

Great Torrington School

Inspection report

Unique reference number	113510
Local authority	N/A
Inspection number	397461
Inspection dates	30–31 May 2012
Lead inspector	Peter Sanderson HMI

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

Type of school	Academy converter
School category	Non-maintained
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	845
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Cdr Michael Bamborough
Headteacher	Tracey Amos
Date of previous school inspection	5 October 2006
School address	Calvesford Road Torrington EX38 7DJ
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Age group	11–16
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Introduction

Inspection team

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Her Majesty's Inspector

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Kate Rick

Additional inspector

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Additional inspector

This inspection was carried out with two days' notice. Inspectors observed teaching and learning in 34 lessons, taught by 33 teachers, of which five were joint observations with members of staff. In addition, one inspector made a number of short visits to lessons with the school's special educational needs coordinator to focus specifically on the support for disabled students and those with special educational needs, while another made a number of short visits to lessons focusing on students' behaviour. Meetings were held with students, members of the governing body and school staff, including the headteacher, senior and middle leaders. Inspectors took account of the responses to the on-line questionnaire (Parent View) in planning the inspection. They observed the school's work, including students' books, and looked at a range of documents, including the school improvement plan, attendance, exclusion and assessment data. They also analysed 216 parental questionnaires as well as those returned by students and staff.

Information about the school

Great Torrington School is a slightly smaller than average secondary school and the number of students on roll has decreased since the last inspection. Nearly all students are of White British heritage and the proportion of students whose first language is not English is well below average. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is below that found in most schools. The proportion of disabled students or those with special educational needs who are supported at school action plus or with a statement is above the national average. The school has specialist status in sport and applied learning and became a converter academy in August 2011. The school meets the current government floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for students' attainment and progress by the end of Key Stage 4.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness	2
Achievement of pupils	2
Quality of teaching	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils	2
Leadership and management	2

Key findings

- This is a good school. Very positive relationships underpin the harmonious and supportive community of the school. Students develop well, both academically and as rounded individuals, well prepared for their future lives. The school is not outstanding because teaching and the progress of students in lessons are not consistently good and more often outstanding. Opportunities for students to practise and develop their literacy and communication skills are not firmly embedded across all subjects in the curriculum.
- Students start from a low base and make good progress in their learning between Years 7 and 11. Attainment at the end of Year 11 is broadly average. Progress is particularly strong in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science but satisfactory in a few other subjects.
- Teaching is good. In the large majority of lessons, work matches students' needs and abilities well through structured tasks that actively involve them in learning. However, this is not consistently the case across all lessons. Teaching is robustly monitored and senior leaders are well aware of the strengths and weaknesses in performance. Improvements to the systems for sharing and developing good practice are leading to improvement.
- Students feel very safe in school and are well cared for. They are courteous and behave well both in lessons and around the school site. They respond well when they are able to take ownership of their learning. In some lessons where students are not sufficiently challenged or actively involved in learning, their engagement falters and, occasionally, they are inattentive.
- The high expectations of senior leaders are evident in the challenging targets set for students. The management of performance is rigorous. Improvements to monitoring and evaluation now more effectively involve leaders at all levels in this process. As a result, leaders have a good understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses and a clear plan is in place to drive improvement.

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What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve teaching so that it is consistently good or better across all subjects in order to accelerate students' progress by ensuring that:
 - all teachers make effective use of assessment information to plan activities that provide challenging tasks that are well matched to the ability and learning needs of all students
 - all teachers use effective targeted questioning to explore and develop students' knowledge and understanding
 - all teachers actively engage students in learning and provide structured opportunities to develop their independent learning skills
 - all lessons proceed at a good pace and no time is lost
 - students are given consistently good oral and written feedback so that they are clear about what they need to do to improve.
- Continue to embed and extend the opportunities for students to practise and develop their literacy and communication skills across all subjects in the curriculum.

