

Towers School and Sixth Form Centre

Faversham Road, Kennington, Ashford, Kent TN24 9AL

Inspection dates

13–14 October 2016

Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Requires improvement
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Requires improvement
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Requires improvement
16 to 19 study programmes	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement

- Leaders' initiatives to improve teaching and learning have not yet had time to have a consistent impact on pupils' progress.
- Teaching, learning and assessment are too variable across the school to ensure consistently good progress for all pupils in all subjects.
- Leaders have not successfully improved standards in mathematics since the last inspection.
- Progress for key groups, such as disadvantaged pupils and boys, is not improving quickly enough.
- The most able pupils do not always receive sufficient stretch and challenge in lessons, so they finish work early or it is too easy for them.
- Leaders and governors do not always accurately evaluate progress of key groups.
- Pupils, in particular boys, do not always take care with the presentation of their work.

The school has the following strengths

- The principal has a very clear, ambitious vision for the school that is shared by all of the school community. All staff are on board to improve the school.
- Pupils, parents and staff all comment positively about the improvements made since the last inspection, especially regarding the pastoral care and behaviour of the pupils.
- Parents are overwhelmingly positive about the school and the school's roll is increasing.
- Provisional GCSE results in 2016 show an overall improvement following a drop in 2015.
- Pupils are proud to belong to their school. Leaders have high expectations of behaviour. Pupils have very positive attitudes to learning.
- The school provides good standards of care for pupils.
- From their starting points, pupils make good progress in English. This is as a result of improved teaching.
- Leaders have successfully reorganised the sixth form curriculum and raised expectations. The school's information shows that standards have improved in 2016.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by:
 - spreading the effective teaching in English to other subjects
 - ensuring that the new assessment policy is applied consistently
 - making sure that teachers accelerate the progress of disadvantaged pupils (including the most able disadvantaged pupils) and boys.
- Improve leadership by setting out action plans with clear targets to show what will be achieved at key points, to enable leaders and governors to evaluate the impact of these actions.
- Improve standards and accelerate progress in mathematics by:
 - improving the consistency of teaching across the mathematics department
 - ensuring that the most able pupils are stretched and challenged.

An external review of the school's use of pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Requires improvement

- Leaders have not embedded initiatives to improve teaching, learning and assessment so that all pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, the most able pupils and boys, demonstrate strong progress across the curriculum. Leaders have not ensured that teachers have universally adopted the new assessment policy to improve how pupils respond to feedback. As a result, the quality of teaching is variable.
- In particular, leaders have not been able to sufficiently improve pupils' outcomes in mathematics, a core subject, which have barely improved since the last inspection.
- Leaders have not monitored the impact of pupil premium funding effectively to reduce differences, across the school, between eligible pupils and others. The progress of disadvantaged pupils is not as fast as that of others.
- Leaders have not measured the impact of their plans precisely enough against clear criteria so that they can accelerate the progress of particular groups of pupils that are lagging behind others, such as disadvantaged pupils and boys.
- Leaders at all levels are beginning to raise overall standards in the school; however, the actions to raise the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and boys are not effective enough. As a result, over the last two years the rate of progress for these groups has not kept up with that of other pupils. Leaders recognise this and have prioritised these areas for improvement this year.
- Since the last inspection, leaders have experienced many challenges, including a major restructuring of staff in the school. This took the focus away from ensuring consistency in teaching, learning and assessment. This also contributed to variability in outcomes for pupils.
- The principal's restructuring of the leadership of the school into groups of subjects has increased teachers' accountability. Many leaders of these subject groups are recently in post. They are committed and keen to learn about improving the leadership of their areas from the more experienced members of the team. Leaders have not had time to have sufficient impact on teaching in their areas of responsibility, although there is further capacity to improve.
- The principal has successfully secured the confidence of the staff, pupils and parents. He has transformed many areas of the school life, especially the learning environment, personal development and well-being of pupils and the sixth form. Pupils now are proud of their school and staff morale is very high. Parents report very positively about their confidence in the leadership of the school.
- The curriculum has been developed to provide more academic rigour and aspiration. A broad range of subjects in Years 7 and 8 is then appropriately honed as pupils make their choices for GCSE courses at the start of Year 9. The school rightly predicts a further rise in standards as the curriculum becomes more established.
- Leaders have developed the curriculum so that personal and social education includes issues such as democracy, citizenship, risks of radicalisation and extremism, prejudice and equality. Pupils respect others in the school, regardless of their differences. The

school is preparing them well for life in modern Britain.

- Extra-curricular opportunities are extensive and the school day is organised so that pupils have access to a wide range of clubs and enrichment opportunities including music lessons, a range of sporting clubs and special interest clubs such as astronomy.
- Leaders have used Year 7 catch-up funding effectively. For example, there is a specific reading programme that pupils follow in Year 7 which improves their reading ages. Pupils told inspectors that they enjoy the scheme.

