

Towers School and Sixth Form Centre

Faversham Road, Ashford, Kent, TN24 9AL

Inspection dates 26–27 September 2012

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Satisfactory	3
	This inspection:	Requires improvement	3
Achievement of pupils		Requires improvement	3
Quality of teaching		Requires improvement	3
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Requires improvement	3
Leadership and management		Good	2

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement. It is not good because

- The sixth form requires improvement because in the past students have typically underachieved in most academic subjects.
- Some students do not yet read well enough to make rapid progress in English or to tackle advanced level work in the sixth form; too few teachers focus on improving students' reading and writing.
- The number of lessons where teaching requires improvement has fallen but not enough for all students to make rapid and sustained progress.
- Learning is too slow in the few lessons where teachers do not control behaviour firmly.
- Some students do not attend school regularly enough.

The school has the following strengths

- All staff, inspired by senior leaders, go the extra mile to support students whatever their learning and personal needs.
- Students in the main school are generally taught well and make at least good progress in mathematics; GCSE results have gone up in the last three years. Standards are average or better in practically all vocational subjects.
- The school helps most sixth form students to proceed to university, training or employment.
- Backed by the governors and senior and middle managers, the headteacher has successfully introduced several significant initiatives which have already improved teaching, some of which is outstanding, and made students' progress faster, particularly in the sixth form.
- Students feel very safe at school and generally behave sensibly; safeguarding procedures are fully in place.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 60 teachers in half lessons (some with members of the senior leadership team), including sessions in the inclusion room and off-site centre. They attended an assembly and advisory (tutor) group sessions.
- Inspectors held meetings with the headteacher, many members of the senior leadership team, some heads of department, the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Governing Body, a representative of the local authority and several groups of students.
- The documents inspectors examined included ones related to attendance, behaviour incidents, development plans, lesson observations, monitoring procedures and data on standards and progress.
- Inspectors considered the views of 13 parents who responded to Parent View. Parental surveys undertaken by the school were also taken into account. Inspectors also considered the views of over 100 staff-completed questionnaires.

Inspection team

Clare Gillies, Lead inspector	Additional inspector
Roger Fenwick	Additional inspector
Marion Hobbs	Additional inspector
Niel McLeod	Additional inspector
Stephen Williams	Additional inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- Towers School and Sixth Form Centre is much larger than the average-sized secondary school.
- It is a non-selective school in an area where at least one in four pupils go to selective schools.
- Two thirds of students are White British. Other students represent several minority ethnic groups, the largest being those from other White backgrounds; very few speak English as an additional language.
- The proportion of students supported through school action, about 16%, is above average. The proportion of students supported through school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs, about 8%, is average.
- An average proportion of students is known to be eligible for the pupil premium.
- The school has a relatively higher than average proportion of students whose circumstances make them potentially vulnerable.
- The school is a specialist business and enterprise college and has specialist status for applied learning.
- The school offers full extended school services, many of which are used by the local community. Off-site provision is located in Norwood Hall. Onsite childcare provision is not managed by the school's governing body.
- The school meets the current government floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress.
- To share good practice, the school is informally linked with a local grammar school and a non-selective school in Hythe.
- The school has football and rugby academies.
- The school converted to academy status in April 2011.
- The headteacher has been in post for a year.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the pace of students' learning and progress by:
 - capitalising on effective monitoring of teaching to further increase the proportion of lessons where teaching is outstanding or good by the end of the academic year
 - increasing the sharing of the outstanding practice that already exists in the school
 - training teachers in how to develop students' literacy skills more fully
 - ensuring consistency in the ways in which teachers manage behaviour firmly and do not allow chatter when they are talking
 - building on the good practice already in the school to ensure that all lessons get off to a flying start and a good pace is kept up
 - extending plans already in place to further improve attendance and punctuality, particularly in the sixth form.
- Raise students' levels of attainment by:
 - tackling underachievement in English and other weaker GCSE and sixth form subjects so that all students make at least the expected progress by the end of the academic year
 - introducing stronger guidance and preparation for the demands of sixth form work before Year 12 students start academic courses
 - assessing students' reading ages in all years so that even those who are slightly below the expected standard can get extra help
 - carrying out the plans now in place to get teachers, in all years and subjects, to contribute to improving students' reading and writing and to generating a culture of reading widely and for pleasure.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils

