialist school status in 2004 increased the range of subjects available in English and humanities at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form. It has enabled enrichment of the provision at Key Stage 3, through, for example, the appointment of a literacy coordinator and improved information and communication technology resources. Wider benefits include the sharing of some of the school's facilities with partner primary schools and members of the local community, for example, the Media Centre.

The school provides a wide range of extra-curricular activities that engage and motivate students and increase their enjoyment, for example, in sports and performing arts. In particular the many visits, including those to partner organisations across the globe, have increased the students' understanding of the world in which they live and of how they can contribute to improving the lives of others.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Students benefit from exemplary pastoral guidance and support through the school's very strong and caring networks. This is seen very clearly in the transition from their primary school through effective liaison and a range of well-planned activities. Students are also very well supported when they make the seamless move from lower to upper school. Through the very good relationships and high level of commitment of the staff, students enjoy their time at school. The school's learning support base, 'My Space', provides exceptional support for students with a wide range of personal and learning needs. This facility is greatly valued by parents. The school works hard to prevent vulnerable students at risk of disaffection from missing out on gaining valuable qualifications and achieving good personal development.

Arrangements for safeguarding students are robust and child protection procedures meet statutory requirements. The school's race equality policy is implemented and the few incidents that have occurred were investigated and followed up promptly, including contact with parents. Systems are in place to regularly review and report the progress students are making. However, insufficient use of pertinent performance data in lessons means the academic guidance students receive is too variable, and often results in students being unclear as to what they have to do to improve to reach their targets. Students benefit from being well-prepared and guided to make appropriate choices for the various courses open to them as they move up the school.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Although there are detailed monitoring systems in place, the school's evaluation of its work had judged all aspects to be good when some are satisfactory. The outcomes of regular lesson observations are not used consistently well enough to ensure that teaching is further developed in order to improve achievement. Best practice is not routinely shared across the school and between subjects. Leaders are aware of this and improvement plans include enhanced opportunities for teachers to learn from and develop alongside their peers.

The school has a wealth of information on students' performance. The use of this is not coordinated well enough to inform teachers' planning or to ensure that students are clear about their targets for improvement. Although the school's specialist status is widening the range of subjects available to students, test results do not clearly support the school's view that this is improving achievement. Specialist subject targets in English, history and geography were unrealistically high in 2007 and consequently were not met.

There is no complacency in the school, and leaders demonstrate a shared commitment to continuous improvement. For example, curriculum subject reviews ensure that leaders are held to account for performance in their areas of responsibility. Strengths and areas for development are identified and actions planned to take these into account. The impact of these actions, however, is not always clearly evidenced in improved outcomes for students.

The school makes a good contribution to community cohesion. Leaders understand the community and are well aware of the importance of promoting understanding of all social backgrounds and cultures, particularly in an area where the majority of families are of White British origin. The school's work in promoting community cohesion was recognised as an example of good practice in a national report on Diversity and Citizenship.

A large majority of parents, in the inspection questionnaire, expressed wholly positive views about the school. They are particularly appreciative of the arrangements for students in Years 7 and 8 to remain in the lower school building and of the support provided at transition stages, such as when entering from primary schools.

Governors are generally aware of the school's strengths and areas for development, and are able to hold it to account for its performance. They are provided with a good range of information and are developing their skills in understanding the school's achievement data and its implications. They express positive views on the involvement of student representatives in some governing body meetings. Governors are impressed by the maturity and confidence of the students in expressing their views and making a contribution to decision making.

The school provides satisfactory value for money and leadership and management provide the school with a satisfactory capacity to improve.

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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?	3	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	3	3

Achievement and standards

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

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	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 learners' needs?	3	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?	2	2

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	3	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	2	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	2	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	3	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	3	
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**

Thank you for your help during the recent inspection of your school. We enjoyed speaking to groups of you during our meetings, in classes and around the building.

We judged Knutsford to be a satisfactory school overall with some particularly good features. The inspection team was impressed by your good behaviour and positive attitudes to school. Many of you showed particular maturity and confidence when contributing your views to the inspection team, and told us that you are used to this because of the opportunities the school provides for you to be involved in decision making.

Here are some of the strengths we found:

- excellent care and support for students, which contributes to your good personal development. For example, you are prepared well for your future lives and understand the importance of teamwork and of valuing all people as individuals
- the school provides a good curriculum and you appreciate the wide range of activities that are provided within and outside the school day
- very positive relationships exist across the school and students and staff get along well with each other in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

In discussions with some of the senior leadership team and governors, we have suggested three areas to help the school improve further:

- although just over half of the teaching is already good, it would help to improve your standards and progress if even more lessons were good or outstanding
- senior leaders could refine the way they work together in using information gathered from monitoring activities to check that their action plans are leading to improvement.
- use learning targets more effectively in lessons so that you know exactly what to do to improve your work and reach the next level.