

The Thomas Hardy School

Queen's Avenue, Dorchester, DT1 2ET

Inspection dates 19–20 March 2015

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected as an academy
	This inspection:	Outstanding 1
Leadership and management	Outstanding	1
Behaviour and safety of pupils	Outstanding	1
Quality of teaching	Outstanding	1
Achievement of pupils	Outstanding	1
Sixth form provision	Outstanding	1

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school.

- The headteacher has set a very clear direction for the school to provide a first-class education for all students. He is adeptly supported by highly skilled senior leaders. Together they ensure that the school is fully inclusive and that discrimination of any kind is not tolerated.
- Leaders, managers and governors are highly ambitious for the school. They work as a team to make sure that all students, including those who are disabled or who have special educational needs, are supported exceptionally well to develop their skills and achieve the very high expectations set for them.
- Governance is very strong. Governors play a key role in ensuring the highest quality teaching and standards of achievement.
- Students' behaviour is exemplary. They display a thirst for learning and this ensures that levels of engagement in lessons are exceptionally high.
- The school's work to keep students safe and secure is outstanding. Students are highly respectful of difference. They actively promote equality of opportunity and this ensures that they are exceptionally welcoming and supportive of others.
- The quality of teaching is outstanding and this enables all students to learn exceptionally well and make outstanding progress.
- The specialist provision for students with disabilities and with statements of special educational needs is outstanding. It reflects the school's determination to ensure that each student is successful.
- Outstanding teaching assistants and the skilful deployment of pastoral staff play a key role in helping students to overcome their learning or personal difficulties.
- Students' achievement is outstanding. By the end of Year 11 they achieve standards significantly above those found nationally, especially in English and mathematics. In 2014 standards in science were not as strong. Leaders have taken effective steps to remedy this and current attainment is now high.
- School leaders thoroughly evaluate the performance of the school. There is rigour and determination to their work and this leads to swift actions to tackle any identified area for development.
- Staff are overwhelmingly positive about the school. They value the opportunities provided for them to enhance their skills and improve the quality of their teaching. They plan interesting activities to engage students in learning and to motivate them to achieve very well.
- Students benefit from an exceptional range of enrichment activities. This, together with the wealth of opportunities for the development of their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, ensures that they are very well prepared for life in modern Britain.
- The leadership of the sixth form is outstanding and inspirational teaching in the sixth form ensures that all students make outstanding progress.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 41 lessons, including 24 which were jointly observed with members of the senior leadership team. Inspectors also conducted a number of shorter visits to lessons to observe students' attitudes to learning and to look at the quality of work in students' books.
- Inspectors examined information about current students' achievement. They also conducted a separate work scrutiny to look at the impact of teachers' marking and feedback.
- Meetings were held with the headteacher, members of the senior leadership team, middle leaders, teachers, staff, students and five members of the governing body.
- Inspectors also met with four representatives of the Dorchester Area School Partnership. This is a group of school leaders from 19 first, middle, special and upper schools.
- Inspectors examined a range of documentation relating to other aspects of the school's work, including those relating to safeguarding, child protection, the school's development plan and analysis of its own performance, samples of minutes of meetings of the governing body, and information about the quality of teaching and performance of staff.
- Inspectors also reviewed records of attendance and behaviour, including bullying and racist incident logs.
- Inspectors took account of the 145 responses to the online questionnaire (Parent View) and letters received from parents. They also took account of the 95 responses to the staff questionnaire.

Inspection team

Caroline Dearden, Lead inspector	Additional inspector
Roger Garrett	Additional inspector
Janet Simms	Additional inspector
Patrick Robbins	Additional inspector
John Lambern	Additional inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The Thomas Hardy School converted to become an academy in February 2012. When the predecessor school, The Thomas Hardy School, was last inspected by Ofsted in October 2007 it was judged to be outstanding overall.
- The school is larger than the average-sized secondary school. It has a large sixth form.
- Students join the school at the start of Year 9.
- The school is organised as four colleges. Each college consists of 15 mixed-age tutor groups which include students from Year 9 to Year 11.
- Almost all students are of White British heritage and the majority speak English as their first language.
- The proportion of students supported by the pupil premium is lower than average. The pupil premium is additional funding for those pupils who are known to be eligible for free school meals and those who are looked after.
- The proportion of disabled students and those who have special educational needs is lower than average. The school has specialist provision for students with speech and language difficulties and for those with physical disabilities.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which are the minimum expectations for students' attainment and progress in English and mathematics.
- A small number of students attend alternative provision at Weymouth College, Kingston Maurward College and Dorchester Learning Centre.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that consistency in teachers' marking and feedback provides advice to students about how to improve their work, embed their learning and deepen their understanding.

