

# Stowmarket High School

## Inspection report

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Unique Reference Number	124818
Local Authority	Suffolk
Inspection number	328221
Inspection dates	11–12 March 2009
Reporting inspector	David Knighton HMI

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 under pilot arrangements; it was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

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Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	13–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1079
Sixth form	215
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Douglas Chivers
Headteacher	Mr Keith Penn
Date of previous school inspection	8–9 February 2006
School address	Onehouse Road Stowmarket IP14 1QR
Telephone number	01449 613541
Fax number	01449 770436
Email address	enquiries@stowmarkethigh.suffolk.sch.uk

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## Introduction

This pilot inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three Additional Inspectors. The inspectors visited 30 lessons, and held meetings with governors, staff and groups of students. They observed the school's work, and looked at documentation, including policies, departmental reviews and data on students' current progress. They scrutinised the responses in a total of 160 questionnaires returned by parents.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at the following:

- how well teaching approaches meet the needs of all students in a class
- how effective have been the strategies adopted to improve provision and outcomes in mathematics
- how effectively the school's tracking system is being used to inform teaching and to raise students' awareness of their progress
- how students' behaviour is affecting learning, and how effectively and consistently the school's behaviour management strategies are being adopted in lessons
- how well the curriculum meets the needs of the full range of students in Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form.

## Information about the school

This is a secondary school of average size, catering for students aged 13 to 18 from the town of Stowmarket and the surrounding rural area. The large majority of students are from a White British background and almost all have English as their first language. The ability of students on entry to the school is slightly above average. The proportion with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is well below the national average. The school has had specialist technology status since 2001 and became a lead school for humanities in 2006. It collaborates with another local school to provide post-16 courses and some vocational courses in Key Stage 4.

## Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness

3

Capacity for sustained improvement

3

## Main findings

Stowmarket High School provides a satisfactory quality of education which enables all groups of students to make progress in line with national expectations. Good, purposeful teaching, which challenges and holds the interest of students, leads to effective learning and good GCSE results in some subjects. However, more typically, a sound but relatively narrow approach, with planning focused more on teaching than on clear learning objectives, allows students to take too passive a role in their learning. Senior leaders, and increasingly middle managers, recognise the need to improve teaching and learning, and a major development, based on using assessment to support learning has recently begun. The effectiveness of this initiative now needs to be more systematically and rigorously monitored, by classroom observations, to ensure that it has the necessary impact. The school has recognised in its development plan the need to improve achievement in the sixth form, which has been no more than adequate in recent years. Here also, there is a need for more challenge for students and for a consistently strong emphasis on the development of independent learning skills.

Provision in mathematics has been a major area of concern for the school for several years, and the strength of feeling about this amongst parents was very clear in the questionnaires returned to the inspection team. There have been particular problems over long-term absence of staff and the quality of cover provided for their classes. School managers and governors have taken the issue very seriously, but contractual arrangements and difficulties in recruitment in this shortage subject have limited the actions which could be taken to find permanent solutions so far. Appropriate measures have recently been put in place to address some of the most immediate problems in Year 11, and new permanent appointments have been made for the next academic year. However, longer term solutions, requiring a joint approach by the school and the local authority, are still needed to resolve the remaining shortcomings in staffing in the department.

Support, care and guidance are good and, as a consequence, most aspects of students' personal development are also good. A new approach to behaviour management, developed last year with a helpful input from the students themselves on appropriate rewards and sanctions, has led to considerable improvements in behaviour and reductions in exclusions. Behaviour around the school and in most lessons is now good, though some low level disruption occurs when lessons fail to engage the students' interest.

The headteacher and senior leadership team are realistic and honest in their evaluation of the school's strengths and weaknesses. They have identified accurately the key areas for improvement and have put in place appropriate strategies to deal with them, some of which are already showing an impact. Areas for improvement identified in the last inspection, such as attendance and vocational options, have been successfully tackled. These positive factors, when set against the on-going problems in mathematics and the fact that the school has not yet met the requirements on it for promoting community cohesion, mean that the school's capacity for sustained improvement is satisfactory.

The school's specialist status has helped it to enhance teaching and learning through provision of new technology such as interactive whiteboards, and to support the development of technology teaching, which is one of its strengths, in partner middle schools. It has enabled educational and cultural links to be established with schools and organisations in countries such as Japan, Denmark and Iceland, which have helped to expand students' international horizons. Some, but not all, of its specialist school targets were met in 2008.

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

## What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning by systematically and rigorously monitoring, through lesson observations, the effect of initiatives such as making better use of assessment to support learning.
- Raise achievement in the sixth form by providing greater challenge for students, particularly the more able.
- Work with the local authority to improve provision in mathematics by resolving, as a matter of urgency, current staffing problems within the department.
- Ensure that the school meets its duty to promote community cohesion.

