

Diss High School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	121184
Local Authority	Norfolk
Inspection number	327425
Inspection date	8 October 2008
Reporting inspector	John Mitcheson HMI

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

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1192
Sixth form	243
Appropriate authority	The local authority
Headteacher	Dr Jan Hunt
Date of previous school inspection	28 September 2005
School address	Walcot Road Diss Norfolk IP22 4DH
Telephone number	01379642424
Fax number	01379642428

Age group	11–18
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one Additional Inspector.

On this one day inspection, inspectors investigated the following issues in detail: the rigour of assessment procedures, particularly in Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form, the quality of teaching and learning, the extent to which the curriculum meets the needs of all learners and the impact of the new headteacher and other leaders and managers in raising achievement and standards. Evidence was gathered from the school's own self-evaluation, national published assessment data and the school's own assessment records. Other evidence included the scrutiny of curriculum and planning documents, observation of the school's work, interviews with staff and pupil and parents' questionnaires. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but HMI found no evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments were not justified, and these have been included in the report.

Description of the school

Diss High School is a larger than average comprehensive school serving the town of Diss and its surrounding areas where the level of socio-economic disadvantage is lower than what is found nationally. The majority of its students are from White British backgrounds and the number eligible for free school meals is below the national average. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is below average although the number with a statement of special educational need is above average. Attainment on entry is average. The school achieved specialist status in humanities in 2005 and holds the Investors in People and healthy schools award.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Diss High School is a good school. Excellent relations between students and their teachers, coupled with an exceptional level of care and support, promotes their personal development and well-being, which is outstanding and creates a positive, friendly environment in which to learn. Students thoroughly enjoy school, attend regularly and behave exceptionally well. They make good progress, attain above average standards and thrive in a wide range of sports, music and arts activities, school visits and community events. Parents are overwhelmingly supportive of the school and local primary headteachers comment favourably about the good partnerships they have with the high school.

Students make outstanding progress in Key Stage 3. Standards in English, mathematics and science are consistently above the national average. In Key Stage 4, students make good progress overall and outstanding progress in mathematics. In 2007, 59% of students attained five A* to C grades including English and mathematics, but the percentage of students attaining five good GCSE pass grades fell from 73% to 62%. This year's provisional results show a similar percentage but significantly, the proportion of students attaining five A* to C grades including English and mathematics has risen to 62%, giving them the skills needed to secure their future economic well-being. GCSE results have fluctuated mainly due to staff recruitment issues and some under-performance in a small number of subjects. A newly appointed headteacher has already taken decisive action to address this by instigating a clear, coherent plan to raise achievement.

Inspectors agree with the school's own view that teaching and learning are good, but also found that lessons ranged from outstanding to satisfactory due to some inconsistencies in how teachers engage students in their learning and assess how well they are doing. Day-to-day assessment procedures are used effectively in some lessons but not in others and data is not used systematically to track students' progress or spot those students at risk of missing the targets set for them. Students achieve well when learning is made enjoyable and when teachers require them to work at a brisk pace and evaluate how well they are doing. Opportunities for group-work and time for students to work independently are limited and not all teachers make effective use of teaching assistants.

Students' personal development and well-being, including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural education, are exceptional. Safeguarding arrangements are robust and students told inspectors that they feel valued, free from bullying and know who to talk to if they have concerns. The student council feels listened to but would like greater involvement in the development of the school. Students act as good citizens, showing consideration for others and make an exceptional contribution to community cohesion. They volunteer to support younger children in primary schools and plan and participate in a week-long event to raise funds for local charities. The school provides adult literacy courses, book fairs and has forged strong international links with schools in Sri Lanka and Malawi.

A good curriculum provides a broad range of courses and enrichment activities that helps all students, including those who find learning difficult, to progress. In Key Stage 3, students have better access to information and communication technology (ICT) and specialist status is being used well to promote their literacy skills and use of language across all subjects. In Key Stage 4, a wide selection of GCSEs meets the needs of most students. All students participate in work experience in Year 10, but opportunities to pursue vocational learning are limited. Students

lead healthy lifestyles but this is compromised slightly by the minimal time allocated to physical education in Key Stage 4.

