

Cockermouth School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	112381
Local Authority	Cumbria
Inspection number	325592
Inspection date	21 May 2009
Reporting inspector	Moira Fitzpatrick

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	11–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1416
Sixth form	310
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Len Cockcroft
Headteacher	Mr Stuart Reeves
Date of previous school inspection	1 January 2006
School address	Castlegate Drive Cockermouth Cumbria CA13 9HF
Telephone number	01900 325940
Fax number	01900 325944

Age group	11–19
Inspection date	21 May 2009
Inspection number	325592

© Crown copyright 2009

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Further copies of this report are obtainable from the school. Under the Education Act 2005, the school must provide a copy of this report free of charge to certain categories of people. A charge not exceeding the full cost of reproduction may be made for any other copies supplied.

Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors.

The inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues: achievement and standards and rates of progress in subjects, how well the curriculum meets the needs of all learners, and the impact of recent developments in leadership and management. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but inspectors found no evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments, as given in its self-evaluation, were not justified. These aspects have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

The school is much larger than average. It is a very popular school and is constantly oversubscribed. Most students are of White British heritage and only a tiny number speak English as an additional language. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is below average; so too is the proportion with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The proportion of students with a statement of special educational needs is above average. The school hosts an Autistic Strategic Facility which integrates students who are on the autistic spectrum. The school holds high performing specialist status for mathematics, computing and modern foreign languages.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Cockermouth is a good school with many outstanding features. It has an excellent reputation among parents and is consistently oversubscribed because of its deservedly high reputation in the locality. It is held in very high regard and with great affection by students, who have extremely positive attitudes to school and each other. Parents explain that this is because their offspring thrive in the 'caring and challenging environment, where expectations are high, support is always available and time is given so freely by dedicated staff.'

Standards are very high and students' achievement is good. GCSE results in 2008 were exceptionally high in mathematics and science, and students' progress in these subjects was excellent. While standards reached in English were above average, students made less than expected progress overall, and this was reflected in the underperformance of some boys. Other high performing GCSE subjects were French and German, which, together with mathematics, achieved a significantly above average proportion of passes at the highest grades of A and A*. Standards at Key Stage 3 show a similar pattern of very high standards and excellent progress in mathematics and in science, and slower progress in English. However, the recently appointed head of English has introduced systems to help staff identify where students are underachieving and early indications are that these are beginning to have an impact on raising standards. Further refinements are planned for the coming year as the school seeks to iron out any differences in the progress that students make, either in subjects or groups, by ensuring that teaching and learning are equally well matched to students' needs in all lessons.

Good, and sometimes outstanding, teaching underpins students' good progress. Teachers have excellent subject knowledge, which is used effectively to plan interesting, well-pitched activities. In the very best lessons, the level of challenge is high regardless of the ability of students. Such lessons fire students' enthusiasm because they know from experience that their teacher will ensure they are successful. The best learning is nearly always based on practical activities that reinforce, consolidate and extend students' understanding. Time is used well in lessons; teachers make clear the intended outcomes and they structure lessons so that learning is well staged with explanation, practice and discussion. These strategies enable students to learn independently at their own best pace, confident that the teacher will provide additional help if needed. In many lessons students are encouraged to assess and comment on their own and others' work. This adds enormously to their understanding of the targets they have to reach and of their progress towards them. Marking is not always used so effectively. Students do not always benefit from regular and clear guidance on which particular aspects of their work need improvement to reach their targets.

Students say that the curriculum is excellent and inspectors agree. Older students say they have been extremely well supported to make the right curricular choices. They feel that this helps them achieve well because they are motivated by what they study. Senior leaders and pastoral staff ensure that vulnerable students have personalised learning programmes, so that they too have a platform for success. The school's specialist status has provided the stimulus for innovative links between subjects, producing some excellent work through, for instance, linking art, information and communication technology (ICT) and French. Such projects have thrilled younger students who speak with great enthusiasm of the fun to be had by 'learning like this'. There has been exemplary development of the programme for personal social and health education, so that it now encompasses religious studies and citizenship. The result is a curriculum that explores the links between good citizenship and world religions and teaches

students how to be safe and healthy by having due regard for themselves and their environment. Students' enthusiastic engagement with this exciting curriculum is testimony to its success: so too is the interest shown by other schools in learning from the Cockermouth model. As parents rightly say, teachers give freely of their time. This is seen in the exceptional range of out of school clubs and activities, which take place at lunchtimes and after school, as well as at weekends, as students take part in a huge array of outdoor and sporting activities. Exchange visits to Europe to learn alongside students from other schools, the high level challenge to remote mountainous country and a cricket trip to India all add to the enrichment of students' lives, extend their horizons and drive their ambitions.

Students' outstanding personal development is a product of the excellent curriculum. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is excellent, reflecting the impact of the well planned curriculum. Students love coming to school as their good attendance indicates. They have excellent attitudes to learning, work hard and form excellent relationships with each other and with staff. Collectively, they create a most harmonious and friendly atmosphere for learning. They say they feel safe and know where to turn with any difficulties or concerns. Students are fully involved in all aspects of the school community and make a very good contribution to its smooth running and improvement by willingly taking on responsibilities and looking after younger students. They make good use of the many opportunities for fundraising to help others, as well as making contributions to their own, local and international communities. They know the benefits of a healthy diet and of taking plenty of exercise and actively follow the good advice they are given. By the time they leave, students are extremely well prepared for the future, both academically and with the necessary personal and citizenship skills.

