

The Axe Valley Community College

Chard Street, Axminster, Devon, AX13 5EA

Inspection dates 18–19 April 2013

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school.

- This is a good and improving school. The headteacher has high expectations of staff and students. He has built a team which is committed to improving the quality of teaching and increasing the rates of progress made by students.
- Students achieve well. From below average starting points, students make good progress, so that by the end of Year 11, they reach standards which are average in English and above average in mathematics.
- Teaching is often good and consistently good or better when students are taught in small groups. Teachers know their subjects well. Students who fall behind with their work are well supported to catch up.
- Students at risk of not doing well make good progress. This is because they receive extra support tailored to their needs.
- Students behave well and feel safe in lessons and around the school. They have good attitudes to learning and get on well together.
- Parents and carers have a strong belief in the ability of the school to teach and look after their children well.
- Members of the governing body are well informed about the school's work and consistently challenge the school to raise its expectations of students and staff.
- The sixth form is good. Students do well in their examinations and increasing numbers go on to university.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- The work set by teachers does not always stretch more-able students. This means that they do not all make as much progress as they should.
- Not enough teaching is outstanding and some requires improvement.
- Recent efforts to improve reading and writing have not yet raised achievement in all subjects.
- Students do not receive consistent advice about how to improve their work.
- Leaders and managers have not made enough use of the good practice that already exists to improve the teaching of others.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 45 lessons, of which nine were joint observations with senior leaders. In addition, the inspection team made a number of other short visits to lessons as well as observing areas around the school at break and lunchtime.
- Inspectors also looked at examples of students' work and case studies. The quality of marking and written feedback was noted.
- Meetings were held with three groups of students, five members of the governing body, including the Chair, and senior and middle managers.
- Inspectors took account of the 66 responses to the online questionnaire (Parent View), one letter from a parent, and 15 staff questionnaire responses.
- Inspectors observed the school's work, and looked at a number of documents, including the school's self-evaluation and development plan, the school's own data on students' current progress, monitoring documentation, records relating to behaviour and attendance, and documents relating to safeguarding.

Inspection team

John Mallone, Lead inspector	Additional inspector
Raye Alison-Smith	Additional inspector
Justine Hocking	Additional inspector
Kevin Wright	Additional inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The Axe Valley Community College is a smaller-than-average-sized community secondary school.
- Most students are White British. The number of students from a minority ethnic background is small and few speak English as an additional language.
- The proportion of disabled students, and those who have special educational needs and are supported through school action is above average. The proportion of students supported at school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is below average.
- The proportion of students eligible for the pupil premium, which provides additional funding for students known to be eligible for free school meals, those from service families or those looked after by the local authority, is below the national average. In this school, it applies only to those eligible for free school meals.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for students' attainment and progress by the end of Key Stage 4.
- The school has very few students who receive alternative education, but uses the services of the Train4All Construction Academy in Chard, Exeter College and Bicton College in Budleigh Salterton.
- A number of new staff have been appointed since the last inspection.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Increase the proportion of good and outstanding teaching and further accelerate students' progress in all classes by:
 - making more consistent use of information from assessments to set work at the right level, especially for the most able
 - improving reading, writing, speaking and listening skills by providing more opportunities to develop these skills in all subjects
 - providing opportunities for teachers to share examples of good marking
 - giving students clear guidance through regular marking so they know how to improve their work and ensuring that they have the opportunity to make those improvements.
- Improve the impact of leadership and management by:
 - extending the use of existing good practice to help others to improve their teaching
 - making checks on teachers' marking to ensure it occurs more regularly and is of a high standard
 - providing training for teachers in marking to a consistently high standard and in being able to check on the quality of each other's marking.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils is good

- Students join in Year 7 with attainment which is below average and achieve broadly average GCSE results in Year 11. In 2012, the proportion of students gaining five A* to C grades at GCSE including English and mathematics fell, especially in English, but remained broadly in line with the national average.
- The reduction in A* to C grades in English was partly due to the number of middle-ability students, mainly boys, failing to obtain a C grade in the examination. Teaching has improved in English and more students are now making good or better progress. GCSE results in mathematics are consistently above average. Progress is rapid and teaching is well matched to students' individual needs. Students are entered early for GCSE examinations in mathematics, a subject in which they achieve highly.
- Although attainment at GCSE remains average overall, performance varies between different subjects. The school has accurately identified subjects where achievement is weaker and has taken steps to improve students' progress and attainment. As a result, students in Year 11 are now achieving better in a number of subjects, notably science and English.
- Boys do not perform as well as girls at GCSE. Last year, this gap widened, especially in English. A new reading programme was introduced three years ago. This has led to huge increases in the number of books being borrowed from the library. There is evidence that boys' achievement in English is now much closer to that of girls.
- In 2012, students achieved below-average results in the English Baccalaureate subjects, especially in science and for higher-ability students.
- Students join the sixth form with broadly average attainment, but with fewer high attainers than average. They make good progress at AS and A level, and achieve average results. The considerable autonomy given to students in the sixth form, coupled with the school's ambitious programme to raise expectations, has led to a doubling of the numbers of students applying for university.
- The gap in attainment between students receiving pupil premium and others has widened from 2011 to 2012 in English, but narrowed in mathematics. In English, these students were a quarter grade behind their classmates in 2011. By 2012, this gap had widened to half a grade. In mathematics, the gap has narrowed to about a quarter grade and these students achieved three quarters of a grade higher in mathematics than in English. This gap has almost disappeared in mathematics but remains the same in English for those students in the current Year 11.
- Support for weaker readers in Year 7 means that they are reading more often than they were and are now better at recognising letters and the sounds they make, and have less difficulty with some combinations of letters and in breaking down words to sound them out.
- The school provides extra support for disabled students and those who have special educational needs. They make good progress because their work is broken down into sufficiently small steps, with further targets identified and reviewed regularly. The few students from minority ethnic backgrounds and those speak English as an additional language also make good progress. The school successfully ensures students have equal opportunities.
- The small numbers of students who study courses with an alternative provider achieve well and their progress is closely monitored. In 2012, no students were not in education, employment or training when they left Year 11. This is due to the guidance that they receive and the appropriate courses that they study.
- The quality of the artwork on display around the school is high and enhances the environment, especially in the sixth form centre. School assemblies have a strong moral character and contribute significantly to the school's ethos.

