

The Thomas Hardy School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	113895
Local Authority	Dorset
Inspection number	289760
Inspection dates	16–17 October 2007
Reporting inspector	Mary Massey HMI

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

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	13–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	2340
6th form	880
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	S Kinnersley
Headteacher	Iain Melvin
Date of previous school inspection	1 January 2002
School address	Queen's Avenue Dorchester DT1 2ET
Telephone number	01305 266064
Fax number	01305 250510

Age group	13–19
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Introduction

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

Description of the school

The Thomas Hardy School is a larger-than-average comprehensive with a very large sixth form, serving the county town of Dorchester and the surrounding villages. The school is over-subscribed and the roll has increased substantially in recent years, particularly in the sixth form. There are very few students from minority ethnic backgrounds or with a first language other than English. The number of students who have free school meals or who have special educational needs is lower than nationally. The school has been a specialist science college since 2002 and has recently been awarded two more specialisms in humanities and special educational needs. There is a specialist unit attached to the school for students with speech and language difficulties. The school also caters for students with physical disabilities from across west Dorset.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Thomas Hardy is an exceptional school. One parent said, 'Everything about the school is outstanding, from the standards of education, lesson planning, behaviour, pastoral care and the development of well-educated, rounded young people.' This view was endorsed by many others. Another said, 'We are fortunate to have such a fantastic comprehensive school in the town.' Students at Thomas Hardy School make outstanding progress and achieve exceptionally high examination results. The principle of enabling success for every student, whatever their ability, is central to the philosophy of the headteacher and is embraced by the whole-school community. An outstanding, flexible curriculum ensures that as well as being broad and balanced, it meets individual students' needs. Teaching is of consistently good or better quality and much of it is outstanding. However, as one parent pointed out, 'The teachers not only teach to a high standard, they know the children individually and genuinely care'. Students value the fact that teachers are dedicated enough to give their own time to help them. Regular, helpful feedback ensures that students know exactly what they need to do in each subject in order to improve. Progress is monitored frequently and with rigour, so both teaching and support staff are quick to identify and assist students who are having difficulty. Although they work very hard and take full responsibility for their own learning, students also enjoy school very much. Often this is because teachers are innovative and adventurous in their teaching, using a wide variety of activities to make their subject interesting. In mathematics, students described how enthusiastic teachers are and how well they work together as a team. They give students confidence to believe that they can achieve well, and this is borne out by the excellent examination results. Large numbers of students join in with the extensive and impressive range of extra-curricular activities available, particularly sport, music and drama. Specialist science status has brought improved facilities, particularly in information and communication technology, and a wide range of initiatives throughout the curriculum, as well as lectures and activities for the wider community. Despite being so large, the school still manages to be personal. Strong links with middle and first schools through the Dorset Area Schools Partnership and an extensive induction process mean that students know the school well before they start in Year 9. Special arrangements are made for those with individual learning needs. Students in the speech and language unit and those with physical disabilities are very well provided for. All students are given individual support both academically and socially, and there is an atmosphere of mutual respect between staff and students. Students behave very well so the atmosphere within the school is calm and purposeful. The headteacher has a passion and commitment to the 'moral purpose of education' and focuses relentlessly on each student's right to the very best provision. Working with experienced senior staff, he has created a pervasive climate of belief in the possibility of success for all. They have established clear parameters of acceptable behaviour and high expectations, which leads to a coherent and consistent organisation. Students and staff know that encouragement and support are there for them, so innovation and seeking to be even better are normal practice. The question, 'How big is your imagination?' gives staff confidence to take risks with their teaching in order to provide an even more effective and enjoyable experience for students. Within the accepted framework of high expectations, staff and students assume personal responsibility for their success. The school has outstanding capacity to improve. For example, it has identified that pupils' understanding of Britain as a multicultural society is not as strong as other aspects of their personal development. Parents and students value what the school offers. One parent wrote, 'What a positive, inspiring place to learn. I wish I was about to start school again!'

