

The North School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	118832
Local Authority	Kent
Inspection number	326905
Inspection dates	29–30 April 2009
Reporting inspector	Anne Duffy HMI

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

Type of school	Modern (non-selective)
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	950
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Kevin O'Bryan
Headteacher	Lesley Ellis
Date of previous school inspection	7 June 2006
School address	Essella Road Ashford TN24 8AL
Telephone number	01233 614600
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Age group	11–16
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three additional inspectors.

Description of the school

The North School is a rapidly growing, secondary modern high school in a selective authority. It has been subject to an extensive new build and refurbishment programme funded by the private finance initiative (PFI). The school has specialisms for sport and the rural dimension and is an eco school. It holds a number of local and national awards.

There are significantly more boys than girls. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is below the national average, as is the proportion of students from minority ethnic groups. The number of those for whom English is not a first language is broadly average; of this group the largest and growing number are of Nepalese heritage. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is well above the national average. The school is a lead school for dyslexia and is in the process of becoming a lead school for autistic spectrum disorder. There are few looked-after children. The number of pupils who join or leave partway through each school year is higher than average.

The school caters for 25 Year 12 students who are on the roll of a neighbouring further education college. This provision was not inspected.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

The North School has undergone significant changes since its last inspection. It is good and improving. Much has been achieved since the last inspection and the impact of this can be seen in rising standards. The vision, drive and determination of the headteacher to provide all students with a positive chance in life is evident in many aspects of the school. All students are encouraged to succeed and, as one student said, 'This school gives everyone a second chance.'

Overall, students make good progress. A comprehensive tracking system is in place to identify the progress of both groups and individuals. This, linked with highly aspirational targets, is showing a positive impact on standards. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good progress. The school's specialist status, particularly in terms of sport, has had a positive impact on achievement. This is reflected in the school's emphasis upon the Olympic values: Personal excellence, Respect and friendship, Inspiration, Determination and courage, Equality (PRIDE).

A key factor in the school's continuing rise in standards and achievement is an outstanding curriculum that is tailored well to the individual needs of its students. Extensive enrichment activities enhance the opportunities provided so that students have a range of interesting sporting or creative activities in which to develop their skills and interests.

Teaching and learning are good. The school has taken, and continues to take, effective action to create its own skilled group of staff through key appointments, making use of the Graduate Teacher Programme and providing strong professional development and training. The middle managers are emerging as an increasingly strong element but their input into school improvement is as yet relatively under-developed. Thorough systems are in place for staff to set targets and monitor progress in lessons. Relationships between students and staff are extremely positive. Personal development and well-being are good, positively promoted through the school's inclusive approach to meeting individual needs. The school's focus on personal development ensures that behaviour around the school is good. Care, guidance and support are good and students are increasingly aware that their future depends upon doing well in school. Those who attend regularly say that they enjoy school. However, there are still a few who do not attend regularly enough, and so levels of attendance are not yet good.

Students feel that the new buildings provide a safe and friendly environment in which to learn, in a school of which they are increasingly proud. The school deals well with its mobile population; those students who were new to the school told inspectors that they had settled in well. Students have a good understanding of how to lead safe and healthy lives. Substantial numbers are involved in helping to run activities in school and in the local community and all benefit from opportunities to gain skills which will help them in their future lives.

The school's focus on raising its profile and reputation within its community has been successful. Nevertheless, a small minority of parents feel that more could be done to engage them.

What the school should do to improve further

- Take effective action to further reduce the number of persistent non-attenders.
- Consolidate the role of middle leaders so that they make an increasingly consistent contribution to the improvement of the school.
- Consider and implement ways in which all parents and carers can be fully involved in, and informed about, their children's learning and progress.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

The school is right to judge students' current level of achievement as good. Many students enter the school with levels of attainment that are below or well below those expected for their age. Nevertheless, in the majority of subjects, including English, mathematics and science, students make good progress at both key stages and this has resulted in a significant rise in the percentage of students attaining five or more A* to G grades at GCSE, which is now in line with the national average. The percentage of students achieving five or more A* to C grades that included English and mathematics was well below the national average in 2008, but the trend over the last three years has been an improving one. School data support the view that this figure is set to rise further in 2009 and will be comfortably above 30%. Given the relatively low starting points of many students, this represents good progress.

