

Blacon High School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	111396
Local Authority	Cheshire
Inspection number	325371
Inspection dates	11–12 March 2009
Reporting inspector	Patrick Geraghty HMI

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	492
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr K Butcher
Headteacher	Mrs Ella Brett
Date of previous school inspection	11 January 2006
School address	Melbourne Road Blacon Chester Cheshire CH1 5JH
Telephone number	01244 371 475
Fax number	01244 374 279

Age group	11–16
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Blacon High School is a smaller than average, mixed 11–16 comprehensive school. The school serves an area of social and economic disadvantage and the proportion of students eligible for free school meals is over twice the national figure. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is also higher than the national average. Few students are from minority ethnic backgrounds. The school has specialist sports status.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

This is a satisfactory, improved and improving school. The headteacher is providing very good and effective leadership in tackling the school's persistent pattern of underachievement. Standards and achievement are improving and are satisfactory. This trend of improvement is being brought about by a range of initiatives: for example, a more consistent approach to monitoring students' progress and the development of a curriculum that better meets the needs of all learners. Many of the initiatives are in the early stages of implementation and their impact, although already discernible, will need time to develop fully. However, in 2008 the school achieved its best ever examination results at both Key Stages. Progress at Key Stage 4 was strong. Standards, especially in English and mathematics, remain below national averages.

Students expressed a renewed pride in their school and spoke of acquiring higher expectations, improved behaviour and positive attitudes to work. Attendance rates have improved significantly. The school provides an environment where pupils are safe and in which their self-confidence and motivation improves. The school has transformed its relationship with the local community from one of hostility and suspicion to one of partnership. Outreach work with families is impacting on attitudes in school. The school acknowledges the need to address a number of negative perceptions from parents expressed through parental questionnaires. While teaching and learning has improved and is satisfactory overall, too much teaching is pedestrian. Inconsistency exists in the quality of marking and detailed feedback and in the challenge and participation offered to students in some lessons. The curriculum is good with subject choice extended at both Key Stages. Vocational pathways have been introduced. Effective partnerships have been developed with further education colleges. The sports specialism is well managed and is promoting better links with the local, national and global communities. Care, guidance and support are good.

Incisive leadership has been pivotal in changing the school's culture and ensuring that on balance leadership and management are now good. Strong direction from the headteacher is ably supported by her new senior leadership team. Astute appointments to that team have strengthened quality assurance. Data is now used effectively to monitor students' progress. A resolute drive to promote a culture of improvement, higher aspirations and more robust systems to ensure quality has been energetically pursued. There is a realistic appreciation, mirrored in self-evaluation, that much still remains to be done. The school is well aware of the imperative to improve teaching and learning further to sustain and accelerate improvement. While middle management has improved, it remains variable across the school. However, the headteacher and her senior team are laying firm foundations for the future and giving the school good capacity to improve further.

What the school should do to improve further

- Increase the percentage of students gaining good grades at GCSE in English and mathematics.
- Improve the pace and level of challenge in many lessons to enhance learning.
- Ensure that marking in all subjects gives a clear indication to students of what they need to do to improve.
- Ensure consistency of good practice across middle management, particularly in the skills required to drive-up standards.

A small proportion of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Achievement and standards are satisfactory and improving. Students enter the school with below average attainment. Low literacy levels present a barrier to learning. In 2008 the school had its best ever results at both Key Stages. Progress is satisfactory overall. While some students now make good and most make satisfactory progress in Years 7 to 9, school tracking, lesson observations and scrutiny of students' work indicates that there remains variability in the scale of progress made. Standards remain below average. In 2008 students made significant progress in English and across a range of subjects at Key Stage 4. Contextual value added was the highest in Cheshire and placed the school in the top 5 per cent nationally. From 2007 to 2008 the proportion of students attaining five or more GCSE A* to C grades increased by 16 per cent. The proportion of students attaining five or more A* to C GCSE grades including English and mathematics was, however, significantly below the national figure at 24 per cent. Since September 2007, more effective and targeted strategies have had a positive impact on raising achievement levels. Targets set for individual students now reflect higher expectations by teachers. The use of assessment data to identify and rectify students' underachievement and to inform them of what they need to know, or be able to do, to achieve their targets has improved. The quality of work in students' books and engagement in lessons observed at the inspection was at least satisfactory and in some cases good. However, the school recognises the need to raise standards further in English and mathematics. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make the same progress as others.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Since the last inspection, there have been significant improvements to students' personal development and well-being. Staff have made a concerted effort to promote good behaviour and, as a result, most students now behave well, both in lessons and around the school. Attendance has improved greatly and is now in line with the national average; many students say that they enjoy their education, and take increasing pride in their school. Students have a good awareness of the importance of a healthy diet and appreciate the choice of food on offer. They take advantage of the many opportunities to engage in sports-related activities, and students report that there are fitness programmes 'to suit everyone, even those who don't normally like sport'. Most students feel that the school is a safe place. They are aware of how to stay safe and their knowledge of Internet safety is particularly good. However, there is a minority of students who have a less well-developed awareness of safe practices. Students are increasingly keen to contribute to the school community and many relish the opportunity to take on additional responsibilities, for example as peer mentors. Older students enjoy supporting younger ones, with several commenting, 'The students in Years 7 and 8 used to be scared of those in the years above, but everyone gets on very well together now.' Some students are encouraged to develop leadership skills, for instance by training as sports leaders, and they benefit greatly from this. Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. They have a good awareness of faiths and cultures other than their own, and many demonstrate tolerance, respect and compassion. Over the last four years the school has been particularly

