

Cowley International College

Hard Lane, St Helens, Merseyside WA10 6PN

Inspection dates

12–13 October 2016

Overall effectiveness	Good
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Require improvement
16 to 19 study programmes	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- The principal has a clear and positive vision for the school. His determination to serve its pupils as well as possible is shared by leaders and other staff. Staff work hard for the benefit of pupils.
- Governors know the school well and provide helpful challenge and support to leaders.
- Pupils are well looked after in school and when they attend alternative provision. Those pupils who talked with inspectors said that they feel safe and that any bullying is rare. Inspectors agree.
- The safeguarding of pupils is effective.
- Pupils generally behave well in lessons and this helps everyone learn. While pupils are usually positive about school, one or two behave less well during breaktimes.
- Attendance is around the national average but longer-term absence is less than often seen elsewhere.
- Teaching overall helps pupils to learn well. The most effective teaching helps pupils to make very rapid progress.
- The provision for sixth-form students helps them to make progress and move on to their chosen next steps. Robust leadership in the sixth form has led to clear improvement.
- In the past, pupils have not made sufficient progress. Understanding this situation is made more complicated because of uncertainty in some pupils' starting points when they join the school.
- Leaders have taken steps to improve rates of progress in English, mathematics and other subjects. These have led to increases in attainment.
- The most able disadvantaged pupils do as well as other pupils nationally.
- The majority of parents are strongly supportive of the work of the school and value it highly.
- The school offers a broad range of subjects. These include academic and vocational courses in key stage 4 and the sixth form. Pupils do well on vocational courses but, by choosing them, some miss out on possible further academic success or other opportunities.
- While the school does much to help pupils understand why success at school is important, some are not confident enough in their own abilities.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that recent improvement in pupils' outcomes in English, mathematics and other subjects continue, with leaders identifying and addressing the key factors in the school's control that will further speed up pupils' progress.
- Ensure that pupils of all abilities are helped to develop their confidence as learners and so raise their aspiration by:
 - teachers providing consistently high challenge in lessons to meet the needs of different groups of pupils
 - leaders ensuring that the combinations of subjects offered provide pupils with access to the broadest possible range of opportunities for further study and eventual employment.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- The principal and other senior leaders are dedicated and committed to making the school work as well as possible for pupils.
- Senior leaders ensure that the 'Cowleian' values, set out as 'aspirational, considerate, independent, healthy, good communicators', underpin the ethos of the school. These also shape the school's approach to the effective development of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural understanding. In addition, pupils are taught about wider values such as respect and tolerance for others.
- The school is well organised which, despite its size and complexity, allows it to run smoothly. Leaders' roles and responsibilities are clear.
- Leaders analyse the school's performance in detail. This is helped by significant use of external scrutiny from suitably experienced consultants. The school's self-evaluation document is detailed but leads to somewhat over-generous conclusions.
- Middle leaders are clear about school priorities. Their close work with senior leaders ensures that they are held to account for the effectiveness of their subject teams.
- The systems for ensuring that teachers are effective are well planned. One of the school's regular periods of observing teachers' practice took place at the same time as the inspection. Activities like this, together with the formal performance management system, mean that there is a continuing focus on the quality of teaching and the outcomes to which it leads. If teachers are identified as underperforming, coaching or specific training is offered before any further steps are taken. Other training and joint work between teachers adds to a culture where teaching is recognised as being very important. The actions taken mean that teaching has improved since the previous inspection.
- Newly qualified teachers and those in the early stages of their careers welcome the support and development opportunities that they receive.
- Leaders ensure that the subjects offered provide a wide range of opportunities for pupils. Pupils in Years 7 and 8 are taught all the subjects in the national curriculum, which gives them a good breadth of learning as they go into key stage 4. The courses in key stage 4 are divided into different 'pathways' which allow pupils to choose whether to add to their academic study with vocational courses. While this arrangement has helped pupils to be successful in vocational subjects, and a higher proportion of pupils are now following academic courses than in the past, some pupils who could benefit from fully academic programmes do not choose to follow these.
- The school offers careers education to pupils across the school. The success of this is indicated by the low and decreasing number of pupils who leave school without definite plans for further study or suitable employment.
- Pupils are able to take part in an extensive range of sporting and other extra-curricular activities. These include rugby and hockey on Saturday mornings. Extra-curricular opportunities are well supported by staff as part of their determination to give pupils the best possible experience. For example, a pupil in Year 7 told an inspector about the

weekend away he had enjoyed shortly before the inspection, learning about mathematics and taking part in other activities.

