

# INSPECTION REPORT

## **THE NELSON THOMLINSON SCHOOL**

Wigton

LEA area: Cumbria

Unique reference number: 112397

Headteacher: Mr P M Ireland

Reporting inspector: Dr R G Wallace  
1050

Dates of inspection: 5-7 February 2001

Inspection number: 223903

Short inspection carried out under section 10 of the School Inspections Act 1996

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## INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL

Type of school:	Comprehensive
School category:	Voluntary controlled
Age range of pupils:	11-18
Gender of pupils:	Mixed
School address:	High Street Wigton Cumbria CA7 9PX
Telephone number:	016973 42160
Fax number:	016973 49160
Appropriate authority:	The Governing body
Name of chair of governors:	Mr J Hawks
Date of previous inspection:	January/February 1996

## INFORMATION ABOUT THE INSPECTION TEAM

Team members		
1050	Dr R G Wallace	Registered inspector
9907	Mr W Orr	Lay inspector
19385	Mr M Beale	Team inspector
3958	Mrs M Cawdron	Team inspector
8854	Mrs M McElroy	Team inspector
4126	Mr C Parsons	Team inspector

The inspection contractor was:

*PkR* Educational Consultants Ltd  
6 Sherman Road  
Bromley  
Kent  
BR1 3JH  
Tel: 020 8289 1924/5/6

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Alexandra House  
33 Kingsway  
London  
WC2B 6SE

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## **PART A: SUMMARY OF THE REPORT**

### **INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL**

Nelson Thomlinson is a large comprehensive school, with 1,156 pupils at the time of the inspection. It has significantly more girls than boys in total and particularly in some years, notably the first year of the Sixth Form. There are very few pupils from ethnic minorities and none needing support in the acquisition of English. The proportion of pupils with statements of special educational needs is lower than that found nationally and in Cumbria. The attainment of pupils on entry to the school is on average higher than that found nationally.

### **HOW GOOD THE SCHOOL IS**

The school enables its pupils to achieve high standards at all ages. Results in Key Stage 3 Standard Attainment Tests (SATs) and at GCSE, A level and GNVQ are high. The work currently being done by pupils is of a similarly high standard. The quality of teaching is good overall and particularly strong at Key Stage 4 and in the Sixth Form. The school's success owes much to the strong leadership of the headteacher whose ambitions for his pupils have greatly raised standards. The pupils have very good attitudes to school and behave well. There is now scope and a need for governors and parents to become more involved in shaping the next stage of the school's development. The school gives good value for money.

#### **What the school does well**

- The school enables its pupils to reach high academic standards and to make good progress overall.
- The leadership provided by the headteacher, supported by his staff and governors, has brought about big improvements. There is a high level of professional accountability within the school and performance management is well established.
- Teaching is of good quality overall with much that is very good.
- The pupils are well behaved, cheerful and mostly keen to succeed.
- The mathematics department is excellent with consistently good results by all age groups sustained over several years.
- General provision for pupils with special educational needs is good.
- The school is well regarded by its community.

#### **What could be improved**

- Standards of English, whilst high, do not match those of mathematics and science.
- The number of fixed-term exclusions is very high and the school has not considered alternative approaches that would indicate strong disapproval of misconduct without releasing pupils from the obligation to attend school.
- The governing body has been very supportive of the school but has not provided its professional management with the challenges and critique that would be helpful.
- Lower-attaining pupils at Key Stage 4 are doing no better than such pupils in other schools.
- The headteacher and governing body need to ensure that there are routes by which parental views can be heard.

*The areas for improvement will form the basis of the governors' action plan.*

### **HOW THE SCHOOL HAS IMPROVED SINCE ITS LAST INSPECTION**

The school was previously inspected in February 1996. The high standards at Key Stage 3 and A level noted then have been maintained. There has been a very big improvement in GCSE results. All results are now well above the national average. The behaviour, attitudes and attendance of the pupils are good. A high proportion of teaching is good or very good.