requires improvement

- Students who enter the school in Year 7 and attend regularly achieve good GCSE results. The school does all it can for students with poor attendance and late entrants, several of whom are from other White backgrounds, but few of them attain many GCSE passes or good grades in the sixth form.
- In Years 7 to 11, standards are average or better in mathematics, science, foreign languages, religious education, sociology and physical education. Partly explained by staffing issues, which have been resolved, attainment and progress have been particularly low in geography, history and child development.
- Students are successful in practically all vocational courses in all years. There were no failures in the sixth form in 2012 and about one quarter of the students attained distinctions.
- In contrast, those taking academic subjects find the work difficult and overall they have made too little progress, particularly in Year 12. By the end of Year 13 the pass rate is higher but there are few high grades at A level. With sharper monitoring, students are now making better progress.
- One third or more of the students do not read as well as they should for their age, but plans to use an intensive reading scheme to tackle this problem are being implemented. Students' writing is better than their reading. The recent, successful focus on getting students to discuss their work confidently and clearly is improving their understanding and speaking.
- The small number of students from ethnic minority backgrounds makes at least the same progress as others and some attain good results at GCSE and in the sixth form. The gap between students eligible for the pupil premium and others is less than that seen nationally, and narrowing.
- Disabled students and those with special educational needs, and low attainers, generally make good progress, but some middle and higher attainers do not. The school is fully aware that this needs to be tackled fast. Many students receiving basic learning support do better than predicted, whilst some with higher levels of need underachieve.

The quality of teaching

requires improvement

- Underpinning lessons are the respectful relationships students have with teachers and most students' enthusiasm to learn and succeed.
- Teachers now focus on improving the percentage of high grades as well as making sure that students attain a C grade at GCSE. They regularly check that students know how well they are doing and what their targets are. They tell them what is needed for particular levels or grades. Students find this helpful and it motivates them to try hard.
- The quality of written comments in students' books is variable, although most teachers mark work reasonably well. They do not always check that students have absorbed and responded to their comments.
- Following effective training, teachers now regularly get students to discuss work together, and this is definitely improving students' knowledge and understanding at the same time as their speaking. It also gives teachers time to check whether students are doing well enough and to intervene where necessary. Some do this better than others.
- Excellent, but rare, practice exists in improving students' reading and writing. Examples include insistence on the use of the correct vocabulary in science or using mini whiteboards in physical education to explore words such as 'outwitted'.
- Features that the growing profile of most successful lessons have in common include:
 - teachers' evident and impressive subject knowledge and enthusiasm, and their

- demands for high standards
- a brisk start and rapid pace throughout (sixth form law lessons proceed at a breath-taking speed)
- a mixture of activities to keep all students motivated and effective use of resources such as computers and the internet
- subtle and very effective calming techniques when students' behaviour is restless
- skilful questioning to explore students' understanding and astute intervention when needed
- making work relevant to real life.
- In the lessons requiring improvement, some elements of the above are missing, reflected in less attentive and/or passive students and slower learning and progress.
- Teaching in the inclusion room and off-site facility is very effective as it blends improving students' behaviour with meeting their learning needs. Other adults in lessons give helpful guidance to students who need assistance to learn or behave sensibly.