- The school is outward looking. Leaders have a clear view of the needs of the school's wider community and aim for the school's work to redress some of the challenges it faces. A strong link with St Helens RFC has been built up over a number of years. This already provides many sporting and other opportunities for pupils. Leaders and club representatives are starting to consider how joint working could support teachers' continuing training. Where the school has expertise in particular subjects or aspects of leadership, it offers support to other local schools.

Governance of the school

- Governors know the school well. They are proud of its successes and show commitment to ensure that they continue. They receive detailed information about key aspects from senior leaders and heads of department. This enables them to hold leaders to account. There is a clear and demonstrable impact of their actions, particularly in the improvement to the quality of teaching. The governing body has recently been reconstituted. Governors' skills and experience match the needs of the school. Individual governors have specific roles linked to key aspects of its work. This allows them to provide greater scrutiny, for example of the school's approach to safeguarding pupils. Governors' understanding of the way the school works for pupils is enhanced by the involvement of senior students in appropriate meetings.
- The system for linking teachers' pay to their effectiveness is fair and robust. Governors make clear decisions about which teachers should receive pay increases. The targets which form part of this assessment are linked to the progress pupils make.
- Governors ensure that there is careful financial management in the school. Spending on the additional government funding to support disadvantaged pupils is closely accounted for. A large part of this funding is used to provide smaller classes in English and mathematics in key stage 4. This has contributed to the increasing achievement in these subjects for both disadvantaged pupils and other pupils.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- All staff are required to complete regular training to ensure that they stay fully up to date about safeguarding. This includes training about safeguarding overall and about specific issues such as the ways staff can help keep pupils safe from people with extreme views or from being radicalised. Anyone who has not completed online training or who has missed face-to-face training is expected to complete catch-up activities. In addition, staff and volunteers are issued with the documents they need to be fully informed.
- The safeguarding policy is updated and ratified by governors every year, normally around the middle of the autumn term. At the start of the inspection, the version of the school's safeguarding policy published on the school website did not fully reflect recent changes to national guidance. However, this was quickly updated when pointed out. In addition, the most important section of this guidance had been available on the website since the start of the school year, meaning that the new details had already been made available.

- The systems to check that new members of staff are suitable are clear and complete.
- Leaders work closely with external partners when this is needed to ensure that pupils are safe. The police officer who works full-time in school provides helpful information and support together with links to the community. These all help to ensure that pupils are properly protected.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Pupils currently in the school learn well as a result of typically good teaching. Where teaching is most effective, teachers use their good subject knowledge to plan activities which stretch pupils. Teachers are able to challenge pupils because of their carefully targeted questions. They use pupils' ideas and mistakes to reinforce everyone's understanding. In such lessons, resources, ranging from textbooks to interactive whiteboards, are used well. In English, there are good opportunities for pupils to develop longer pieces of writing, and in mathematics there is an emphasis on solving problems. Both activities give pupils the skills they need to use their knowledge in other subjects.
- However, some teaching does not stretch pupils as well because teachers do not provide sufficient structure to the planned learning or they fail to provide resources which are sufficiently demanding. One example of this is when teaching materials are provided which only require pupils, including the most able, to make very simple responses to questions. In addition, some teachers provide work which does not capture the interest of pupils of lower or middle attainment. When this happens, some pupils lose their focus, or wait for the teacher or teaching assistant to tell them an answer rather than working it out for themselves.
- Teachers often provide helpful feedback in pupils' books. Leaders expect teachers to provide advice on how pupils can improve their work. Pupils' books showed many examples of this being done effectively, particularly in the books of the most able pupils. The school's approach to feedback gives a degree of flexibility to different subject departments. However, this leads to differences in the impact of teachers' feedback between subjects.
- The school uses well-planned and regular opportunities for assessment to build up teachers' understanding of how well pupils are learning. This assessment begins as part of the induction activities for new pupils as they join the school. This early assessment is used by leaders to help to add to the information about pupils' starting points. The information from assessment adds to teachers' knowledge of pupils' personal situations. It allows teachers to plan work aimed at meeting the needs of different groups of pupils. Teaching and support for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities helps such pupils make progress at similar rates to others.
- The use of subject 'pathways' and groupings at key stage 4 means that some classes have relatively higher numbers of more able pupils. When such classes are taught by the school's most effective teachers, these pupils make rapid progress; for example as seen in a Year 11 mathematics lesson where pupils were challenged to use their knowledge of algebra to deduce a general solution to a complicated equation.