Good progress has been made in response to the key issues of the previous report. There is more effective teamwork and greater consistency of practice in departments. The quality of teaching in design and technology has improved and some is now very good. Religious education is better established but is still not available in the Sixth Form. There has been an improvement in information and communication technology (ICT) with more, but still insufficient use, in subjects. Not enough ICT equipment is available for adequate use in subjects, and business studies courses ought to be taught

in rooms with good ICT facilities. The school has made good progress and is well placed to continue with its programmes of improvement.

## STANDARDS

The table shows the standards achieved by 16 and 18 year olds based on average points scores in GCSE and A-level/AS-level examinations.

Performance in:	compared with			
	all schools			similar schools
	1998	1999	2000	2000
GCSE examinations	B	B	A	B
A-levels/AS-levels	A*	A	A	

Key	
well above average	A
above average	B
average	C
below average	D
well below average	E

The A\* for A level in 1998 means that in that year the school was in the top five per cent of maintained schools nationally.

The pupils have achieved results in the Key Stage 3 Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) for the last four years that have been well above the national average, both overall and in the three core subjects of English, mathematics and science. The results in 2000 were also well above the average of similar schools (those with a similar number of pupils entitled to free school meals). Within those overall results, some average and lower-attaining pupils did not do as well in English as in mathematics and science. The upward trend in the school's SATs results in recent years is broadly in line with the national trend. Girls perform better than boys, as they do nationally, but at Nelson Thomlinson the difference is much greater and in 2000 it was three times greater than that found nationally.

In 2000, the school achieved its highest ever proportion of pupils achieving grades A\*-C, with results that were well above average. This was a continuation of the big improvements at the school that have been taking place in recent years at a faster rate than nationally. The progress made by pupils from their Key Stage 3 results in 1998, when compared with similar schools, was above average for the proportion achieving grades A\*-C in five or more subjects. When the results of pupils in one subject are compared with their results in the average of all their other subjects, pupils are seen to have done better in mathematics, design and technology, geography and history, and worse in English language, art and design, business studies and physical education. Girls have consistently done better than boys at the school but, whereas in 2000 the girls achieved their best results, the boys' results were lower than in 1999 and only a little higher than in 1998. The school has achieved or exceeded its challenging targets, except for the proportion of pupils reaching or exceeding the minimum grade G in five subjects at GCSE.

Achievement at A-level is high overall, in the three core subjects and in most other subjects. Standards are also high in GNVQ. The school assesses progress from GCSE to A-level and this shows satisfactory progress overall with marked progress in some subjects.

The standards observed in lessons during the inspection and by the examination of the pupils' work match those achieved in recent examinations. Most pupils are achieving well, enjoying their learning and making good progress. Pupils with special educational needs mostly make good progress and some make very good progress as a result of carefully and specifically planned programmes. Able pupils make very good progress. Standards of literacy and numeracy are high overall. The school is aware that some pupils in lower-attaining groups are not making sufficient progress during Key Stage 4 and has taken action to improve their performance, although so far without significant results.

## PUPILS' ATTITUDES AND VALUES

Aspect	Comment
Attitudes to the school	The pupils have very good attitudes.
Behaviour, in and out of classrooms	The pupils behave very well in lessons and, despite high levels of congestion in corridors, conduct themselves sensibly around the school.
Personal development and relationships	Relationships in the school are very good. The school provides well for its pupils' personal development.
Attendance	The pupils record very good attendance.

The pupils' attitudes and behaviour are a major reason for their academic success. The rate of fixed-term exclusions is high, putting the school well into the top third nationally.

## TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teaching of pupils:	aged 11-14 years	aged 14-16 years	aged over 16 years
Lessons seen overall	Good	Very good	Very good

*Inspectors make judgements about teaching in the range: excellent; very good; good; satisfactory; unsatisfactory; poor; very poor. 'Satisfactory' means that the teaching is adequate and strengths outweigh weaknesses.*

The overall quality of teaching is good. Ninety four per cent is at least satisfactory, with six per cent that is unsatisfactory. Twenty one per cent of all teaching is very good or excellent. The teaching of the three core subjects is good overall. There is some unevenness in the teaching of English to lower-attaining sets. Specific teaching by specialist staff to pupils with special educational needs is very good. The learning needs of the highest-attaining pupils are well met. Numeracy is very well taught and most teaching of literacy is good. Older and lower-attaining pupils at Key Stage 4 respond well to good teaching in practical subjects and some other subjects, but do not study effectively on some occasions.