Girls and boys make similar progress, although the school has correctly identified the slower progress of more able students as an area of challenge. Those for whom English is not a first language reach high standards at the end of Year 11. Students with additional educational needs, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, make good progress as a result of high quality support and personalised provision.

In the past, achievement has been inconsistent across subjects, but the school has identified these inconsistencies and taken appropriate action to address them. The school has set itself challenging whole-school and specialist targets and these have made a significant contribution to securing improved rates of achievement.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Students' moral and social development is good. This is demonstrated by the awareness and consideration which they show to one another and adults, and in their engagement in lessons. Students gain a good understanding of the diverse cultures represented in modern Britain through activities such as the global dimension day, as well as by developing links with the world-wide community through, for example, partnering with a school in Shanghai.

Students' adoption of a healthy lifestyle is demonstrated by the very large proportion of students who take part in sporting and other physical activities. However, the school's attempts to encourage healthy eating are slightly undermined by the catering options on offer, particularly the snacks available at break time.

During the inspection students were seen to behave well and act safely in and around school. Although some parents expressed doubts about behaviour, students themselves say that behaviour has improved and they were not unduly concerned about bullying. They know what to do if any incidents occur, and say that the school will deal with them. Parents generally feel that their children enjoy school. Students' attendance is satisfactory; the school continues to implement measures to improve this with some success but there remains a small number of students who are persistently absent.

Students make a positive contribution to the school and local community, for example raising money through their learning communities for a variety of local and national charities. The specialisms have been at the centre of building local community links. Some students work with primary schools as junior sports leaders; others share knowledge and expertise of the rural

dimension. Students' preparation for their future economic well-being is good. Their development of good teamwork and cooperative skills stands them in good stead for the future. As one parent wrote, 'I feel confident that my son will leave this school in a position to pursue a course in further education and on to the career of his choice.'

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teachers share each lesson's objectives well with the students so they are aware of what is expected of them. Students frequently consolidate this learning at the end of each lesson through a wide variety of short activities, which often add to the enjoyment of the lesson as a whole. Typically, lessons are carefully planned to provide students with a range of activities that are suitably adapted for different ability groups. On the few occasions when this is not done, learning is not as secure for the full ability range. Relationships and behaviour in lessons are good. Students frequently work in pairs or small groups in which they listen well to the other members and respect each other's views. Teachers have good subject knowledge and communicate their enthusiasm for their subjects to their students. They are encouraging, promoting an atmosphere in which students feel they are able to succeed.

Students know how well they are achieving through regular assessments. In the best lessons, for example in English and physical education, teachers support this by frequent written feedback showing exactly what each student needs to do to improve the standard of their work still further. Consequently, students take more responsibility for their own progress.

A strong feature of the school is the deployment of teaching assistants and other support staff. They effectively assist both individual students who have additional educational needs and whole groups of students, so ensuring that all make good progress.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The curriculum is dynamic and constantly under review. It is outstanding in meeting the needs and aspirations of the students. This is particularly the case at Key Stage 4, where the four clearly defined but interlinked pathways have been carefully designed for students of differing levels of ability. This strong emphasis on matching courses to individuals has a positive impact upon raising standards. In addition, the curriculum responds flexibly to meeting the needs of students according to their individual requirements and interests. For example, a range of negotiated, tailor-made classes support students with additional educational needs well and promote their development in key areas.

The aim of all subject areas is for students to learn through experience and so develop not only the relevant skills, but also raise their self-confidence. The enrichment days allow students of different age groups to work together on curriculum-based problem-solving activities. Learning beyond the doors of the classroom enhances students' experience still further, particularly their practical skills. The school farm and a carefully planned and evaluated activities week are examples of this approach, and provide real life learning opportunities that the students enjoy. A wide range of extra-curricular activities broadens students' experiences still further.