Governance of the school

- Governors are committed to improving the school. They understand their role in ensuring effective self-evaluation and that statutory duties are met.
- Governors have not held leaders effectively to account for monitoring the impact of additional funding, for example the pupil premium.
- Governors have a wide range of expertise that is helpful in providing challenge and support to the leaders of the school. They participate in regular training to improve their skills.
- Governors successfully hold the leaders to account for the development of the sixth form, which is much improved.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. There is a strong safeguarding culture in the school.
- All staff in the school, including governors, are trained regularly to keep the safeguarding of pupils a key priority. Pupils report that they feel safe in school and they would trust adults in school to support them should they have a problem.
- Leaders ensure that partnerships with parents are deepened through termly opportunities to attend well-being parental update evenings. Topics such as child sexual exploitation have been covered during these meetings. Parents report that the school keeps their children safe.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment varies within subjects, across the curriculum and across year groups. Teaching is consistently stronger in the sixth form and in English, but varies in all other subjects and years. Pupils' progress across the curriculum is therefore not yet strong enough to be good.
- Teachers do not consistently plan for the varied starting points of the pupils in their classes. Inspectors observed a number of most able pupils, including those that are disadvantaged, finishing tasks early or being given work that was too easy for them. The most able pupils' books also showed variability in progress across the curriculum.
- Teachers' feedback to pupils to help them improve their work is variable in its effectiveness and the new assessment policy is not fully embedded. When teachers give feedback to pupils so they can improve their work, pupils' progress accelerates. Too often, however, pupils do not receive or act on advice about how to improve.

- Pupils' presentation in books is highly variable. Boys' work, in particular, is often poorly presented or unfinished.
- The quality of teachers' questioning to deepen pupils' learning is variable. Some questioning guides pupils about how to do tasks, but does not develop and check pupils' understanding. At times, some pupils are not involved or are reluctant to take part in question and answer sessions. This sometimes includes pupils whose progress is not as good as others'.
- Where teaching is effective, teachers employ a variety of questioning techniques, including exploring pupils' understanding, in order to identify misconceptions and promote learning. These teachers have detailed knowledge of pupils, are aware of groups of pupils, including those that are disadvantaged, and meet their learning needs.
- Most teachers have good subject knowledge. Teachers make sure that pupils clearly understand the standards needed in preparation for examinations.
- The new assessment policy is being implemented well in some subject areas. For example, in English pupils discuss together how to develop their work and then improve their initial draft.
- Teachers set homework regularly and an online resource base is used effectively by pupils to promote learning at home. Most parents say that pupils have appropriate homework for their ages.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Parents are very positive about the care and pastoral support their children receive.
- All staff place a high priority on pupils' well-being and welfare managers are available at any time to support pupils effectively. Pupils are appreciative of this support.
- Pupils report that bullying is rare. They are confident that should they have any concern it would be dealt with effectively. Parents also confirm that bullying is dealt with well.
- Typically, pupils are keen to learn and have positive attitudes towards their studies.
- Pupils are less enthusiastic in lessons and their concentration wanders when work is not well matched to their abilities.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- Pupils are proud to belong to their school. They want to do well and consequently there is little or no off-task behaviour in lessons.
- Teachers manage pupils' behaviour well. There is a clear behaviour policy and high expectations of conduct. There are well-defined procedures should a pupil need support to improve their behaviour. Pupils' behaviour has improved considerably since the last inspection; this is confirmed by pupils, parents and staff.

- The school has a resourced unit where any pupils committing more serious misdemeanours, that would have merited a fixed-term exclusion in the past, have their education away from the main school. This has reduced fixed-term exclusions and has successfully helped improve behaviour.
- The school has inclusive values and demonstrates a sound equality of opportunity for pupils. Staff have good relationships with outside agencies and pupils are supported well.
- Impartial careers information, advice and guidance are valued by pupils, such as those who are disadvantaged, since they are given individual support. Pupils speak positively about the information they receive.
- The attendance of pupils dipped in 2015 and then improved in 2016 to just below the national average. Strategies are in place to effectively monitor and support individuals who are persistently absent. The level of persistent absence has remained below average since the last inspection.
- A small number of pupils are late to school in the mornings. Leaders have recognised the impact that lateness has on learning and attendance. The school is successfully working with families to improve punctuality.
- A small number of pupils attend ASPIRE and Goldwyn, off-site alternative learning facilities which provide a combination of work experience and a range of choices of courses leading to qualifications. There is good communication between the school and these facilities and pupils are supported to make appropriate progress.

