

Holmesdale Technology College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	118796
Local Authority	Kent
Inspection number	313094
Inspection dates	6–7 February 2008
Reporting inspector	Joan Greenfield

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

Type of school	Modern (non-selective)
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	806
6th form	50
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Richard M Sams
Headteacher	Ian Hobson
Date of previous school inspection	26 July 2006
School address	Malling Road Snodland ME6 5HS
Telephone number	01634 240416
Fax number	01634 244041

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by four Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

This is a smaller than average secondary school. It is formally federated with a neighbouring school, under the leadership of an executive headteacher and a single governing body. Because of the selective system within the local authority, students' attainment on entry is below average. Nearly all students are White British. There are small numbers from a range of minority ethnic heritages, but very few have a home language other than English. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including those with a statement of special educational need, is above average. The school has been a specialist technology college since 2001 and a training school since 2005. It is also a local authority pilot extended school.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

This is a good school that has improved noticeably in recent years. Standards have risen considerably under the very effective leadership of the executive headteacher. They are broadly average by Year 11, although they remain below average in English, mathematics and science. In the GCSE examinations in 2007, almost all students obtained at least five or more A* to G grades in their GCSE examinations and a slightly higher proportion than average attained the higher grades of A* to C. The school is working hard to improve students' achievement in English, mathematics and science, and some other subjects, with greater success so far in English and science than in mathematics. Considerable difficulties in recruiting subject specialist teachers have affected improvements in mathematics. Standards in the small sixth form are below average but most students make satisfactory progress overall.

Students make good progress between Years 7 to 11 and achieve well because much of the teaching is effective. This is evident from students' current work and the school's tracking of their progress. Lower attaining students and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities also do well because of the additional support they receive, especially in Year 7 where the curriculum is tailored effectively to their needs. The national test and GCSE examination results in 2007 showed that students made much faster progress in Years 10 and 11 than in Years 7 to 9, when their progress was below that expected. With more specialist subject teaching now in the lower school, this weakness is being tackled successfully.

The good curriculum provides older students with a wide range of courses and other work-related opportunities to meet their needs and aspirations and to prepare them satisfactorily for their future lives. Most students respond positively in lessons, especially when the work interests and engages them. Teachers generally manage their classes well. The tasks and activities they provide meet the needs of average and lower attaining students well but do not challenge the higher attainers enough.

Most students clearly enjoy their education, and appreciate the new buildings, facilities and resources. As one Year 7 student commented, 'It's completely different from primary school; you can see the fun side of it with laptops.' Their personal development and well-being are enhanced by the vertical tutor group system. However, the personal, social and health education programme does not make a strong enough contribution to their personal development, especially on matters relating to health and safety or preparing them to live in multicultural Britain. The majority of students behave well in lessons but a minority do not conform to the school's expectations. Around the school and overall, their behaviour is satisfactory. Students' good awareness of the need to lead healthy lifestyles is evident in their participation in extra-curricular sporting activities and eating healthily at lunchtimes. They contribute effectively to the school and wider community through fund raising for charity, the school council and links with local community projects.

Parents are mostly supportive of the school but a small number express concern about behaviour, their child's progress and the school's communication with them. High numbers of parents attend the two review days each year to discuss their child's work and progress. Senior staff work effectively together to support the executive headteacher and the head of school, and the governing body gives them good support. A number of innovations have been introduced successfully. Technology and training school status is having a positive impact on areas of the

school's work, as is its role as an extended school. The improvements made in recent years indicate that the school has good capacity to improve further.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

The small sixth form provides a satisfactory education for its students. Its mainly academic curriculum, which has broadened this year, is satisfactory. Arrangements with other local schools provide students with additional courses, but their choices are constrained by the lack of a common timetable. Some students succeed well beyond their predicted grades, for example in A-level sport where the results in 2007 were well above average. In others, they are less successful. Weak literacy skills slow the progress of some students. There are examples of good and sometimes outstanding teaching but its variability means that overall it is satisfactory. Surveys show that students are critical of some of the teaching, finding it too dry and theoretical. This was not evident during the inspection but some lessons do not do enough to engage students actively in their learning.

Students grow in maturity and have good opportunities to develop socially, becoming responsible members of the community. Residential and extra-curricular opportunities enrich their personal development well. However, the provision for religious education is not secure. Students receive good personalised attention from staff. Good systems track students' academic progress and personal development carefully. Sixth form leadership and management are satisfactory and show strong signs of improving further.