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 1

A high proportion of students from Thomas Hardy Year 11 choose to stay on into the sixth form. This year, 37% of the students in Year 12 came from schools outside the catchment area. The students comment that 'they are treated like adults' and also say they are 'kept on track' because of the excellent support and guidance they receive. The school ensures a very effective transition into the sixth form. Year 12 students say, for example, that 'staff are very welcoming and easy to talk to, they put us at our ease.' The vision to create a 'post-16 college' within the school is realised through the creation, expansion and maintenance of a delightful sixth form centre. Relationships with staff are outstanding and the views of sixth formers are both sought and valued. High expectations of behaviour and attitudes to work, as well as the opportunity to take on responsibilities, mean that students are articulate, confident and well motivated. The mature, assured attitudes of sixth form students have a positive impact on the atmosphere throughout the whole school. The progress students make and the standards they achieve in examinations at the end of Years 12 and 13 are outstanding. This is the result of strong support, excellent teaching, effective feedback and the consistently high levels of motivation and commitment of the students themselves. The curriculum is broad and inclusive and all students are well served by the provision. The introduction of the International Baccalaureate is a fine example of how the school has widened the curriculum to provide more choice and appeal and fill a need in the local community. There are also efficient links with other colleges to expand provision. The range of activities for students outside the normal school day is extensive and the vast majority of students are very busy working and playing hard. The procedures in place for the students to move to higher education or into work are excellent. The school support continues to the time that students have successfully settled on post-18 courses or made other career choices. Leadership of the sixth form is exemplary. The school culture of high expectations, consistent challenge and continuous improvement also permeates the sixth form. There is a relentless focus on student success. The director of sixth form has an accurate view of the many areas of strength, based on comprehensive evidence. Despite obvious success, he has established well-reasoned priorities for further improvement.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve students' awareness and appreciation of Britain's multicultural diversity.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Achievement is outstanding and standards are well above those found nationally. Very high quality teaching means that students, who have broadly average attainment on entry to the school, make outstanding progress in Years 9, 10 and 11. Standards achieved in national tests at age 14 and in GCSE examinations have remained exceptionally and consistently high for a several years and are in line with the extremely challenging targets set by the school. The number of students achieving five A* to C grades including English and mathematics fell slightly in 2007, but the figure is still well above the national average. Although this high achievement is generally consistent across subjects, in 2007, mathematics, textiles and history gained exceptional numbers of the highest grades. The gap between girls' and boys' achievement at GCSE narrowed this year, but the school is continuing to work hard to reduce this further.

Well-focused, effective and individual care, guidance and support for students with learning difficulties and disabilities result in very high achievement for these students.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Students have extremely positive views about the school. Some Year 9 students said they like their new school because they are given 'more trust and responsibility' and it is 'less patronising'. Students treat each other with respect and bullying is rare. Behaviour is exemplary both in lessons and around the school and students show a mature and responsible attitude in the way they use resources and relate to others. This creates a positive, cheerful and calm atmosphere where students feel very safe. They have excellent collaborative skills and are very articulate. These attributes together with their high achievement prepare students very well for adult life. Students are aware of the need for a healthy diet and value the improved selection of food in the canteen. The high take-up of sports clubs further helps students' health. The Student Voice and school council play an important role in giving students a real say in the school and have led to some significant improvements. Students have also worked in local schools of the Dorset Area Schools Partnership to develop a collaborative School Council. In Year 9, classes choose their own charity and then organise fund-raising events. Year 10 students have been trained to act as student mentors to Year 9. High levels of achievement in key skills and effective support in making career choices ensure that students are prepared for future economic well-being. Social, moral and spiritual development is outstanding. Students' experience of what it means to live in a multicultural society is limited. The school is aware of this and plans are in place to develop their understanding further.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Teaching and learning in the school are outstanding and have a direct effect upon the students' high level of achievement. At the forefront is a pursuit of excellence and the belief that students come first in any discussion about what makes a good lesson. Teachers have expert subject knowledge and use a wide variety of teaching styles. Students are enthusiastic and given scope to show their talents. The best lessons are very well planned, making successful use of resources such as interactive whiteboards to stimulate interest, to offer realistic challenge and to enhance progress. Students with additional learning needs receive very well-targeted help and teaching assistants are used efficiently to support learning. There is regular assessment to check progress, so the vast majority of students are confident about how well they are doing and what they need to do in order to reach targets. Occasionally, the learning needs of students of different abilities are not fully met. The senior management team is fully aware of the strengths and weaknesses in teaching and works hard to improve expertise and spread good practice through regular reviews of classroom practice