The quality of teaching is good

- Where teaching is good or better, teachers move learning forward at a fast pace and use a variety of activities to engage students' interest and plan work that matches individuals' needs and abilities. Teachers' strong subject knowledge helps to create lessons which students enjoy, and their calm approach to behaviour management means that students remain on task.
- Teachers have good subject knowledge and plan lessons so that they engage and maintain the students' interests. When teachers do not plan lessons with individual students' targets and current achievement in mind, more-able students, in particular, do not make enough progress. In the sixth form, work is more closely tailored to individual needs and students make good progress.
- Teachers use questioning effectively to check students' understanding. When questions are tailored to individuals' needs, progress is quicker. When teachers' questions are less probing and not targeted at individuals' needs, progress is slower, especially for more-able students.
- The quality of marking varies between subjects and teachers. The best marking clearly identifies what students have done well and what they need to do to improve. They are not always given the opportunity to make the required improvements. In some cases, marking is not done on a regular basis. The quality of marking is particularly variable in Years 7 to 9.
- The school has correctly identified that levels of reading, writing, speaking and listening need to improve across all subjects and it has begun to address this. There has recently been training for all teachers on improving writing, but it is too soon to assess its impact.
- In the smaller groups found in the sixth form, teachers know their students well and tailor work more consistently to their individual needs and abilities. Strong subject knowledge, coupled with clear advice and guidance on how to improve, with a particular focus on writing, mean that students make better progress than in the main school.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are good

- Behaviour around the school is good, including at lunchtime and break. Students consistently show respect towards one another. The prefect system is a strength of the school.
- More-vulnerable students, disabled students and those who have special educational needs are well supported. They socialise and study with other students.
- Bullying is uncommon, incidents of racist and homophobic bullying are very rare and the school deals with these effectively. Students know how to identify bullying and where to turn for support when it occurs. The school has worked to protect students when they are online and to give them ways of dealing with cyber-bullying.
- The number of exclusions is low, in part due to the close monitoring and support of students whose behaviour puts them at risk of exclusion.
- Attendance is above average and improving, and better than similar schools overall. Disadvantaged groups have much better attendance than in other schools. There is very little persistent absence.
- The school encourages students to take on responsibilities, for example by becoming prefects, organising fund-raising activities for charity and taking part in challenges such as the 10 Tors trek.

The leadership and management are good

- Senior leaders have an accurate understanding of many of the school's strengths and weaknesses and have clear plans to address areas of concern. They are committed to raising standards and work closely with department leaders to bring this about. They have introduced a common format for monitoring the progress of all students, with a special emphasis on the more vulnerable.

Progress in many subjects has improved as a result.

- Recent staff appointees have driven welcome changes, especially in the sixth form, and begun to raise awareness of the importance of improving standards of literacy in all subjects. Strong leadership has led to a rise in achievement in English. The subject support programme has brought about significant improvements in some subjects, notably in science.
 - The appointment of an assistant head of sixth form has led to closer monitoring of student progress, an increased focus on independent learning skills, improved teaching and faster progress for students.
 - The school's systems for analysing and monitoring students' progress are robust. A recent move to half-termly reporting aims to ensure that teachers plan and deliver lessons that are matched to students' different abilities and which bring about faster progress.
 - There are new systems for managing the performance of teachers and to give pay rises when these are justified. Teachers report that these systems contribute to improving their professional development by clearly linking targets to the national Teachers' Standards.
 - Although assessment has been the subject of a whole-school focus, checks on the quality of marking by senior and department leaders has not increased its consistency. Teachers have not received enough training or had opportunities to work together to share the best examples of marking.
 - Although there is a thorough process of lesson observations, the use of good and outstanding practice to help improve the performance of other teachers has not raised the standard of teaching enough.
 - Students have good opportunities to engage in musical and sporting activities outside the normal school day, including taking part in several musical ensembles and a wide variety of team and individual sports.
 - The school has used the pupil premium to improve achievement in English and mathematics by providing one-to-one sessions with specialist teachers and extra revision. There are good systems for monitoring students' progress.
 - This year, the local authority has supported the school by undertaking joint lesson observations with senior leaders. The local authority has also worked to improve subject leadership in science.
 - The school's arrangements for safeguarding students meet all current regulatory requirements.
 - **The governance of the school:**
 - Governors take a keen interest in and have a good understanding of the way the school works. They work closely with the senior and department leaders and meet with them regularly so that they know about the quality of teaching. Governors know how well students are achieving, including those in receipt of the pupil premium, and consistently challenge senior leaders to improve the rate of progress. Governors have a good understanding of the new system for managing teachers' performance and teachers' pay. They closely monitor the school's budget, including the spending of money from the pupil premium, and are active in seeking ways to solve problems. All governors receive regular training.
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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	113497
Local authority	Devon
Inspection number	412776

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

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Maintained
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	833
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	111
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Graham Watts
Headteacher	Martin Smith
Date of previous school inspection	July 2010
Telephone number	01297 32146
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