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Pupils are generally positive about school and have good relationships with each other. Those who talked with inspectors said that there is little bullying and that, if problems arise, they know which adult could help them. They were confident that any issues would be resolved.
- The school ensures that pupils are safe. Pupils reported to inspectors that they feel safe. Parents who completed Ofsted's online questionnaire generally agreed. However, a number felt that communication with the school could be improved to help them understand the school's approach when any issues arise and to inform them better about how their children are progressing.
- The circumstances of pupils who have particular needs or who face specific challenges are very well known to leaders. Leaders work closely with the local authority and other services to make sure that such pupils are well supported.
- Leaders are aware that some pupils lack confidence in their own potential as learners. While they provide information, support and challenge to pupils and their families to raise pupils' self-belief, some pupils' progress is slower than it could be because they do not fully understand what they could achieve.
- The school uses alternative providers to support the learning of a small number of pupils. This is carefully organised in partnership with the local authority. Twice-daily contact with providers is used to make sure that pupils involved are present as expected. A senior leader regularly checks that pupils taking part in alternative provision do well and are properly looked after.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- The vast majority of pupils behave well in lessons, they are smart in their uniforms and show respect for adults and each other. Pupils know about the systems in place to challenge any less good behaviour in class and to encourage good attitudes and learning. These allow teachers to deal with any interruptions to learning swiftly and effectively. The buildings are tidy and well kept. Pupils show respect for the premises and drop little litter. The school is calm and orderly. Pupils conduct themselves sensibly between lessons and at social times. There is a high presence of staff on duty so on the few occasions that behaviour is not so good or inappropriate language is used, it is dealt with appropriately.
- Pupils' attendance is close to the national average. The effectiveness of the school's systems to help pupils enjoy school and to want to attend well is demonstrated by the low proportion of pupils who have longer-term absence. Pupils are punctual to morning registration and to lessons. They bring the right equipment with them which helps them to be ready to learn.

- In many lessons, pupils take pride in their work. It is often neat and includes good examples of high-quality presentation with clear attention to detail. This helps them to make fast progress.

Outcomes for pupils

Require improvement

- Many pupils make good progress. However, there is a legacy of underachievement so that outcomes are not consistently good. Leaders have recognised this and put in place successful strategies to make sure that outcomes improve.
- Observation in lessons, scrutiny of pupils' work and other inspection evidence confirm that pupils currently in the school make good progress. This is particularly the case for those taking vocational subjects in key stage 4 and in the sixth form. For example, around half of the pupils in Year 11 taking health and social care make very rapid progress, exceeding rates identified nationally as representing more than expected progress.
- Historically, information about some pupil's starting points on entry to the school has been uncertain. This makes it harder for leaders to know how well pupils are doing. In response, leaders and teachers conduct additional tests on pupils as they start at the school. The school's own assessment information shows improving progress for different groups of pupils from their starting points.
- Attainment improved in 2016 and is around the national average. A small group of pupils who had experienced particular challenges during their education did not achieve as well as their peers but they have successfully continued into employment or training.
- In the past, disadvantaged pupils have made less progress than other pupils. Leaders are ensuring that the use of the additional pupil premium funding addresses this. In 2016, the most able disadvantaged pupils in Year 11 achieved results similar to those of other pupils nationally. Differences between the attainment of disadvantaged pupils overall and others reduced.
- In general, pupils make faster progress in English than in mathematics. This situation is reversed for those students re-taking English and mathematics in the sixth form.
- The school's own data shows that the most able do better than similar pupils nationally. This data also shows that a higher proportion of younger most-able pupils make even faster progress.
- The school's predictions of pupils' achievement have been accurate in the past. Current predictions indicate that the improvement to pupils' achievement will continue. For example, Year 11 pupils in 2017 are predicted to achieve better results than similar pupils in 2016.
- As part of the work to check that the additional funding to support pupils' literacy and numeracy skills is being spent effectively, and to check the impact of other work to support reading, leaders test Year 7 pupils' reading ages. This testing shows that pupils who are less confident readers make rapid progress in developing their skills. An experienced primary school teacher has been employed to support pupils who need to catch up as they enter the school.