Inspection judgements

The leadership and management are outstanding

- The headteacher, senior leaders and governors have focused on improving the already high standards in the school. They have worked determinedly to provide opportunities for all students to make exceptional progress and achieve the highest possible standards.
- The leadership of teaching is outstanding. School leaders use information about students' progress and achievement to thoroughly track and monitor the work of the school. This ensures that teaching is of the highest standard and swift action is taken to tackle any identified area for development.
- The school is exceptionally inclusive; discrimination of any kind is not tolerated. Students who are disabled or who have special educational needs receive specialist support and are fully integrated into the life of the school. Parents of these children are overwhelming supportive of the way in which school leaders ensure equality of opportunity, set high expectations and support students to develop and make outstanding progress.
- The relationships between staff and students are extremely positive. All teachers have high expectations for students' achievement and therefore welcome the advice and training they receive to enhance their skills. Consequently teaching is never less than good and the majority is outstanding.
- Subject leaders carry out their roles impressively. They effectively hold their teachers to account for the standards achieved by students. They in turn are rigorously held to account by senior leaders and governors.
- Pastoral leadership of the school is remarkable. The college structure ensures that all students are known as individuals and therefore the care, guidance and support provided for them help them to overcome any personal difficulties extremely well. As a result, all groups of students attend and behave exceptionally well.
- The school sets challenging targets for students in all subjects. Regular checks on students' progress mean that any underachievement is quickly identified. Interventions are therefore swift and focused on accelerating progress.
- Additional funding for disadvantaged students has largely been used to employ deputy college and guidance leaders. These staff conduct regular meetings with students to track and monitor their attendance, behaviour and progress. Students are encouraged to set themselves goals and to aspire to further education. The funding is also used to ensure equality of opportunity for disadvantaged students through provision of specialist equipment, bursaries for further education or to part-fund cultural visits. The spending of the funding is very effective and there are now minimal gaps between the progress and attainment of these students and their peers.
- Safeguarding meets current statutory requirements. The school places a strong emphasis on keeping students safe and this includes well-organised arrangement for child protection and site security. As a result, all students feel safe, and this view is also shared by parents and carers and by staff.
- The curriculum meets the needs of all students exceptionally well. There is a strong emphasis on academic subjects, particularly in English and mathematics, and this results in high numbers of students taking up university places. Partnerships with Weymouth College, Kingston Maurward College and Dorchester Learning Centre enable students to access work-related courses or additional support for learning outside the mainstream setting. Skilful timetabling ensures that these students attend some of their lessons at the school and therefore remain integrated into the school community. A small number of students follow courses which are specifically tailored to meet their special educational needs.
- The school's spiritual, moral, social and cultural provision is extremely strong and, as a result, all students are highly respectful of difference and unaccepting of any form of prejudice.
- Students also benefit from an impressive range of enrichment opportunities. This ensures that they are well prepared for life in modern Britain and for the next stage in their education, training or employment.
- The impact of advice and careers guidance is exceptional. Students are helped to make informed choices about the next steps in their education. Disadvantaged students receive additional support which is impacting strongly on raising the aspirations of this group of students.
- The school works closely with the local authority to support and nurture children who are looked after. Light-touch support is provided for other aspects of the school's work.
- The headteacher chairs the Dorset Area Schools Partnership. Under his leadership the role of this partnership has changed from providing resources to being student centred. The school now works proactively with first and middle schools to track and monitor students' progress from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 5. The schools also work together to monitor attendance and to develop effective strategies for tackling persistent absence.