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The curriculum is innovative and inclusive. There is a flexible attitude to need and opportunities for students are wide. The partnership with local schools promotes an ethos of continuity, progression and cohesion. This is well illustrated by the successful arrangement for tests at the end of Key Stage 3, which are now completed in middle schools at the end of Year 8. Parents are happy with this arrangement which means that on entering the school in Year 9, students are ready to embark on GCSE courses in the core subjects and accelerate their progress. At the heart of the curriculum is the need to provide breadth and balance and to ensure that all students have equal opportunities. The school continues to seek alternative qualifications for students with learning difficulties and for those who wish to take vocational courses. Citizenship is currently taught alongside the personal, social and health education programme. Plans are in place for a review of this provision. An immense strength of the school is its extensive additional and extra-curricular opportunities, including residential and overseas trips. These are thoroughly appreciated and supported by the students.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The care, guidance and support provided are outstanding. The school is very careful to track how individual students are doing and has a very efficient internal information system which enables excellent communication between staff, so the response to students' specific needs is swift. Excellent use of external agencies ensures that specialist support is readily accessible. The students confidently use the systems available in school and comment positively on how quickly staff respond to any issue they raise. Arrangements to ensure that students are safe are robust and meet statutory requirements. Risks are carefully assessed before trips and visits and are checked by senior staff. The school strongly promotes regular attendance, which was above the national average last year. Learners are clear about how to improve their work. Individual discussions with teachers enable students to clarify what they need to do, for example, to improve their designs of different tables. Consequently, students work on their own confidently both developing their own ideas and saying what they think is good about their work. Staff know students well and so the guidance they are given at the end of Year 11 is focused on making sure each one moves on to the right provision. The school has forged strong links with other post-16 providers.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Self-evaluation is both accurate and thorough and operates effectively at both whole school and departmental level. National benchmarks have been regularly exceeded, so targets now have the extra 'Thomas Hardy' challenge. Leaders gather a range of evidence to help them judge how effective they are. Despite all the indicators that the school is among the best in the country, no-one is complacent. Leaders throughout the school point to things that they

do less well, and these feature in their planning. Middle leaders say, 'We are encouraged to find solutions, not to bring problems'. They have autonomy to act, while knowing they have responsibility for the impact of their actions. As the school has grown in size, the headteacher, governors and trustees have ensured that there is sufficient very high quality accommodation and resources. Students thrive in an excellent environment for learning. Staff turnover is low and leaders use this positively to maintain the stable framework, which parents and students appreciate. The governing body is sharp and perceptive. Although they know the school is very successful, they are ready to challenge the headteacher. They see the resignation of their very successful, long-serving headteacher, and the need to appoint a new one, as another opportunity to build on the tradition of continuous improvement.

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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?	1	1
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	1	1

Achievement and standards

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

Personal development and well-being

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

The quality of provision

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

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?	1	1
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	1	1
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	1	1
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1	1
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	1	1
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1	1
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1	1
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**

18 October 2007 Dear Students Inspection of The Thomas Hardy School, Dorchester, Dorset DT1 2ET Thank you for welcoming us when we came to your school on 16 and 17 October, and for the confident way in which you shared your views about your school. I would like to tell you about our findings. You are very lucky to have the opportunity to attend such an outstanding school. Your excellent behaviour and cooperative attitude create a happy, calm and purposeful atmosphere, which impressed us very much. This produces just the right environment in which you can learn effectively, and as a result you make excellent progress and obtain examination results well above the national average. You work very hard and take responsibility for your own learning. The curriculum is well matched to your needs and enthusiastic teachers usually make learning interesting and exciting. Some of you have been involved in explaining to staff what you think makes a good lesson. Many of you made it very clear to us that the school is not just about academic success. You are exceptionally well cared for and treated with respect by staff. They know you as individuals and are always willing to put themselves out to provide help if you need it or organise the huge range of activities that are available for you outside normal lesson time. There is one area for the school to develop further. I have asked the headteacher if he will make sure that you become more aware of the range of races and cultures of people living in Britain today, so you are well prepared for life in a multicultural society. Your dedicated headteacher and staff will continue to work with you to make the school even better. I wish all of you every success for the future. Mary Massey HMI

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Your dedicated headteacher and staff will continue to work with you to make the school even better.

I wish all of you every success for the future.

Mary Massey HMI