

Culcheth High School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	111430
Local Authority	Warrington
Inspection number	325379
Inspection dates	4–5 March 2009
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)	1166
Sixth form	131
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Annick Platt
Headteacher	Mr Martyn Froggett
Date of previous school inspection	22 March 2006
School address	Withington Avenue Culcheth Warrington Cheshire WA3 4JQ
Telephone number	01925 762136
Fax number	01925 766373

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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

Culcheth High is a slightly larger than average secondary school situated in a village location on the outskirts of Warrington. Many students live in the vicinity of the school in areas of above average social and economic advantage. Around 16% of students live outside the school's local authority area in a wider range of socio-economic circumstances. A much lower than average proportion of students is eligible for free school meals. Most students are of White British heritage and almost all speak English as their first language. The proportions of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities or with a statement of special educational needs are in line with the national average.

Culcheth High has specialist status in humanities, with history as the lead subject and including geography and English. The school has awards in: Investors in People, National Healthy Schools, Artsmark and Financial Management in Schools. Culcheth High has recently been designated as an Apple Training Centre.

There is a privately managed pre-school nursery on the school site. This provision was inspected separately and will receive a separately written report.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Culcheth High School provides a good education for its students and has improved since its last inspection. Students achieve well and all groups of learners, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, make good progress. The consistent rise in attainment at GCSE over the last three years led to Culcheth High being identified as one of the 'most improved schools' in 2008. A much higher than average proportion of Key Stage 4 students gained five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C including English and mathematics.

The good leadership and management provides clear direction and vision, and the headteacher and senior leaders set an excellent example in this respect. The school's self-evaluation is accurate and rigorous, and teaching and learning are good. These factors contribute to the school's good capacity to improve further. In fact, a good proportion of lessons are now outstanding. Common features of almost all lessons are the positive relationships between staff and students, and between students themselves. Staff demonstrate a strong commitment to inclusion and to providing good levels of care, guidance and support for all groups of learners. Students' personal development, including their attendance and attitudes to learning, is good. The school council promotes their citizenship skills and through this forum good suggestions for improvement have been made, for example regarding school uniform and curriculum development. Students take on a wide range of responsibilities, such as involvement in staff interviews and being prefects, peer mentors and sports leaders. This develops their social skills very well and is a factor in their outstanding contribution to the community.

Academic guidance is good. Students are generally aware of their targets and how to achieve them, and are given good advice when choosing courses or careers. Most teachers give clear guidance when marking books or reviewing assessments. However, the school recognises that there are inconsistencies in the way teachers use assessment on a day-to-day basis. For example, marking does not always set out clearly what students need to do to improve. In addition, not all teachers are equally effective in using assessment to help them adopt good questioning techniques that challenge students of all abilities and promote their learning and thinking skills.

The school's specialist status makes a positive contribution to its work, for example in enhancing the quality of the curriculum. It has also enabled the school to share additional resources and expertise for the benefit of partner schools and local community groups. Good governance and effective financial management help to ensure that the school provides good value for money.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Teaching and learning are good in the sixth form college. Standards are in line with national averages and show an improving trend. This represents good progress for most students in relation to their earlier attainment at Key Stage 4. The number of competitive choices in the local area means that some of the highest attaining students move elsewhere for post-16 courses.

2008 examination results indicated variations in the college's performance at AS and A level. Students made good progress overall. While outstanding progress was made in some subjects, others were less successful. Leaders have identified reasons for these variations and are taking effective action to remedy this. Projected A-level examination grades for 2009 indicate an

improvement in achievement, including at higher grades, and reviews of students' progress show that most are on target to achieve these.

Retention rates are very good because the college is responsive to students' needs, to the extent that a small number who did not reach their full potential in some AS and A-level subjects in 2008 were supported to remain in the college longer to improve their grades. These students had initially found adjusting to sixth form work particularly challenging. They appreciate the support and guidance provided for them, explaining that this has increased their confidence and ensured that they are now on target to achieve higher grades.

Leadership and management of the college are good. Challenging targets are set and rigorous systems are in place to track students' progress. The curriculum is enhanced by a good range of enrichment opportunities through which students' personal and leadership skills are promoted well: for example, college council membership, voluntary care work, leading form group assemblies, international visits and team-building activities.

Students receive good academic guidance and use their initiative to make use of additional sources of information available on recommended websites. Those who are applying for university places are given effective support and guidance to complete personal statements and make informed choices. Students who do not wish to progress to further education are offered guidance tailored to their individual needs, including mock interviews and informative talks by professionals representing a variety of career paths.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that the assessment of students' learning is of a consistently high standard across the school.
- Improve the consistency of performance in A-level subjects so that, in all subjects, students make good or better progress in the sixth form.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Students' attainment on entry to the school is generally above average, with some fluctuations from year to year. Lesson observations during inspection confirm the school's view that students' achievement is good.