■ The governance of the school:

- Governance of the school is very strong. Governors have undertaken an audit of their own skills and this means that they are able to play an active role in monitoring the standards achieved by students. They share senior leaders' ambitions for the school and have a strong belief in the inclusive ethos of the school. Governors know the strengths of the school and are knowledgeable about the areas for improvement. Each governor is aligned to a subject area and the senior leader with line management responsibility for the subject. This means that governors hold school leaders to account very effectively.
- Governors play a key role in allocating funding and ensuring that the pupil premium has strong impact on improving the achievement and attendance of disadvantaged students. Governors understand information about students' progress and are knowledgeable about the quality of teaching. They are involved in linking teachers' performance to pay progression and have ensured that pay increases are only awarded when outcomes for students are strong. Governors are diligent in ensuring that the school's arrangements for keeping students safe and secure are meticulously implemented.

The behaviour and safety of pupils

are outstanding

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding.
- Students conduct themselves exceptionally well in lessons and around the school. Poor behaviour very seldom happens, confirmed by school records, and exclusions are rare.
- The very strong relationships between students mean that they actively promote equality of opportunity by helping others to be fully involved in school life. They welcome the inclusive nature of the school and this ensures those who are disabled are not viewed as different or less able. This is exemplified by students' views that the only thing they would change about their school would be to widen the doors so that those in wheelchairs are able to move independently around all areas of the campus.
- Students have excellent attitudes towards learning. They are keen to meet the high expectations their teachers have of them and this means that they proactively engage in lessons, are interested in what they are learning and are motivated to achieve their best.
- Students are very proud of their school and are keen to take on positions of responsibility such as college captain, sports captain or peer mentors. The school council is well established and enables school leaders to value, consider and act on the ideas of students.
- Attendance is above average for all groups of students and illustrates how much they enjoy coming to school. Those attending alternative education also have high attendance and highly positive attitudes towards learning. Students arrive promptly to lessons and quickly settle to task.

Safety

- The school's work to keep pupils safe and secure is outstanding. The school's systems for ensuring that students are safe and secure are meticulously implemented and rigorously monitored. This includes risk assessments for trips and procedures for recruiting staff.
- Pastoral staff and those with responsibility for students with disabilities or special educational needs look after students exceptionally well. As a result, all groups of students feel very safe, a view endorsed by parents and carers.
- Students are very knowledgeable about the different forms of bullying, including racist, homophobic and cyber-bullying. They are acutely aware of the hurt any form of bullying can cause. Those spoken to told inspectors that incidents of name calling are quickly and efficiently dealt with by school staff.
- The very strong relationships between students and teachers mean that students are able to seek help from a wide variety of staff should they need it. Students spoken to said that all teachers are approachable and very willing to provide support and guidance when asked.
- Students have carefully balanced views about social and moral issues. This means that they are welcoming of difference and despising of prejudice.
- There is a wide range of activities to teach students how to keep themselves safe. This includes use of the internet and social media. Students spoken to appreciated the recent activity on gang culture because it taught them how to recognise and respond appropriately to extremism.

The quality of teaching

is outstanding

- Teaching across the school is outstanding and results in students making outstanding progress.
- Teachers have very strong subject knowledge and communicate a real passion for learning to students. As a result, students demonstrate a thirst for knowledge and achievement is exceptionally high.
- The teaching of literacy, reading and mathematics is excellent across the school and is especially strong in history and geography, where students use a range of skills to make links between different parts of the subject. All students develop the skills they need to make rapid gains in their learning across all subjects.
- Lessons are very well planned and work is carefully matched to students' needs. This means that all students, including the most able and those who are disabled or who have special educational needs, make excellent progress from their different starting points.
- All teachers have very high expectations of students. They skilfully question students to make them think carefully about what they are learning and to encourage them to deepen their understanding.
- The strong support provided by teachers helps students to become very confident learners who believe they can achieve well. As a result, the standards they attain are very high in almost all subjects. This was evident in many lessons observed by inspectors.
- Teachers monitor students' progress and understanding during lessons, reshaping tasks as necessary and encouraging students to check their work for themselves. Students confidently assess each other's work, providing feedback which is pertinent and helpful.
- Teaching assistants skilfully help students with additional needs to make outstanding progress. This includes support for physical development during sports or performance lessons. The work of teaching assistants ensures that all students have equal opportunity to study courses suited to their skills, talents or aspirations.
- Students' learning is enhanced through the impressive range of extra-curricular activities. Teachers are adept at recognising underachievement and developing interesting activities to motivate students. This includes visits to the European Council for Nuclear Research (CERN) and Florence to provide context in science, trips to art galleries in London and New York and opportunities to participate in agricultural work including ploughing and lambing.
- Teachers mark students' work regularly and comments are usually personalised to provide students with advice about how to improve their work. Students use mark schemes very effectively to assess and correct their own performance in examination-style work. This has a considerable impact on moving learning forward and in preparing students for their examinations.