The strengths in teaching, which predominate, are: high expectations of the pupils who are set challenging tasks; the clarity of the teachers' objectives in lessons, often communicated to the pupils and confirmed at the end of lessons; good sequencing of activities and lessons over a topic; and, particularly in the Sixth Form, the expert subject knowledge of the teachers. A general feature of many lessons is that the teachers are encouraging and challenging the pupils to think. This is one of the strengths of mathematics teaching, but it is not confined to that subject. In a few lessons, excessive chatting is allowed during group or paired work, there is unacceptable behaviour in a very small number of lessons for older pupils and lower-attaining sets and there is insufficient consolidation of learning. The few lessons that were taught unsatisfactorily were either in Year 7 or were with lower-attaining sets where the pupils' lack of motivation had not been overcome.

The pupils are enabled to learn well and make progress in most lessons and subjects. The inadequacy of ICT equipment is an impediment to learning, particularly in business studies.

## OTHER ASPECTS OF THE SCHOOL

Aspect	Comment
The quality and range of the curriculum	The school provides a satisfactory range of courses, including GNVQ, although music and drama are not as well established at Key Stage 4 as they are at most other high-performing schools. Extra-curricular provision for music is good.
Provision for pupils with special educational needs	Specialist provision for these pupils is very good, with a high level of appropriate expertise.
Provision for pupils' personal, including spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	Provision is satisfactory overall. The school promotes its pupils' social and moral development very well. The promotion of spiritual development and appreciation is unsatisfactory. The cultural development of the pupils is satisfactory overall, but with inadequate preparation for life in multicultural Britain.
How well the school cares for its pupils	The school cares well for its pupils, with good welfare arrangements and appreciation of child protection requirements.

The curriculum arrangements generally meet the needs of the pupils. There is no provision for religious education in the Sixth Form in breach of statutory requirements. There is insufficient use of ICT to promote learning in some subjects and business studies courses are inappropriately taught in a room without sufficient ICT equipment.

## HOW WELL THE SCHOOL IS LED AND MANAGED

Aspect	Comment
Leadership and management by the headteacher and other key staff	The school is very strongly led by the headteacher who is ably supported by all staff, particularly the strong group of middle managers. There is an unremitting drive to raise standards.
How well the governors fulfil their responsibilities	The governors support the school well but do not take sufficient part in setting goals, contributing to the planning of the school with the professional staff, or monitoring the implementation of policy.
The school's evaluation of its performance	This is a very good feature of the professional management of the school, with much analysis of data, effectively used.
The strategic use of resources	The school uses its resources well. It does not have sufficient ICT equipment to enable adequate use in subjects.

The leadership of the school by the headteacher has been a main cause of its improvement and current success. The school purchases services wisely. The expansion of its buildings has been carried out with sensitivity to existing buildings to provide well-arranged accommodation.

## PARENTS' AND CARERS' VIEWS OF THE SCHOOL

What pleases parents most	What parents would like to see improved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents are pleased with the standards that their children achieve and with the school's high expectations.</li> <li>They consider the school to be well led and managed.</li> <li>The pupils' behaviour is generally approved by the parents.</li> <li>Formal reports to parents on the pupils' work are considered to be very good.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is less strong approval and some disapproval by a significant minority of parents about the school's communications and working with parents.</li> <li>Similarly, fewer parents approve strongly and a significant minority are dissatisfied with the provision of extra-curricular activities.</li> <li>Some parents are confused by the setting arrangements and disapprove of the school's not discussing or even informing them when their children are moved between sets.</li> </ul>

The inspectors endorse the parents' favourable view of the school. Inspectors can only note the parents' concerns about communications, not being in a position to say whether or not they are justified. They confirm that there is less drama and that music classes are smaller at Key Stage 4 than is usually found in schools with good academic records. They consider that consultation with parents should precede decisions to change pupils' sets and the headteacher agrees with this view.