The behaviour and safety of pupils

require improvement

- Students feel safe and are happy at school. The mixed-age advisory (tutor) groups help Year 7 students to settle in quickly and foster friendships, support and a strong community spirit. The majority of students are ambitious and keen to study.
- Students are tolerant of different beliefs and lifestyles. They are confident that leaders deal with bullying and racist incidents firmly on the rare occasions they happen.
- Students are fully aware of controversial issues, such as homophobia or different family structures, and observe that teachers always tackle insensitive name calling.
- It is good that the school regularly revises its personal education programme to address current concerns such as about cyber bullying or health and safety. In advisory time, students discuss topical news items, for example racism in football and other moral topics.
- Students generally behave sensibly, are polite and considerate and move around the large site calmly; but the distance between buildings means that lessons often start late.
- The majority of teachers deliver lessons which encourage calm learning, but there are students who need teachers to be more vigilant in helping them to concentrate, especially when they are working together. A few are prone to interrupt the flow of lessons and distract teachers and other students' attention too much.
- Despite considerable improvements, attendance is still an issue, especially for those whose attendance falls below 85%.
- The good quality support for students with disabilities, those with behavioural and emotional needs, looked after children and any whose circumstances makes them potentially vulnerable, reflects the school's successful focus on helping all students to succeed.

The leadership and management

are good

- In the past year the headteacher has introduced very effective, analytical systems to monitor how well students are doing. This is resulting in them making better progress than in the past. The extra teaching for those who are not keeping up is sharper and is having a positive impact on achievement.
- The headteacher insists that all senior and middle leaders are responsible for students' achievement, already reflected in subjects such as mathematics and science where results have improved rapidly.
- Senior leaders now carry out rigorous checks that look at how well teachers are helping students to learn. The high quality training for teachers on how to get students talking about their work, for example, is most effective. The school is well respected as a trainee teacher institution.

- The headteacher uses performance management to address weak teaching which he confronts without hesitation. He has made some astute appointments to the middle and senior leadership teams and their work is already evident in better teaching and learning, especially in the sixth form. Improved systems and procedures in the sixth form are making a significant difference in all aspects of provision. There is heightened awareness of students' literacy needs among all staff, with positive effects on learning and progress.
- Senior leaders have already highlighted the need to improve reading in all years and achievement in sixth form academic courses. Their analysis of the school's strengths and areas requiring improvement is accurate and their action plans are robust. They are introducing plans to measure the effectiveness of well-considered pupil premium spending.
- The headteacher has continued the school's inclusive approach and determination to eliminate discrimination. Students from other schools are welcomed, and all the school's students can stay on into the sixth form to follow courses which match their abilities and career paths. Students involved with the football and rugby academies receive a very good balance of teaching for academic and sporting success.
- Students have equal opportunities to succeed because the curriculum matches their interests and abilities, and local job opportunities. The number of students going to university is rising and many find other, worthwhile career routes.
- The majority of vocational courses, such as construction or hospitality and catering, are very successful because they have a high status and are taught by experienced and skilful practitioners in well-equipped facilities.
- Reflecting its specialisms, the school has developed useful links with businesses and industry so students are well prepared for their working lives. Enterprise days take place regularly, the performing arts and sports have a high profile and there are many external speakers, visits and trips for all year groups. All these strengthen students' social skills and their awareness of different cultures.
- Parents' responses to the school's questionnaires are very positive. Staff morale is high. Several teachers referred to how much they enjoy working at the school and how they appreciate the training they receive.
- The local authority provides good support for the school.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - has been galvanised into action by the converting to academy status and appointing a new headteacher. It is increasingly effective in questioning the school's direction and achievement
 - governors receive detailed information from the headteacher before meetings. Recently organised training has helped their interpretation and evaluation of performance data
 - individual governors now monitor the progress of small groups of students who have particular needs; this is good practice
 - ensures that all statutory requirements with regard to safeguarding are met.

What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>

School details

Unique reference number	136583
Local authority	Kent
Inspection number	406647

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

Type of school	Academy converter
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1437
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	355
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Rita Hawes
Headteacher	Graham Ralph
Date of previous school inspection	18–19 May 2011
Telephone number	01233 634171
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