Outcomes for pupils

Require improvement

- Examination performance in 2015, almost a year after the last inspection, showed a substantial dip and did not meet floor standards.
- Provisional results from examinations taken by Year 11 pupils in 2016 show much improvement compared to 2015. Overall, pupils' progress in 2016 is now close to the national average. Although the proportion of pupils achieving a grade C in both English and mathematics has risen considerably, pupils' attainment in mathematics since the last inspection has remained below national levels. Early indications are that around half of pupils in 2016 achieved A* to C in mathematics.
- The examination results in 2015 showed boys performing less well than girls, with the gap being wider than the national difference. In 2016 provisional results show that, while both boys and girls improved their performance, this sizeable gender difference remained. Currently there is more variation in progress seen in boys' books compared to girls' books, especially in Years 7 and 8. Leaders have identified boys' progress as an area to improve this year.
- Disadvantaged pupils do not do as well as other pupils. Overall, disadvantaged pupils' progress is not fast enough overall to diminish these differences. Their progress in English bucks this trend, with provisional GCSE results showing that disadvantaged pupils of all abilities, including the most able, are making good progress.
- Current pupils' progress is inconsistent across year groups and within most subjects. Weaker progress is due to a lack of challenge or support and feedback. At times the

work of the most able pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, shows variability in quality which has not been challenged.

- Many subjects showed improvement in the provisional 2016 results, particularly in English and geography. Teaching is better in these subjects
- The small number of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are well supported by teachers and teaching assistants, in small groups or in lessons. These pupils are making good progress.

16 to 19 study programmes

Good

- Leaders have successfully re-organised the sixth form. Higher expectations have led to students having higher aspirations, more commitment to their studies and pride in their sixth form.
- Early indications are that academic progress has improved in 2016 from a lower performance in 2015. In particular, progress has improved in mathematics and English and remains strong in religious education. Students' progress on vocational courses remains well above national levels.
- The curriculum has been adjusted so that less successful subjects have been dropped or teaching has been strengthened. The new curriculum has a range of academic courses and vocational pathways including public services and health and social care.
- Teaching, learning and assessment in the sixth form are strong, with less variability than in the rest of the school. Typically, teachers structure lessons to allow students to make good progress, often using examination criteria to help them understand the high standards required. For example, in a Year 13 A-level sociology lesson about Marxism, under the expert guidance of the teacher, students deconstructed an exam question and discussed together how to answer it to achieve full marks.
- Leaders emphasise the importance of achieving GCSE English and mathematics if a C is not achieved in Year 11. There are more students following mathematics courses than English courses, in view of the lower proportion of students achieving a C or above in mathematics in 2016. Teachers ensure that students make progress in these classes.
- Disadvantaged students in the sixth form are well supported and they performed similarly to their peers in 2016.
- Students exhibit high standards of behaviour and dress. They manage their own behaviour effectively. When asked about bullying, students explained that they would never tolerate that sort of behaviour within their peer group.
- Students are provided with effective and impartial advice about the appropriateness of courses to take in the sixth form. Careers advice, information and guidance continues throughout the sixth form so they can plan for their next steps, including further and higher education courses, apprenticeships and employment.
- Students benefit well from enrichment courses including first aid, cultural diversity, conversational French, confidence building, road safety and others. Work experience is offered to all students so they can prepare for future careers.

- Retention rates for some courses fell in 2016 owing to the slimmed-down curriculum pathways.
- The proportion of students going to university has nearly doubled to 38% in 2016 compared to 2015. The vast majority of students go on to further and higher education, training or employment.

School details

Unique reference number	136583
Local authority	Kent
Inspection number	10019906

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

Type of school	Secondary comprehensive/Modern (non-selective)
Age range of pupils	11 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in 16 to 19 study programmes	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1,081
Of which, number on roll in 16 to 19 study programmes	250
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Robert Weaver
Principal	Richard Billings
Telephone number	01233 634 171
Website	www.towers.kent.sch.uk
Email address	admin@towers.kent.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	24–25 September 2014

Information about this school

- The school complies with Department for Education guidance on what academies should publish.
- Towers School and Sixth Form Centre is a larger than average mixed non-selective school in a local authority that has a selective education system.
- The school has broadly equal numbers of boys and girls on roll. There is a higher than average proportion of disadvantaged pupils.
- The school has a lower than average proportion of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.

- The school works with two alternative learning providers, ASPIRE and Goldwyn, that provide for a small number of pupils.
- There are below-average numbers of minority ethnic groups in the school.
- The current principal arrived at the school shortly before the last inspection in January 2014.
- The school did not meet the government floor standards in 2015.

Information about this inspection

- The inspection team observed learning across a range of subjects and year groups including the sixth form, visiting 33 lessons, four tutor periods and one assembly. Around a third of visits to lessons were jointly observed with school leaders.
- Inspectors met with senior leaders, middle leaders, a range of staff and groups of pupils. There were also meetings with governors and two representatives from the local authority.
- The inspection team reviewed work from a sample of pupils in Years 7 to 11 as well as seeing work in lessons.
- Inspectors evaluated a range of documentation including the school's self-evaluation and action plan, governor minutes, the school website, a number of policies, pupil performance information and other analyses. Safeguarding documentation, including the school's single central record, was scrutinised.
- Inspectors took account of 54 responses to the Parent View online questionnaire and 43 written responses. Survey responses from 97 staff and 107 pupils were considered.

Inspection team

Sue Child, lead inspector	Ofsted Inspector
Susan Willman	Ofsted Inspector
Philip Storey	Ofsted Inspector
Ben Ramdhony	Ofsted Inspector

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