## How good is the overall outcome for individuals and groups of pupils?

3
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By age 16, students' attainment is broadly average, but with better than average performance in some areas. Average GCSE points scores have increased for the last three years, and in 2008 clearly exceeded the national figure; in contrast, the proportions of students achieving five or more GCSE grades C or above have remained close to the national average. GCSE performance in English has been well above average, that in mathematics below average. The progress made by students from age 13 to 16 has varied quite considerably over the last few years, but has

been satisfactory overall, and satisfactory for all groups of students, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Progress has been markedly better in English than in mathematics. Under-performance in mathematics contributed to the lower than expected proportion of students achieving five or more higher grade passes, including English and mathematics, in 2008.

Students' personal development is good. The strong personal, social and health education programme, which students enjoy, helps them to understand how to ensure their own safety, and they adopt safe behaviour in classrooms and around the buildings. They are confident that if bullying occurs it will be dealt with firmly. Students generally understand the factors that contribute to a healthy lifestyle and have, for example, through the school council removed unhealthy snacks from vending machines. There is a good level of involvement in sporting activities, including after school clubs and teams. Students have contributed to the school community by initiatives to improve the outside areas of the school. They are readily involved in fund-raising for charitable activities, and groups such as the sports leaders work with pupils in local primary schools. Good careers guidance and high quality enterprise activities help to develop skills and knowledge relevant to the workplace. The proportion of young people who fail to move into education, training or employment at age 16 is low. Attendance improved significantly in the last academic year to well above the national average. Awareness of spiritual, moral and cultural issues is developed well through a range of school activities, including assemblies. Students generally demonstrate good social skills.

*These are the grades for pupils' outcomes*

Pupils' attainment <sup>1</sup>	3
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	3
The quality of learning for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and their progress	3
How well do pupils achieve and enjoy their learning?	3
To what extent do pupils feel safe?	2
How well do pupils behave?	3
To what extent do pupils adopt healthy lifestyles?	2
To what extent do pupils contribute to the school and wider community?	2
Pupils' attendance	2
How well do pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being?	2
What is the extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development?	2

## The quality of the school's work

Teaching and learning observed by inspectors ranged from outstanding to inadequate. It was predominantly satisfactory, but with sufficient good work to

<sup>1</sup> Grades for attainment are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; 4 is low

provide the basis for spreading effective practice. Teachers' subject knowledge is good and they plan lessons carefully. In the better lessons, teachers have high expectations and challenge students through varied, well-focused activities and tasks; students are able to work effectively independently and co-operatively, they are aware of their targets and know how well they are doing. In lessons that are no more than satisfactory, students are not actively enough involved in their learning, the pace of work is sometimes slow and tasks are not well matched to the differing needs of the students. The quality of marking is variable, and not all students are clear about what they need to do to improve their work. Regular tracking of students' progress is taking place on a termly basis, with review days being held to involve parents. Most students are aware of their targets, but do not always know how their work currently relates to them.

The main school curriculum is broad and balanced. Links with a neighbouring school, and with local further education colleges and training providers, have helped to extend the options available in Key Stage 4, and enable students to follow vocational courses and young apprenticeship programmes. Further developments are in place for the introduction of Diploma courses from September 2009. Whilst most of the required elements of the programmes of study for ICT and citizenship in Key Stage 4 are covered, some of the cross-curricular mapping across other subjects is incomplete or unrepresentative of what actually happens, so that the school cannot be confident of full coverage.

Students are well cared for and supported. Vulnerable students are particularly well provided for, and this is reflected in the progress and increasing confidence of several looked after refugee children. Effective guidance is provided for students on transferring from middle schools and in making options choices at the end of Year 9. Careers advice and guidance are good in helping students make post-16 choices. The inclusion centre is successful in supporting students at risk of disengagement from education and re-integrating those returning to school after extended absence. A Community Information Point in the school gives students access to comprehensive specialist guidance and support from counsellors and health professionals.