Standards at the end of each Key Stage are above and sometimes well above average. For example, challenging targets were met or exceeded in English, mathematics and science at the end of Key Stage 3 in 2008. Mathematics was particularly successful, with a higher than average proportion of Year 9 students reaching the highest levels. This reflects the upward trend in students' progress in the last three years, although the school recognises that there is scope to further raise attainment at the higher levels in English.

A well above average proportion of Key Stage 4 students gained five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C in 2008, an improvement on previous years. The number of students achieving this with English and mathematics included was also much higher than average. Overall examination results in 2008 indicated that a small minority of students achieved lower than expected grades in some subjects, and this suggested that, in these subjects, their progress was not as good as it should have been.

The school has identified a number of contributory factors and has taken action to remedy these. As a result, the school's tracking of all groups of learners in the current Year 11 shows

that most students are on track to meet targets that represent good achievement from their starting points in Year 7.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Students' personal development is good overall. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. A discussion with students during a history lesson revealed their very good awareness of diversity and equality matters. Students had been researching women's rights issues in America, and displayed an impressive depth of thought about disability, race and contemporary issues.

Registration periods and year group assemblies support personal development effectively. For example, younger students talked about 'the gift of family and friends' in one session. Older students listened intently in an assembly where members of staff gave their personal views about 'family' and then discussed different cultural attitudes, emphasising universal values. Students were interested to hear a Chinese proverb about parenthood and a Hollywood actor's view that 'acting is just a way of making a living, the family is life'.

Students' behaviour and attitudes to learning are good. The number of exclusions has reduced markedly in recent years. Students say that they feel safe, and are confident that, if they have any worries, they can turn to staff for help or use the 'bullying box'. A small minority of students are less considerate of others, for example in some satisfactory lessons when they are less motivated and do not demonstrate the positive attitudes to learning which are more usually seen.

Students adopt positive attitudes towards leading healthy lifestyles and are well informed about the problems that can be caused, for example, by smoking and drugs abuse. A significant number take part in sports activities at lunchtimes and after school. A group of students from Years 9 and 10 won a citizenship award last year for their media project on the abuse of alcohol.

Attendance is good, reflecting much enjoyment of school life. In view of the high standards students reach in mathematics, English and information and communication technology (ICT), and taking into account their good personal development, they are prepared well for their future economic well-being. Students also show much goodwill towards the wider community through their fundraising activities for charities and good causes.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teaching and learning are good overall and a good proportion of lessons is outstanding. Strong features of teaching include excellent relationships with students and presentations that capture and sustain students' interest. Teachers have good subject knowledge which most use creatively to plan stimulating lessons which maintain a strong ethos for learning. Literacy, numeracy and ICT are taught well, ensuring that most students reach high standards in these key skills. An outstanding history lesson contained all these features as the teacher created a real buzz in the classroom through skilful interventions as groups of students researched significant factors resulting in the great plague. A good example of the impact of the school's specialism was also seen in a physics lesson where students had chances to consider how, in the past, important scientists had their theories accepted or rejected by the scientific community of the day.

Students' behaviour in lessons is consistently good, and the vast majority display positive attitudes towards their learning and respect for teachers and each other.

Effective evaluation of teaching and well-targeted professional development has led to significant improvement since the last inspection. Although the proportion of good and better teaching is high, there is scope for further development, especially in the pace of some lessons. Many students are actively involved in their own learning and know how to improve their work because teachers give clear guidance when marking books or reviewing assessments. However, chances are sometimes lost to encourage students to use their own initiative. For example, opportunities for peer assessment are regularly planned but not always fully implemented.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The school provides a good curriculum that is responsive to students' learning needs and career aspirations. Provision is thoughtfully planned and continuously reviewed to reflect fully the requirements of the National Curriculum and the college's humanities specialism. For example, a GCSE humanities course is offered to Year 9 students. More able students in Key Stage 3 are offered a 'condensed' two-year programme in some subjects. Timetabling is adjusted and cross-curricular themes introduced to give maximum effect to teaching and learning. A strong emphasis on ICT is reflected in a rapidly developing virtual learning environment and the school's wireless-enabled conference centre. Well planned provision for personal, social and health education (PSHE) incorporates citizenship and is organised in day-long units to have maximum impact.