Care, guidance and support are outstanding. Staff are dedicated to getting the best out of students and to do this they take care to get to know them very well. Systems for tracking progress are well developed and used effectively in teachers' planning. Heads of Year have recently extended their monitoring of students' personal development to include monitoring their academic progress. This is helping to spot underachievement early so that action is taken to provide support and guidance to help students quickly overcome any difficulties. Students say that they feel staff know and understand them very well. They are convinced that they will always be given good advice and support, such as through action planning, to help them improve. Transition arrangements are excellent, ensuring a smooth start for students whenever they join the school or off-site provision. Safeguarding and child protection procedures meet statutory requirements.

The school is very proud to host the excellent Strategic Facility as part of its provision. There is a very wide range and variety of needs and all students in the Facility have severe learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Staff have an excellent understanding of the specific needs of each pupil and address these needs with considerable care and patience. The very high level of staff expertise concentrates on achieving the maximum amount of independence for each student. Fulsome praise rewards students' success and getting things right at their own level. Records of progress are kept up-to-date and indicate that students' achievement is good from very low starting points. The Facility is very well led and managed. All staff contribute to the team effort of improving students' skills and understanding, and in preparing them very well for the future. Students from the Facility are very well integrated in all of the school's provision.

Leadership, management and governance of the school are good. Under the outstanding vision and leadership of the headteacher, there has been rapid development in the roles and responsibilities of senior and middle managers since the last inspection. This has led to some outstanding progress in some areas and overall good improvement since then. The curriculum

and the provision for academic monitoring have both had a significant impact on the quality of provision for students. The senior leadership team sets an excellent example in the quality and range of its work. School self-evaluation is rigorous and accurate. The priorities for improvement are ambitious and firmly focused on raising achievement and standards even further. The school is improving at a rapid rate because of the many challenges and opportunities offered to middle leaders, who are eager to rise to the very high expectations of the headteacher. Given the current rate of improvement and the highly effective systems that are in place, the school has good capacity for further improvement.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Standards in the sixth form are above average and achievement is good. The few students joining from other schools are welcomed and settle quickly into the routines and expectations of Cockermouth. Examination results at AS and A level in 2008 were above average. The proportion of higher grades, A to B rose. The school's focus on improving how well students' academic progress is monitored has been particularly effective in maintaining high standards. Pupils' progress is evaluated rigorously and where performance causes concern, effective action is taken. Over the last three years, standards have improved and the variation between subjects is narrowing. Results in the vocational subjects are above average.

Students' personal development and well-being are outstanding. Students say that they especially appreciate the ready help and guidance they receive from teachers. They are clear that this helps them to do so well. Teaching and learning are good and lead to evident good progress. Teachers inspire confidence through their expert subject knowledge. As a result, learning is enthusiastic and sharply focused. It provides ample opportunity for the majority who wish to follow academic courses, or the growing number who choose vocational courses. The school's specialist status in mathematics, computing and modern foreign languages provides rich and diverse opportunities for sixth form students. They can, for example, take part in the annual mathematics conference that allows students to establish effective business links that contribute well to their future economic well-being. Students also have the opportunity of an international experience during which they can study or work abroad, or, for instance, by teaching at the Lycee in Marvejols.

The outstanding care, guidance and support enjoyed by students in the main school continue in the sixth form. The assessment and tracking of students' progress contribute to their good achievement and many students speak of their determination to reach the challenging targets set by their teachers. The leadership and management of the sixth form are very good and have a very successful focus on raising achievement and improving what is provided for all students.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve the consistency of progress and achievement between subjects, especially in English.
- Increase the regularity and consistency of marking and feedback to enable students to understand how to improve their work in all subjects.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaints about school inspection', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

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
---	----------------	-------

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	2
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?	1	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2

Achievement and standards

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

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?	1	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1	
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	1	
The attendance of learners	2	
The behaviour of learners	1	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	2	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1	1

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2	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	2	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1	1
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	1	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	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	

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

Dear Students

Inspection of Cockermouth School, Cumbria, CA13 9HF

Thank you very much for making my colleague and me feel so welcome when we inspected your school recently. It was a pleasure to talk with you about your learning and school life. It was clear that you are very happy with all that your school offers and that you make the most of it. Your parents too told us how much they value your school and appreciate all that teachers do for you. Please pass on our thanks for the questionnaires they returned. We found many strengths in your good school, including some which are outstanding.

Standards are very high and you make good progress in most subjects, both in the main school and in the sixth form. Where we spotted some inconsistencies in your progress, we have asked the school to improve this so you make the same progress no matter what the subject, and especially in English. Teaching is good and sometimes it is outstanding. Your teachers know your needs very well and in most lessons the level of challenge is high. You work hard as learners and this makes a big contribution to your success. Well done! We noticed that sometimes the marking of your work doesn't give advice on what to improve and have asked the school to ensure that all teachers do this.

You benefit from an excellent curriculum, which is constantly being improved to meet your interests and ambitions. You have superb opportunities to learn about the world beyond school and to enjoy many sporting and arts activities and you certainly make the most of them. Through seizing all the opportunities available, you develop excellent personal qualities and are extremely well prepared for the future. Teachers and all staff take very good care of you. They are always there to give you support and they guide you very well to academic success. It was good to see how well you follow their example of care in how you look after and support each other and learn to become good citizens of the future. Your school benefits from good leadership and management and is improving at a rapid rate. Everyone knows what to do to improve and they work closely together to achieve this.

You and your parents are rightly proud of your school and your achievements. We are confident that you will help it to improve even further and wish all at Cockermouth the very best for a bright future.

Yours faithfully

Moira Fitzpatrick

Lead inspector