## **PART B: COMMENTARY**

### **WHAT THE SCHOOL DOES WELL**

#### **The school enables its pupils to reach high academic standards and to make good progress overall**

1. At all stages the school's results are very good, being mostly well above the national average. In Key Stage 3 SATs, the pupils have achieved results that have been well above the national average in all three subjects for the last three years. The results were also above the average for similar schools (those with a similar proportion of pupils entitled for free school meals) in 2000.
2. The pupils achieved GCSE results that were well above the national average in 2000, both for the proportion of pupils achieving grades A\*-C in five or more subjects and on the basis of their average points scores. By the same criteria, the results have been improving dramatically in recent years, going up from 45 per cent of Year 11 achieving grades A\*-C in five or more subjects in 1996 to 72 per cent in 2000, putting the school high in the national table of the most improved schools by this criterion. Almost all subjects had results that were well above national averages, the exceptions being business studies and physical education, each entered by about a quarter of pupils. When the results of pupils in one subject are compared with the same pupils' results in the average of all their other subjects, the best results are seen to be in mathematics, design and technology, geography and history. A comparison of results in 1997 and 2000 puts the school in the top thirty nationally for improvement at GCSE.
3. A level results have been consistently high for several years, with an average points score well above the national average, and in 1997 and 1998 the school was in the top five per cent of all maintained schools (including selective grammar schools) nationally. The results of almost all subjects accorded with this high overall performance in 2000, only those in design and technology and physical education not matching the heights of the other subjects. The school has been a local leader in introducing GNVQ courses and its results have been good.
4. The Sixth Form is of high quality, enabling many pupils to go on to higher education and careers that have A level or GNVQ entry requirements. Although the proportion of pupils staying for the Sixth Form has not been as high as in most schools with similar GCSE results, there was a significant increase in 2000. The school develops its Sixth Form pupils intellectually in a wider sense whilst preparing them for examination success. Good support and guidance are provided from Year 11 until Year 13, with good monitoring of academic progress and personal development. Key skills, including ICT and mathematics, continue to be developed in the Sixth Form.
5. Standards observed during the inspection were high, matching those achieved in recent examinations. Overall literacy standards are high, although there is a very wide range. Many pupils are fluent, confident and articulate speakers, able to express their ideas and arguments at length, with only a small proportion reluctant to respond orally. Reading skills are mainly good. There is much good and excellent writing. Number skills are particularly good and their development is a main feature of the strong mathematics department. ICT skills are being developed well and this is much improved since the previous inspection, although there is still insufficient use of ICT in lessons, particularly in business studies courses.

**The leadership provided by the headteacher, supported by his staff and governors, has brought about big improvements. There is a high level of professional accountability within the school, and performance management is well established**

6. The school benefits from very strong leadership. The headteacher has an unswerving vision for the school's continued progress in achieving ever-better examination results, based upon his understanding of the need to raise the pupils' aspirations and his belief in what they can achieve. He is supported by his senior and middle managers, by the staff as a whole and by the Governing body. The heads of department provide very strong and effective leadership. Management approaches, including staff training, are clearly focused on raising standards.
7. Management accountability is well established in the school. All heads of department report to one of the senior staff on a weekly basis. This tier of management, already mostly good at the time of the previous inspection, has been further strengthened. Much statistical analysis of examination results takes place and the resulting data and conclusions are used to identify weaknesses that are then remedied. The performance of classes, and therefore of their teachers, is analysed for the core subjects on the basis of progress from previous levels of attainment or towards targets that have been set.
8. Statutory targets, which are ambitious, are achieved except in regard to the proportion of pupils achieving grades A\*-G in five or more subjects. The even more demanding, unofficial targets are also often exceeded. Success is celebrated but laurels on which to rest do not exist. The striving for ever-higher achievements continues with each achievement being the springboard for the next.