Students enjoy a good choice of academic, technological and vocational options, enhanced by links with local employers, schools and colleges. These offer a close match with their preferences and post-16 aspirations. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities receive continuous, carefully managed support, which includes them in all aspects of provision. A few pupils at risk of disaffection benefit from provision tailored to their needs including work related courses. Many pupils benefit from numerous additional activities which complement the timetabled curriculum and offer extra learning opportunities.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

The care, guidance and support provided for students are good with some outstanding features. Teachers work very closely with an extensive number of outside agencies to ensure that the pastoral care, guidance and well-being of all students is of a high standard and meets their specific needs. Students are appreciative of the support provided by the learning mentors and deputy headteachers. The school continues to strive to improve attendance further with recently embedded strategies such as 'first day absence calls', award certificates and assembly presentations. The positive impact of the school's Behaviour Inclusion Centre is illustrated by the fall in exclusions and internal 'isolations'. The small minority of students who display challenging behaviour respond well to courses and counselling, enabling them to accept responsibility for their actions.

A robust transition process allows effective monitoring of all students new to the school and identifies specific needs well. This results in good support for all students including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Work-placements and good careers education and guidance enable students to make informed choices about their futures. Parents value the

quality of guidance and support that is given to their children and the commitment shown by all staff. A typical view expressed in the inspection questionnaire responses was: 'The teachers have always been supportive and informative regarding my child.'

In some lessons assessment is used well to ensure that effective questioning challenges individual learners at different levels. Many teachers make good use of examination grade criteria, for example in a Year 10 media studies lesson, enabling students to assess their own and others' work and know exactly how to improve it.

However, not all teachers are equally effective in using assessment to ensure good questioning techniques that challenge students of all abilities and promote their learning and thinking skills.

All statutory requirements for the safeguarding of students are met.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Leadership and management are good overall. The headteacher and senior team provide excellent leadership and a clear vision for school improvement. They have a good track record of taking action that leads to improvement, for example in teaching and learning, and is resulting in better outcomes for students.

Very good self-evaluation processes provide an accurate view of the school's strengths and areas for development. The judgements of the inspection team closely match those of the school. Senior and middle leaders evaluate the effectiveness of the school's actions to provide clear evidence of their impact on improving outcomes, in students' personal development as well as their academic progress: for example, the reduction of exclusions and the upward trend in examination results. Challenging targets are set for all students. Improvement planning is thorough and action plans are informed by a range of monitoring activities and linked to the professional development needs of staff. Good practice is shared and rigorous faculty reviews ensure that middle leaders are held accountable for their work. Senior leaders are aware that some inconsistency in the quality of middle management remains, although significant improvement has been made in this area since the last inspection.

The school promotes equality of opportunity and community cohesion well. The school's PSHE, citizenship and specialist subjects make a good contribution to these aspects. For example, students make an excellent contribution to their school and local community and have a good understanding of diversity in Britain. All students are able to benefit from a good range of visits, residential trips and the development of international links. The school provides well for able and talented students, while ensuring that all those who find learning difficult achieve to the best of their ability.

Most parents are appreciative of the school's work, particularly of its pastoral support for their children. However, some inspection questionnaires indicated that a minority have mixed feelings about students' behaviour and the quality of communication between home and school. The governors and leadership team arranged a 'Listen to Improve' evening recently to canvass the views of parents, whose suggestions are taken into account. Inspectors found no incidents of poor behaviour in lessons or around the school during the inspection.

The school benefits from a proactive governing body which is well led by the chair of governors. Committee structures and meeting agendas are well focused to make the best use of time for

discussing important issues for school improvement. Governors are well informed and have a 'hands on' approach to the monitoring of school performance.

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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	2	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	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	2	
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	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?	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	

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

Thank you for the help you gave to the team of inspectors who visited your school recently. We enjoyed hearing your views when speaking with many of you in meetings, during lessons and around the school. We found that Culcheth High is a good school with a good sixth form. This confirms that the school and sixth form have improved well since the last inspection three years ago.

Test and examination results at Key Stage 3 and GCSE are well above average, and in line with national averages at A level. This represents good achievement for all groups of students, and the school is continuing on an upward trend. Much of this is due to good leadership, teaching and learning. In fact, a good proportion of lessons are now outstanding! The school provides good care, guidance and support for students, which contributes to the strengths in your personal development. We were happy to see that you make an outstanding contribution to the community, and your spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is also outstanding overall.

The school provides a good curriculum which meets your needs and is enhanced by the humanities specialism. Although a minority of your parents are not convinced that behaviour in the school is good, the inspection team did not see any poor behaviour during lessons. You tell us that you would be comfortable reporting any problems and feel that they would be dealt with. There are only rare occasions when a small minority of students don't display the positive attitudes and enjoyment of learning that is normally seen (if you're one of them, don't let yourselves and your classmates down.)

The school has good plans for further improvement in a number of ways, because everyone wants the school to be outstanding in all areas. Two of the key priorities we have suggested are:

- for all teachers to assess your learning and guide you to improve as thoroughly as those we have seen in very good and excellent lessons
- improve some A-level subjects in the sixth form so that all students make good or better progress.

We wish you well for the future.