The achievement of pupils

is outstanding

- Students achieve exceptionally well across a wide range of subjects. They make outstanding progress from their starting points, which are generally typical for their age. They leave Year 11 with standards of attainment that are consistently above average in almost all subjects.
- The proportion of students attaining five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C including English and mathematics has been significantly above average for a number of years. Progress in English and mathematics, humanities and physical education is especially impressive and standards of attainment are very high.
- Senior leaders have taken very effective action to rectify the previously lower standards in science and, as a result, the progress and attainment of current students is now very good.
- All groups of students make exceptional progress across the school. This includes those who are disadvantaged, the most able and those with disabilities or special educational needs. Work in students' books together with inspection evidence from visits to lessons and analysis of the school's information about the progress and attainment of students currently on roll confirmed this.
- The achievement of disadvantaged students is outstanding. They achieve standards that are much higher than those of other students nationally. In 2014 disadvantaged students attained approximately one grade lower than their school peers in English and mathematics. School information shows this gap to be closed for students currently on roll.
- The achievement of disabled students and those with special educational needs is outstanding. Teaching assistants are highly effective and skilfully enable students to develop their confidence so that they are able to work as independently as possible. This includes supporting development of physical skills so that students are able to take part in sporting and performance opportunities alongside their peers.
- The most able students make outstanding progress because teachers consistently provide work which stretches their understanding and challenges them to think deeply about what they are learning. Many students leave school to take up places to study highly academic subjects, including medicine, at top

universities.

- The curriculum provides many opportunities for students to read about what they are learning. The school library is exceptionally well stocked and this means that students are able to read for pleasure from a wide range of genres.
- The school does not enter students early for examinations.

The sixth form provision

is outstanding

- Leadership and management of the sixth form are outstanding and this ensures that the sixth form is as inclusive as the rest of the school. The bursary scheme enables disadvantaged students to continue with their education. Strong support for those with disabilities or special educational needs ensures that these students also continue with their education.
- Students make outstanding progress in all subjects because the variety of courses on offer matches the range of students' needs and prepares them extremely well for their futures. In 2014, 97% of students gained A-level grades, with over 60% achieving grades A* to B. Information provided by the school indicates much higher attainment for 2015. Over 300 went to university in 2014, many taking up 'unconditional' offers to top universities.
- A very small number of students enter the sixth form having not attained GCSE English and/or mathematics. These students are well supported and therefore pass these examinations before the end of Year 12.
- Teaching is outstanding because teachers have exceptionally strong subject knowledge which they use to plan interesting and engaging lessons. As a result, all students are highly motivated and determined to achieve well.
- Almost all students stay in the sixth form for two years and complete their courses. Students receive the same very high quality careers advice as younger students. They discuss their career choices with specialist advisers, representatives from a wide range of universities and with their teachers. The number of students not progressing into sustained employment, education or training is very low.
- Students' behaviour is exemplary. They display consistently strong attitudes towards learning, which enables them to work with their teachers to achieve very high standards. Students conduct themselves with maturity and act as highly positive role models for younger students.

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	137163
Local authority	Dorset
Inspection number	453394

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	13–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	2,235
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	824
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Garry Batt
Headteacher	Mike Foley
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected as an academy
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