The school's subject specialism in sport has made a good start in influencing provision in other subjects. Its contribution to the extra-curricular provision is well established, with a wide range

of sporting activities being enjoyed by a large number of students. The rural dimension, the school's second specialism, also makes a major contribution, often involving members of the local community. It has had a rapid impact in broadening the curriculum, with an emphasis on promoting a sustainable environment.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

The good quality of care, guidance and support from staff is demonstrated in the well-ordered and harmonious community in which students with different abilities and from different backgrounds are valued, and work well together. The school's approach has reduced the number of occasions when students have to be excluded to prevent them from disrupting others' learning, and there are effective systems for reintegrating such students when they return. The large majority of parents say they are pleased with the support their children receive but a small minority would like to be more informed about their children's progress. The school works well with a very wide range of outside agencies to promote students' well-being. Students are guided well towards the next stage in their educational or vocational careers.

Support is particularly strong, both within and beyond the classroom, for the high proportion of children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those at the early stages of learning English. As a result these students are able to make good progress, are fully included in the life of the school and are able to benefit from all the opportunities it offers.

The school has robust systems for safeguarding children, including vetting of staff appointments and ensuring risk assessments are carried out regularly and thoroughly.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Leadership and management have changed since the last inspection. The headteacher was previously a deputy in the school and, following her appointment, some further changes were made to the existing senior leadership team. More recently some key appointments have been made in order to further strengthen the group of middle leaders. The headteacher sets a clear direction for improvement. She is supported by enthusiastic, committed staff, both teaching and non-teaching. Although a small minority expressed some concerns, the majority of parents appreciate the changes that have been brought about and the impact that these have had. One parent expressed her support with, 'Yippee – keep it up, well done!' and another, 'We feel the North School has everything to offer and more.'

In conjunction with the PFI development, resources have been deployed well to significantly improve the learning environment and create a tangible sense of the school as a learning community. Realistic self-evaluation has helped the school to address identified areas for development and, where appropriate, to be both innovative and imaginative. This is most apparent in the rich and dynamic curriculum on offer. The use of rigorous monitoring, coupled with well-focused professional development, has helped the school to address very effectively any areas of relatively weak provision, with consequent positive impact upon raising standards. Accurate and very challenging targets are used extremely well to promote improvement and school leaders have a clear understanding of how well groups and individual students are progressing.

The school's contribution to promoting community cohesion is strong. It plays an active role within its own community and has addressed both international and global dimensions extremely well. The governing body is very supportive of the school. It has recently been reorganised and has not yet fully demonstrated the level of challenge that it is capable of. However, it has worked well with the leadership team and with other partners to steer the school effectively through a significant period of change and development. The school has good 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
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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
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?	2
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	1

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
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	3
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?	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	1
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	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
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**

1 May 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of The North School, Ashford TN24 8NL

Thank you very much for welcoming us to your school. We really enjoyed our visit, and it was good to meet so many of you. I particularly liked hearing some of your music and we all very much enjoyed the delicious lunch that some of you made for us.

Your school is good, with an outstanding curriculum. There is an excellent range of things for you to study and to do inside and outside school. There are good opportunities for you to try different courses and types of work before you leave school. Teachers work hard to make lessons interesting and it was good to see how many of you are making good progress. You are right to be proud of your new buildings and the ideas that you have had for different areas of the school.

Many of you told us that you enjoy school and we could see that you have good relationships with the staff. They take good care of you and guide you well. We could also see that many of you have worked hard to improve your behaviour and this has helped you to learn more. However, a small number of students who should be at school still do not attend often enough.

Your headteacher and the staff have many ideas about how the school can get even better. We have asked them to:

- make sure you all come to school regularly
- make sure that the subject leaders play an even stronger role in improving the school
- find ways to ensure that your parents and carers all feel fully involved in your education.

I hope that you will all try your best and do well in the future.

Yours faithfully

Anne Duffy

Her Majesty's Inspector