What the school should do to improve further

- Increase students' rate of progress in English, mathematics and science to raise standards in these subjects by Year 11.
- Plan work in lessons to provide higher attaining students with more challenging work.
- Sharpen the planning of the personal, social and health education programme to support students' personal development more effectively.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

Standards by Year 11 are broadly average and have improved considerably in recent years. This is reflected in the GCSE examination results for the last three years. In 2007, nearly all students gained at least five or more GCSE grades A*- G and the proportion attaining the higher grades of A*- C was slightly higher than the national average, although not quite as high as the well above average results in 2006. The GCSE results in English, mathematics and science were below average in 2007, but those in design and technology, French, geography, food technology and the humanities were above average. The school is taking positive steps to improve standards in the core subjects, with real signs of improvement in English and science but not so evident in mathematics. The school's data indicate that the school is on course to improve its results in 2008, although it is unlikely to meet its very challenging targets. From their below average starting points in Year 7, students' progress in Key Stage 3, as shown by their national test results, has been lower than expected, other than in English where they made good progress. The school has encountered difficulties in recruiting subject specialists, especially in mathematics, which has affected the continuity of students' learning. Staffing is now more stable and the

school is taking determined action to raise standards in mathematics and science. From Year 9, when students start their GCSE courses, students catch up considerably and make good progress, although not consistently in all subjects.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Students work well together and relationships are mostly good. They feel safe and say that they are listened to. They do not perceive bullying to be a problem and comment that the school takes any incident seriously and deals with it promptly. The vertical tutor system has created a positive team ethos, with students of all ages getting on well with each other. Their behaviour and attendance are satisfactory. In most lessons, students behave well, especially when the tasks are challenging and the activities interest them. Occasionally, a minority of students lose focus when the work does not engage them or when the teacher does not manage them well enough. Elsewhere, their behaviour is satisfactory.

Students' moral and social development is good, and stronger than their spiritual and cultural development. Their awareness of living in a multicultural society is underdeveloped. Students have a strong sense of others' needs through extensive fund raising for charity, the positive contribution they make to the school community as school councillors and their involvement with the on-site special school. They maintain a healthy lifestyle, eating healthily at lunchtime and participating in extra-curricular sporting activities. The opportunities for vocational courses, work experience, business and work-related days, careers guidance and the citizenship course give students a good grounding for their future lives, but these positive features are affected by weaknesses in their literacy and numeracy skills.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

Students respond positively to the predominantly good teaching that occurs in the majority of lessons. As a result, they make good progress. Most teachers organise their classes well and manage the students' behaviour effectively. This enables students to engage productively in learning and respond well to the planned activities. Occasionally, teachers do not establish clear enough routines or have high enough expectations of their response so students do not learn as well as they might. Good use of information and communication technology (ICT) motivates students and helps them acquire greater understanding of the work being covered. For example, in one science lesson, students used ICT effectively to build models of atoms and to explain the atomic structure. In many lessons, teachers' enthusiasm and secure subject knowledge engage students' interest well.

Lesson planning sets out the learning intentions of lessons and the activities to be covered but, in some instances, does not identify clearly enough how teachers will meet the learning needs of the higher attaining students. Some inconsistencies occur in the marking of students' work. Pockets of good practice exist, for example in English, but much marking, although regular, is supportive rather than helpful in identifying clearly how well pupils are doing and showing them how to improve their work.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

The curriculum meets students' needs and aspirations well. In Year 7, students enjoy a project-based programme for part of the week, which involves several subjects and helps them to develop a range of valuable learning skills. Students identified as vulnerable and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have a good adapted curriculum, which meets their needs well and helps them to settle more easily into the school. The start of GCSE examination courses in Year 9 allows students to choose their preferred subjects early or to take a more practical pathway. The first students to follow the three-year course take their GCSEs this summer and the indications are that they will achieve well. The school's specialist status has had a big impact on students' attitudes and progress in all areas of design and technology, because of the new equipment and resources. So far, its impact on mathematics and science has not been as strong.