16 to 19 study programmes

Good

- Students in the sixth form benefit from good teaching which helps them learn well and be successful. The sixth form is well led.
- Leaders have had a clear impact on improving provision in the sixth form. The variability in subject performance in the past, particularly at A level, has decreased as a result of the robust approaches leaders have taken. Leaders have ensured that there are different ways in which students can access information about careers and possible next steps after leaving the sixth form. Many students have clear ideas about what they intend to do.
- The college offers a broad and balanced curriculum. There is an appropriate balance of vocational courses and students achieve very well in most of these. There are particular strengths in computer applications, multimedia, applied science and engineering. Students who take A levels do not always make the same strong progress, but rates are improving. There are no gaps in attainment between disadvantaged students and non-disadvantaged students on either academic or vocational courses.
- Students who study A levels are less likely to complete their studies compared to similar students elsewhere. However, the proportion who take up further education, employment or training after leaving the sixth form is similar to that seen nationally. Many students who leave A-level courses do so to pursue appropriate employment and training opportunities. While the number of students applying for courses at the most highly regarded universities is rising, more could still be done to raise some students' aspiration and to encourage them to apply for such courses.
- Outcomes for students who re-sit English GCSE are lower than for mathematics. Leaders have recognised this and have started to ensure that progress improves so that more students achieve a GCSE grade in English at C or above. For example, teaching time has been increased.
- Teachers use resources effectively to support students' learning. They plan a variety of activities to keep students interested, to help them to enjoy their work and to make progress. However, some teaching pays insufficient attention to the different starting points of groups of students. In particular, the most able sometimes do not have sufficient challenge.
- Students are offered a broad range of enrichment activities including, for example, first aid, sign language and Mandarin. However, some students do not take full advantage of such opportunities. Leaders do not do enough to encourage them to participate.
- Students are helped to make informed decisions about their own safety. They receive regular information about issues such as the misuse of drugs and alcohol, and safety when using social media. They know where to get help if they are worried about themselves or a friend.

School details

Unique reference number	104829
Local authority	St Helens
Inspection number	10000582

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 comprehensive
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in 16 to 19 study programmes	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1,458
Of which, number on roll in 16 to 19 study programmes	296
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Margaret Bellis
Principal	Mr Cameron Sheeran
Telephone number	01744 678 030
Website	www.cowley.st-helens.sch.uk
Email address	cameron.sheeran@sthelens.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	23–24 November 2011

Information about this school

- Cowley International College is a much larger than average secondary school.
- A number of leaders have joined the school since the previous inspection, including a new associate principal and a new head of mathematics.
- The proportion of disadvantaged pupils is well above the national average.
- The proportion of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities broadly matches the national average. The proportion of pupils who have an education, health and care plan or a statement of educational needs is well below average.

- Very few pupils are from minority ethnic groups or speak English as an additional language.
- A number of pupils are educated through off-site provision at five providers. Providers include Aspire Training Services, Instant Training, MPH Training, Launchpad and PACE.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress.
- The school does not meet requirements on the publication of information about the curriculum on its website.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed teaching and learning in the 11 to 16 part of the school and in the sixth form. They visited form times and assemblies. They observed pupils' conduct in lessons, while moving around the school and during social times. They visited the school's support centre, 'remove' room and internal exclusion room.
- They held meetings with the principal and other senior leaders and groups of teachers, including middle leaders, and other members of staff. They met formally with four groups of pupils and spoke to others during lessons and at other times during the school day. An inspector met with a group of governors.
- An inspector met two representatives of the local authority and two representatives of St Helens RFC, which has a long-established partnership with the school.
- Inspectors examined pupils' books during lessons and during a scrutiny of samples of written work across a range of pupils and subjects.
- Inspectors reviewed documents including school policies, safeguarding information, reports from consultants, the school's own evaluation of examination results and of school effectiveness, the college improvement plan, minutes of governing body meetings and information about the performance management of teachers.
- Inspectors considered 151 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including 36 additional written comments to the survey questions, and a telephone call from a parent. They considered 104 responses from staff to an online questionnaire. One response to Ofsted's online questionnaire to pupils was received.

Inspection team

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