*These are the grades for the quality of provision*

High quality teaching and purposeful learning	3
Effective assessment	3
An appropriate curriculum which meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, provision through partnership with other organisations	3
Support, guidance and care	2

## How effective are leadership and management?

Senior leaders provide clear direction for the school. Ambitious plans, to which staff at all levels have contributed, have been produced to develop students' learning and personal skills in a more coherent and systematic way. They have been suitably translated into an action plan, which relates to almost all aspects of the school's work and is currently being implemented. Middle managers are being encouraged to take

an increasing role in driving forward whole school initiatives, increasing their effectiveness and exploiting their skills. The recent successful initiative to improve behaviour has been well monitored and evaluated, but monitoring of teaching and learning is less thorough. The satisfactory achievement of all students, the wide range of provision to meet all needs in the main school, and the confidence felt by groups of students provide evidence of the school's successful approach to equal opportunities and its ability to tackle discrimination. All necessary safeguarding procedures are in place. Risk assessments are carried out appropriately in most areas. However, the school needs to re-assess its current arrangements for allowing students out of school at lunchtimes, so that it can be confident that it is fulfilling its duty of care in this respect. Governors know the school well, and provide effective support and challenge; they understand key issues and priorities, and take the necessary action to deal with them. However, they and the school's leadership team have not yet appreciated the full extent of their duties to promote community cohesion, and measures are currently inadequate. Through its regular consultation meetings the school generally keeps parents well informed about students' progress, and seeks their views through independently organised parental surveys. Most areas of the school are suitably resourced. The building of a new skills centre on the school site, which is currently underway, will provide good local facilities for the new Diplomas, as part of the school's commitment to its local 14-19 partnership.

*These are the grades for leadership and management*

Communicating ambition and driving improvement	3
Promoting equality of opportunity and tackling discrimination	2
Ensuring that safeguarding procedures are effective	3
Ensuring that the governing body provides effective challenge and support so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities are met	3
Promoting the school's relationship with parents and carers, including their involvement in decision-making about matters relating to learning and well-being	3
Developing partnerships with other providers, organisations and services	2
Ensuring the school contributes to community cohesion	4
Deploying resources to achieve value for money	3

## Sixth form

AS and A level results were at or below national averages in 2008, as they have been for the last few years. The proportions of grades A and B in particular have been low. In relation to students' starting points, these results have consistently represented no more than satisfactory progress for the majority of students. Sixth formers provide good role models for younger students, and they contribute to the life of the school and the wider community through mentoring arrangements, sports activities and leadership of the school council. The quality of their learning is satisfactory overall, with some good examples of the sort of independence and intellectual challenge needed for success on advanced level courses and as preparation for higher



education; this good practice needs to be spread across all sixth form courses. Through the collaborative arrangements with a neighbouring high school, students have access to a satisfactory range of advanced level courses. There is currently no lower level sixth form provision for students whose attainment at 16 is insufficient for advanced level study, though some level 2 courses are planned for the next academic year. Most students complete their courses successfully, and the majority progress to higher education.

Outcomes for students in the sixth form	3
The quality of provision in the sixth form	3
Leadership and management of the sixth form	3
The overall effectiveness of the sixth form	3

## Views of parents and carers

Questionnaire responses were received from the parents of 18% of students in the school. Forty per cent of these responses were entirely positive in their views of the school, but well over half expressed some concerns about one or more aspects of the school. The most urgent and strongly expressed concern, registered by nearly a third of parents, was about the quality of mathematics teaching and its impact on their childrens' achievement. Inspectors agreed with this level of concern. The other significant issue raised, though not on the same scale, was about the school's supervision arrangements at lunchtimes.

## What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. In 2007-8, 15% of schools were judged to be outstanding.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well. In 2007-8, 49% of schools were judged good.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils. In 2007-8, 32% of schools were judged satisfactory.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves. In 2007-8, 5% of schools were judged inadequate.

## Common terminology used by inspectors

Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.
Achievement:	an overall measure of the pupils' success in their academic learning. The term combines attainment and progress. Pupils might make good progress, for example, but if their attainment remains low, inspectors may judge that their achievement is only satisfactory.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.



13 March 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Stowmarket High School, Stowmarket, IP14 1QR

My colleagues and I enjoyed meeting many of you, in lessons and discussion groups, during the recent inspection of your school. It was very helpful to hear your views and to be able to look at your work.

We think that Stowmarket High is a satisfactory school, in which you are well supported and cared for. Most of you make satisfactory progress during your time in school, and your examination results are close to national norms. We think that you could achieve more if you took a more active part in many lessons, and we have asked the headteacher and staff to check more closely that their plans to help you do this are working. We recognise the particular problems that there have been in mathematics, and we have emphasised the need for the school and the local authority to work together to sort out staffing difficulties in the department.

Whilst achievement in the sixth form is satisfactory, we think that it should be better than this. The key to improvement is to provide more challenge for sixth form students, and to develop the independent learning skills which will also be important for those of you who move on to higher education.

The school helps you to develop a wide range of personal and social skills, and the impressive links established with other countries, such as Japan and Denmark, give you a first hand understanding of international issues. You have fewer opportunities to learn about and understand some of the more diverse cultures within Britain; this is part of the responsibility which the school now has to promote community cohesion, and I hope that you, possibly through the school council, will be able to contribute to its development.

With best wishes for the future,

David Knighton  
Her Majesty's Inspector

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