A good range of visits, speakers and residential trips enriches the curriculum and students' personal development. Many subjects run out-of-school sessions to help students catch up and practise their skills. Students appreciate the range of sporting activities after school, and the opportunities to be involved in performances or to try out new ideas in technology. The personal, social and health education programme is not planned or monitored with sufficient rigour.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Staff look after students well. Safeguarding and health and safety procedures are secure, although not all staff have received up-to-date training in child protection. Key staff have a good understanding of the needs of individual students, especially those identified as vulnerable, and give them good support. As a result, students feel safe and know to whom to turn if they have problems. However, the personal, social and health education programme does not do enough to promote students' health and safety systematically. Students' access to the toilets during the day is very difficult, which is a concern to students and many parents. The new system for managing behaviour is working well, although not always applied consistently, and attendance is monitored carefully. Strong links exist with local primary schools to ensure that transfer to the school in Year 7 is smooth. Students receive good guidance in selecting their GCSE courses and at points of transfer to the sixth form and beyond.

Staff check students' progress carefully, especially those who are in danger of underachieving. Students have targets against which their progress is monitored. Some students are clear about the levels they are working at and what they need to do to improve, but, as with marking, the picture across the school is inconsistent.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

The executive headteacher sets a clear direction for the school, ensuring a strong focus on raising achievement. The good progress the school has made in recent years reflects the impact of his very effective leadership and the work of other senior staff. Middle leaders are growing in confidence in the way they are managing their areas of responsibility, and are held firmly to account by senior leaders for the results in their subjects.

The school knows itself well and its understanding of its strengths and weaknesses is mostly accurate. The school has set itself some very challenging aims although these are not set out into a detailed improvement plan. The success of new initiatives is monitored thoroughly and when things do not work, innovative solutions are forthcoming. A challenging and rigorous rolling programme of departmental audits checks the quality of subject provision well, although the written outcomes of these audits are not always sharp enough. Regular reviews of teaching and learning are effective, enabling the school to make accurate judgements about the quality of teaching. Whilst no systematic analysis of the strengths and weaknesses in the teaching occurs following these reviews, they enable important concerns to be picked up, resulting in intervention by senior management. Governance is effective. Governors are insightful and clearly aware of the strengths and areas for further development in the school. They undertake their responsibilities well, other than in ensuring that the provision for religious education in the sixth form fully meets requirements. The large amount of funding that will be carried forward to the next financial year is earmarked appropriately for specific major projects. As a result of its extended school status, the school's involvement with a wide range of partners in the local area is developing well, benefiting both students and the wider community.

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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	3
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	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	3
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	2	

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	3	
How well learners enjoy their education	2	
The attendance of learners	3	
The behaviour of learners	3	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	2	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	3
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	2

¹ Grade 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.

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2	
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 tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	2	
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	

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

8 February 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Holmesdale Technology College, Snodland ME6 5HS

Thank you for welcoming us to your school. We enjoyed our visit, and our discussions with you helped us in our work. This letter is to tell you of our findings. I hope that many of you will take the opportunity to read the whole report as well.

You go to a good school. We think that the school has improved considerably over the past few years under the very good leadership of the current executive headteacher. Standards have improved and are broadly average. Most of you are making good progress and achieving well because of the good quality of much of the teaching. However, many of you could be doing far better than you currently do in English, mathematics and science. Those of you who are more able do not always get enough challenging work in lessons to help you do even better.

Most of you get on well together and clearly enjoy school. The good curriculum provides you with many opportunities to succeed and prepares you satisfactorily for your future lives. You have a good understanding of the need to follow a healthy lifestyle, and make an effective contribution to the school and local community. Staff take good care of you. You say that you feel safe in school and that you can go to staff if you have any problems. Your progress is monitored carefully but not all of you are sufficiently aware of your targets and what you need to do to improve your work to get to the next level or grade. Most of you behave well in lessons, but some of you do not behave well enough, which means that you do not learn as well as you should.

We have asked the school to do three important things to help you do even better.

- Help you to make better progress in English, mathematics and science so you get better results in GCSE examinations.
- Give those of you who are capable of higher attainment more challenging work to do in lessons.
- Make sure that the programme of personal, social and health education is planned more carefully to support your personal development.

We hope that you will continue to work hard and do your very best for the school.

Yours sincerely

Mrs J Greenfield Lead inspector

Annex B

8 February 2008



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Yours sincerely

Mrs J Greenfield
Lead inspector