successful in reducing the numbers of those not in employment, education or training from 17 per cent to 2 per cent in 2008. Students' preparation for their future economic well-being is satisfactory.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory. It has improved since the last inspection. While there is a significant amount of teaching that is good, there remains too much of uneven quality. The school has recently introduced more robust monitoring and evaluation arrangements to tackle inconsistencies and ensure that areas for development are identified and acted upon. These are being supported by an improving programme of continuous professional development. The sharing of good practice is being promoted, particularly by the strong sports department which is successful in fostering approaches to independent learning skills and promoting students' confidence and self-esteem. Lessons are well prepared and almost all are conducted in a harmonious atmosphere. Teachers are most effective when they use their subject expertise to formulate questions and activities that stimulate enquiry and test students' ability to think for themselves. In these lessons tasks are challenging and the teacher deploys a variety of strategies that secure engagement, interest and enjoyment. Progress is brisk and learning is with understanding. In less effective and lack-lustre lessons teachers dominate and provide few opportunities for students to explain or reflect on their learning. There is little variety of tasks so learning becomes passive and the rate of progress slows. The quality of marking varies. Although there are examples of the effective use of assessment as a tool for enhancing learning, its use is not consistently applied within and across subjects.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The school provides students with a good and continually developing curriculum. It is reviewed and adapted to meet changing circumstances. As a result, it is increasingly well matched to the wide range of different pupils' needs. Overall, the curriculum is broad and balanced, though it is recognised that there is a need to further develop the provision for music. The school has been innovative in introducing a fresh approach to its Year 7 curriculum and plans are in place to expand this provision into Year 8. The Key Stage 4 curriculum has significantly improved since the last inspection and there is now a good balance between academic, applied and vocational courses. The specialist sports status has had a significant impact on the range of courses on offer. Flexibility and effective collaborative arrangements with other institutions enable the curriculum to be more closely tailored to individual requirements. They also provide a safety net for those students at risk of disaffection. There is a very good range of extra-curricular activities, including trips and excursions abroad, for example to The Gambia and a youth sports festival in Italy. An increasing number of students progress to further education.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Students feel well cared for as a result of the good quality pastoral systems in the school. Effective liaison with primary schools and detailed needs analysis informs guidance and support

systems. Students know that staff are there to help them, and that they can speak in confidence to adults who will deal with issues sensitively and arrange additional support as necessary. A particularly strong feature of the support in school is the outreach work carried out with students' families. Good work with external agencies ensures that specialist support is available for individuals. The needs of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are identified and well met. Through a range of highly successful strategies, the school has been extremely effective in improving students' attendance, which has moved from well below average and is now in line with the average. Students now receive good academic guidance to make informed decisions. Child protection requirements are met, and health and safety procedures are in place. Procedures for safeguarding students meet current government requirements.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Leadership and management are good because strong and effective leadership is bringing about change which is having a positive impact on the student experience. Strong leadership is provided by the headteacher. She has enabled the development of a culture of improvement and promoted high aspirations for students. A new senior leadership team gives her ample support. A strong and clear direction has been established. Quality assurance systems are more robust and are being embedded. Tracking and monitoring systems have been introduced and are demonstrating effectiveness and impact. A year-on-year trend of improvement has been established albeit standards remain significantly below national averages. Very good progress at Key Stage 4 across all subjects was achieved in 2008. Tighter procedures for self-evaluation have been introduced to give leaders and managers a clear picture of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Middle management is beginning to use data to greater effect to track students' progress and implement intervention strategies to tackle underachievement. However, there still remains variability at this level and a need to embed skills to accelerate improvements in standards. The leadership and management of the sports specialism are good. There is good promotion of equality of opportunity through pastoral programmes, the developing curriculum and an increasing range of additional activities. Community cohesion is strong. The school actively engages with the local community who now value the school and see it as an essential part of community development and improvement. Governance is satisfactory. Governors recognise the need to be more involved within the school and to develop a more critical and evaluative approach to monitoring its progress. Accommodation is satisfactory. Given the significant improvements made under the present headteacher and her new senior team, the capacity for further improvement is good. Value for money is satisfactory.

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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
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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?	3
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well being?	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Achievement and standards

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

¹Grade 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.

Personal development and well-being

How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	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
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	2
The attendance of learners	3
The behaviour of learners	2
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 learners' needs?	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2
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	3
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	2
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	2
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	3
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	3
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

Inspection of Blacon High School, Chester, CH1 5JH

Thank you for welcoming the inspection team into your school recently. We thoroughly enjoyed our two days at your school. We particularly enjoyed talking to so many of you about your work, interests and how much you enjoy and give to the school.

Your school is making satisfactory progress. The school is very well led. The headteacher, staff and governors are working hard because they want you to do the very best you can.

Most importantly, your achievements have improved over the last few years. You enjoy many of your lessons, particularly when you know that you are improving and learning. However, results in GCSE mathematics and English need to improve further so that you are provided with the best opportunities for further education and in your career choices.

In the good lessons you respond well to teachers' high expectations and you make good progress. However, this is not the case across all of the school. In some lessons you are not being given work that really stretches you or encourages you to enjoy learning, achieve well and progress.

Your curriculum options are good. You enjoy a wide range of extra activities. We were particularly impressed with how many of you take part in sport where there are increasing opportunities for you. The teachers and support staff care for you and give you good guidance.

We have asked your school to:

- increase the percentage of you who gain good grades at GCSE in English and mathematics
- improve the pace and level of challenge in many lessons to enhance your learning
- ensure that marking in all subjects gives you a clear indication of what you need to do to improve
- ensure consistency of good practice in monitoring your progress and planning for you to make even better progress.

We are sure that you will keep up your growing commitment for learning and will make even better progress in the future. All of us in the inspection team wish you well for your future education.