Parents describe the quality of care and support provided as 'superb' and 'brilliant' and say that the arrangements for the induction of Year 7 students are exceptional. In this inclusive school, all students including the most vulnerable and those that find learning difficult receive excellent one-to-one care from committed staff including a school counsellor that helps them to achieve equally as well. Very few students are excluded and the effective action to encourage all students to attend regularly has led to a significant improvement. Guidance is good rather than outstanding because day-to-day assessment and the use of data to monitor how well students are progressing is too variable. Students are set challenging, attainable targets in most subjects but not in all and systems for leaders and managers to identify accurately those at risk of underachieving lack coherence.

Leadership and management are good. The school is well led by a committed headteacher who has quickly acquired a good understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. She shared her vision for the development of the school with staff and governors and has their full support. A significant number of parents commented favourably about the impact she has had in a short space of time. She is building good capacity to improve further by fully engaging senior and middle leaders in plans for raising achievement and by refocusing professional development and training opportunities for staff. The majority of middle leaders have responded well to the increased accountability and responsibility but in a few subjects, the evaluation of students' and teachers' performance lacks rigour. Most specialist targets were met last year and specialist status has contributed directly to raising standards in English and improving overall GCSE results. Effective governance has overseen the strategic development of the school and ensured good value for money.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form is good. The number of students joining the sixth form is rising and the majority of them remain in Year 13 to continue their studies. Based on their starting points, most students make good progress and attain broadly average standards at advanced level. Progress varies across subjects. For example, it is good in English, geography, and general studies but only satisfactory in psychology. This year, 98% of students achieved at least a pass in their studies. The proportion of students achieving the very highest grades is below average although this improved this year. A good curriculum meets the needs of most students and is enriched by an excellent range of sporting and cultural activities, school visits and community fund-raising events organised through the senior school committee. All students study key skills in ICT, careers education and general studies. Vocational choices are limited but the small proportion of students that do opt for them achieve results that are above the national average.

Students' personal development and well-being are exceptional. They act as role models for the rest of the school. An annual health conference educates them about healthy living and students can discuss personal issues with a counsellor. Teaching and learning are good, some of the best teaching was observed in the sixth form. Students share excellent relations with their teachers and enjoy their studies. They value highly the mutual support and friendship of their peers and feel that this helps them to enjoy and achieve. They receive an exceptional level of care, guidance and support. Weekly monitoring by tutors promotes good attendance and

regular progress checks involving students and their parents help to check whether they are on track to meet the challenging targets set for them. The sixth form is well led and managed.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve teaching and learning by checking that day-to-day assessment procedures are applied consistently and become firmly embedded in all lessons.
- Ensure that assessment data is used systematically by all teachers and managers to monitor the progress of individual students and to support those at risk of under-performing, particularly in Key Stage 4.
- Enhance the curriculum by extending opportunities for students to study vocational awards in Key Stage 4 and through into the sixth form.

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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?	1	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1	
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	1	
The attendance of learners	1	
The behaviour of learners	1	
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	1	

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	1

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	3	
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?	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	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**

9 October 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Diss High School, Diss, Norfolk IP22 4DH

Earlier this week another inspector and I visited your school and found it to be a good school. It is a friendly and caring environment in which to learn. Thank you for allowing us to join you in lessons and to talk with some of you. We also spent some time meeting with your senior teachers, the chair of governors and read many letters from parents. Throughout the inspection, your behaviour was exceptional and you made us feel welcome.

We were impressed with many aspects of the school, particularly the outstanding care and support provided for you by your teachers and other staff. This and your exceptional attendance helps you to achieve well and enjoy the excellent range of after-school clubs, sports teams and school visits. We noted that many of you volunteer to support primary school children, raise funds for local charities and help other schools abroad. Can we say a special thanks to the school council and senior committee who represented your school very well.

Many of you do very well in Key Stage 3 tests and in GCSE examinations. The number that achieved at least five A* to C grades including English and mathematics is impressive. However, to make sure that all of you achieve your very best and make Diss an outstanding school we have asked your senior teachers do three things.

- Involve you in checking how well you are doing against the targets set for you in all of your lessons.
- Ensure that your teachers make systematic use of assessment information about your performance, especially in Key Stage 4.
- Increase your choice of vocational courses in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form.

Your new headteacher and her staff lead and manage your school well. You can help them by asking your school council representative to share your views about the school with senior teachers. Once again, thank you for your help and I wish you all well.

Yours sincerely

John Mitcheson

Her Majesty's Inspector