

Inspection of a good school: Holcombe Grammar School

Holcombe, Maidstone Road, Chatham, Kent ME4 6JB

Inspection dates: 12 and 13 March 2024

Outcome

Holcombe Grammar School continues to be a good school.

The headteacher of this school is Lee Preston. This school is part of Thinking Schools Academy Trust, which means other people in the trust also have responsibility for running the school. The trust is run by the chief executive officer, Stuart Gardner, and overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by Gerard Newman.

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils at Holcombe Grammar School are proud to attend their 'rights respecting' school. Their attendance is very high. They experience an inclusive, welcoming and supportive environment in school. The school community takes opportunities to celebrate its diversity often.

The school's motto of 'Transforming Life Chances' is reflected in all that the school does. The school is determined to prepare pupils for their next stages of life and learning. Students in the growing sixth form succeed in their studies. Many go on to top universities and high-profile careers.

Pupils know who to turn to if they are worried about anything. Typically, pupils feel listened to and cared for. This helps most to feel happy and safe at school. When pupils report bullying, leaders usually deal with it quickly and effectively.

Pupils are provided with a wealth of opportunities to nurture existing talents and interests, as well as to discover new ones. High numbers participate in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme or join Sea Cadets. Arts, drama and music clubs thrive. Some students in the sixth form develop their leadership skills by running the school council, mentoring younger pupils, or delivering speeches on open days.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

The school is ambitious for all pupils and knows the importance of ensuring that they are given a high-quality curriculum. Increasingly, this is in place. Pupils benefit from studying

a wide range of subjects, including in the sixth form. All pupils study the English Baccalaureate suite of qualifications.

In most subjects, the school has considered carefully what they want pupils to know and remember. New knowledge builds from what pupils have learned before. Sometimes, teaching does not check or deepen pupils' understanding before moving on to new content, and the resources used do not fully engage the pupils in their learning. This means that, on occasion, pupils are not learning the curriculum fully.

Teachers are real experts. They have strong subject knowledge and a passionate interest in the subjects that they teach. Teachers weave subject-specific and technical vocabulary skilfully into conversations that they have with pupils. Students in the sixth form appreciate the excellent learning environment that the school offers. They enjoy the quality and depth of discussions and debates that they experience in their lessons. Students are mature and articulate.

Pupils' positive attitudes to learning and staff's consistent use of the behaviour policy ensure a purposeful atmosphere in lessons. Pupils and staff have seen a marked improvement in standards of behaviour over the last few years. Pupils' work is generally of a high standard.

The school accurately identifies the needs of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Teaching staff receive the training and support they need to help these pupils effectively. As a result, pupils with SEND access the same curriculum as their peers and achieve well overall.

The school is developing a culture of reading for pleasure, with timetabled library lessons and reading sessions in form time. Different subjects prioritise reading in lessons. Pupils are tested when they come into school and those who need it are supported with a programme of additional support during form time. The newly refurbished library is a welcoming space for pupils to spend their breaktimes and lunchtimes reading. Pupils enjoy their role as library monitors.

The wider personal development of pupils is a strength of the school. The newly written personal development curriculum is delivered enthusiastically by staff. The programme is valued by pupils and students in the sixth form. Pupils learn how to be responsible citizens and develop healthy relationships. They learn about positive relationships, online safety, and about beliefs and cultures that are different from their own. They engage in moral debates on topical issues. Pupils appreciate the weekly check-ins on their mental health and the consequent actions taken by the school. The 'you said, we did' posters give evidence of staff listening and responding to pupils.

There is a very comprehensive programme of careers information and guidance that includes one-to-one careers sessions and mock interviews. Students in the sixth form value the guidance that they are given for their next steps. They feel well informed about university courses, apprenticeships and employment. Work experience weeks in both Years 10 and 12 give valuable insights into the world of work.

Governors and trustees know the school well and provide appropriate support and challenge to help the school continue to improve. All teachers, including those new to the profession, value the high-quality training and support offered by the school and the wider trust network. Staff feel well supported and are proud to work at this school.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- The quality of teaching, assessment and resources does not consistently support all pupils to learn as well as they could across all subjects. This means that some pupils are not consistently learning the ambitious curriculum that has been put in place or achieving as much as they could. The school needs to continue its work in ensuring that teachers have the expertise required to enable all pupils to achieve highly in every subject.

Background

When we have judged a school to be good, we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains good. This is called an ungraded inspection, and it is carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. We do not give graded judgements on an ungraded inspection. However, if we find evidence that a school would now receive a higher or lower grade, then the next inspection will be a graded inspection, which is carried out under section 5 of the Act. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the ungraded inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour or the quality of education, we will deem the ungraded inspection a graded inspection immediately.

This is the first inspection since we judged the school to be good in April 2018.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, 'disadvantaged pupils' is used to mean pupils with SEND; pupils who meet the [definition of children in need of help and protection](#); pupils receiving statutory local authority support from a social worker; and pupils who otherwise meet the criteria used for deciding the school's [pupil premium funding](#) (this includes pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years, looked after children (children in local authority care) and/or children who left care through adoption or another formal route).

School details

Unique reference number	136594
Local authority	Medway
Inspection number	10288001
Type of school	Grammar (selective)
School category	Academy sponsor-led
Age range of pupils	11 to 18
Gender of pupils	Boys
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1,032
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	295
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Gerard Newman
CEO of trust	Stuart Gardner
Headteacher	Lee Preston
Website	www.holcombegrammar.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	24 April 2018, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The school is part of the Thinking Schools Academy Trust.
- The school currently uses no alternative provision.
- The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 8 to 13 with information and engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.

Information about this inspection

Inspections are a point-in time judgement about the quality of a school's education provision.

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with school leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation.
- Inspectors met with the headteacher, trust leaders and representatives, senior leaders, subject leaders, the leader responsible for pupils with SEND, many teachers and support staff.
- The lead inspector met with governors and the CEO of the trust.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: English, mathematics, history and design and technology. Inspectors met with subject leaders, visited lessons and spoke to teachers. They looked at curriculum planning and pupils' work. They met with pupils to discuss their learning.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, the inspectors: reviewed the single central record; took account of the views of leaders, staff and pupils; and considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils' interests first.
- Inspectors observed pupils around the school site during lunchtimes and at breaktimes.
- Meetings were held with groups of pupils and groups of staff, to hear their views. Inspectors also spoke to pupils and staff informally around the school.
- Inspectors considered the responses to the confidential Ofsted survey for staff and pupils and Ofsted Parent View.

Inspection team

Ann Fearon, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

Elaine Parkinson

Ofsted Inspector

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