Main report

Achievement of pupils

The very large majority of parents and carers believe that their children achieve well. Inspectors also judge that the achievement of students is good. The percentage of students attaining five or more A* to C GCSE grades including English and mathematics has been slightly above the national average in each of the last three years. Given students' starting points at the beginning of Year 7, this represents good progress in their learning between Years 7 and 11. The progress made by students varies between subjects. The strongest progress is seen in English, mathematics, science and humanities, while it is weaker in subjects such as modern foreign languages, music, business studies and information and communication technology. However, effective action being taken by the school is beginning to close these gaps between subjects, particularly in the case of modern foreign languages and music.

Lesson observations undertaken during this inspection confirm that students make good progress across all year groups in the school. They settle quickly and concentrate well in lessons, particularly where the work is interesting and well planned to meet different students' needs. For example, in an outstanding Year 9 mathematics lesson, high attaining students enjoyed and responded extremely well to the challenge of solving problems involving trigonometric identities that were set at different levels and well matched to their ability. There is some variation in the achievement of different groups of students. For example, the achievement of lower attaining students is slightly below that of their middle and higher attaining peers. However, lesson observations and analysis of school tracking data indicate that this

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gap in achievement is closing. Disabled students and those with special educational needs make good progress similar to that of all students. However, the progress made by those students at school action plus level of support is not as strong as that made by those at school action level or those with a statement of special educational needs. The school has recently evaluated and improved its in-class support for disabled students and those with special educational needs and this is having a positive impact on the achievement of this group of students.

Quality of teaching

The responses from parents, carers and students to the inspection questionnaire indicate that the very great majority judge teaching to be good. The quality of teaching observed in the lessons seen during this inspection confirms this view. Teachers have good subject knowledge and use this to plan lessons well around clear learning outcomes for students. Lessons are characterised by good relationships with students, effective use of new technologies to aid learning and clear teacher explanations. In the best lessons, teachers make effective use of prior attainment data to plan an engaging range of activities that actively involve students in learning and they provide structured opportunities for students to develop their independent learning skills. In these lessons, teachers' expectations are high, activities proceed at a good pace and questioning is used effectively to check and develop students' learning. For example, in a good Year 8 science lesson, the teacher carefully selected students to question about energy transfers, allowed the students time to think through their answers and then systematically developed their understanding through good secondary questioning. In the less successful lessons, tasks are not always well matched to students' abilities. At times, teachers talk for too long, slowing the pace of learning, and questioning is only used to check students' knowledge rather than delving deeper to explore their understanding.

Students are clear about their targets and how well they are doing in relation to these targets. However, they are generally less clear about what they need to do to improve. Some marking and oral feedback to students are of high quality and provide good advice to students about how to move from one level or grade to another. However, this good practice is not consistent across the school. In particular, some work is not marked regularly enough and written comments vary in the detail and advice they provide.

Teaching promotes students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development well; for example, effective links that have been made between subjects such as history and English enable students to effectively discuss moral dilemmas in First World War poetry. The school has rightly identified the need to improve the literacy skills of some younger lower-attaining students. Effective use is being made of a phonics (linking letters to sounds) programme to tackle this issue. There is a whole-school focus on the development of students' literacy and communication skills. Although some examples were seen of effective approaches being used to develop students' literacy and communication skills in a few subjects, this approach is not firmly embedded across all subjects.

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Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students are welcoming, friendly and polite. Their high attendance is testimony to their enjoyment of school and the importance they attach to learning. Students' behaviour around the school is good. They behave with consideration to each other in the long, relatively narrow school corridors. Punctuality is good. They socialise well with each other at break and lunchtime and have a good moral understanding of right and wrong. Although the large majority of parents and carers returning questionnaires believed that behaviour was generally good in the school, a number did raise concerns, particularly over disruption in lessons. Inspectors judged that behaviour in lessons is good and that on the rare occasion when low-level disruption occurs in lessons, it is, in almost all cases, a response to less engaging teaching.

Students report that they feel safe in school and are confident that if any problems occur, including incidents of bullying, they will be dealt with effectively by staff. Students have a clear understanding of the types of bullying that can occur, understand the nature of risk and act responsibly. Exclusions from school are below average and declining.

Leadership and management

The headteacher gives strong direction to the work of the school. Since arriving almost two years ago, she has established a clear focus on improving teaching and driven important and effective changes to the systems for monitoring and evaluation and for tracking students' progress. Rigorous systems are used to monitor the quality of teaching and, alongside these, there are substantial opportunities for the professional development of teachers, including peer coaching. This has a positive impact on the quality of teaching. Targets set for students are challenging and a good system to track the progress of students is in place. As a result, underachieving students are quickly identified and provided with effective support. Through recently introduced departmental reviews, middle leaders are held appropriately accountable for the quality of provision and student outcomes in their subject area. Subject leaders are not equally expert at driving improvement, resulting in some variation in achievement between subjects. However, effective line management systems are beginning to address this issue.

The governing body are very supportive of the school and they are well informed of the quality of provision and the impact on students' outcomes. They provide senior leaders with an appropriate level of challenge. Safeguarding procedures, particularly the required staff checks and child-protection training, are robust and meet requirements. The school's self-evaluation is accurate and the improvement plan effectively addresses identified weaknesses. Recent improvements to teaching and the closing of the gap in achievement between subjects and groups of students demonstrate the school's capacity for further improvement. Equality of opportunity is at the heart of much of the school's work and discrimination is tackled well.

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The curriculum is broad and effectively meets a wide range of needs, enabling students to achieve well. The curriculum places an emphasis on the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of students. This is actively promoted through the school's '3Rs' programme, lessons and in extra-curricular experiences, such as in music opportunities, sports clubs and school visits.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	46	46	8	0
Primary schools	8	47	40	5
Secondary schools	14	38	40	8
Special schools	28	48	20	4
Pupil referral units	15	50	29	5
All schools	11	46	38	6

New school inspection arrangements have been introduced from 1 January 2012. This means that inspectors make judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2010 to 31 August 2011 and represent judgements that were made under the school inspection arrangements that were introduced on 1 September 2009. These data are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2010/11 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Primary schools include primary academy converters. Secondary schools include secondary academy converters, sponsor-led academies and city technology colleges. Special schools include special academy converters and non-maintained special schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning and development taking account of their attainment.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Attendance	the regular attendance of pupils at school and in lessons, taking into account the school's efforts to encourage good attendance.
Behaviour	how well pupils behave in lessons, with emphasis on their attitude to learning. Pupils' punctuality to lessons and their conduct around the school.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving based on its self-evaluation and what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the governors and headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.
Safety	how safe pupils are in school, including in lessons; and their understanding of risks. Pupils' freedom from bullying and harassment. How well the school promotes safety, for example e-learning.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



1 June 2012

Dear Students

Inspection of Great Torrington School, Torrington EX38 7DJ

I would like to thank you for the way in which you welcomed the inspection team when we visited your school. We very much enjoyed our discussions with you. We think the school provides you with a good education. Here is a list of the school's main strengths.

- The school has a welcoming, friendly ethos. You all get on well with each other and your behaviour in lessons and around the school is good.
- You told us that you feel safe in school and that you are confident staff will deal quickly and effectively with any concerns you raise with them.
- You are taught well and, as a consequence, make good progress, particularly in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science.
- You enjoy school and your attendance is above average.
- The school provides many good opportunities for your spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, both in lessons and through the broad range of extra-curricular activities on offer.
- Your headteacher, the governing body and other school leaders have a good understating of the strengths and weaknesses of the school. They have a good plan in place to make the school even better.

Although in the large majority of lessons you are taught well and make good progress, teaching varies across the school. To improve teaching, we have asked senior leaders to ensure that all your lessons are as good as the best. We have also asked school leaders to ensure that you are given more opportunities to practise and develop your literacy and communication skills in all subjects.

You can help to make these improvements by continuing to attend regularly and continuing to get actively involved in activities arranged for you by staff.

Yours sincerely

Peter Sanderson
Her Majesty's Inspector

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