**Teaching is of good quality overall, with much that is very good**

9. Teaching is at least satisfactory in all but a small proportion of lessons. In 22 per cent of lessons it is very good or excellent. Teaching is good overall at Key Stage 3 and very good at Key Stage 4 and in the Sixth Form. Teachers and pupils in Year 13 (Upper Sixth) are often working in ways and at A level more commonly found in the first years of universities.
10. At all key stages, the teachers have good subject knowledge, demonstrated in a Year 11 history lesson on the Korean War and a Year 13 history lesson on Joseph II of Austria. The approaches were different, with a big contribution from the teacher and textbook to the Year 11 lesson and heavy demands made upon the pupils' knowledge and understanding in Year 13, but in both cases it was the teachers' expertise that lifted the lessons. Constructive relationships between teachers and pupils are effective in producing good work as in a Year 13 textiles lesson where an atmosphere that was both relaxed and purposeful enabled the pupils to make very good progress. The teachers also have high expectations. This was evident in many lessons; for example, in a Year 9 French lesson on hobbies, journeys and other activities requiring transactional language, using three tenses. The teacher demanded and achieved high performance. Similarly in a Year 11 mathematics lesson with the top set, the teacher had high expectations of the pupils who had been set challenging questions to ponder over the weekend. In the lesson the pupils came to the board and worked through the solutions to problems with an attentive audience of other pupils. The work was at the level of grade A or A\* for GCSE. High expectations are also a common feature of top sets in English, with some sophisticated work taking place with older pupils.
11. It is a common feature of lessons at the school that objectives are clear and stated to the pupils at the outset. Many lessons have a good structure, as was the case in a Year 9 English lesson with a low-attaining set working on *Macbeth*. The text was difficult for the

pupils, but the teacher's structured approach enabled them to give lively responses and make good progress. Many lessons have a good sequence of activities. This was the case in a Year 11 geography lesson on global warming, where integrated use of textbooks, question and answer, the development of pupils' ideas, the analysis of data into pros and cons and the effective use of a spider diagram enabled the combined activities to make sense and promoted good learning.

12. Some, although not all, teachers encourage independence of learning by pupils within a secure lesson structure. In a Year 13 design and technology lesson pupils were working on their individual projects and, although the teacher was able to spend time with each pupil giving advice in depth, it was the pupils who remained in control of their work. Even with younger pupils, some teachers are challenging pupils to think for themselves and to justify their judgements; for example, in a Year 9 religious education lesson where, in the context of a campaign about buses, the pupils were tackling moral questions about the legitimacy of different forms of protest.
13. There is a growing emphasis on the accurate use of language in the school. Key subject words are displayed in rooms, to encourage their accurate use and spelling, although reference is not always made to the words on walls when they are being used in the lesson, so that some opportunities for reinforcement are lost. A good emphasis on language was seen in a Year 9 science lesson on light, with the teacher explaining vocabulary clearly and insisting on its accurate use.
14. There was a small number of lessons that were taught unsatisfactorily. These were in Year 7 and in lower sets in Years 9 and 11. Low levels of expectation by the teachers, coupled with their difficulty in overcoming the pupils' poor motivation in the older classes, were the reasons for these unsatisfactory lessons.

#### **The pupils are well behaved, cheerful and mostly keen to succeed**

15. There is a good atmosphere in the school. The emphasis on academic achievement results in pupils who are mostly confident and relaxed. There is a desire to succeed, shared by the teachers and most pupils, and this identity of goal allows learning to take place in a purposeful and cheerful way.
16. The pupils behave well around the school, moving quickly to lessons in a big school with buildings spread over a large site. Congestion at lesson changes and particularly in waiting for admission to the dining hall is a problem, but the pupils respond reasonably with the minimum of supervision. Even some of the younger pupils are beginning to shed some of their uninhibited desire to get to places quickly as they develop an understanding of the virtues of patience and consideration for others.

#### **The mathematics department is excellent with consistently good results by all age groups sustained over several years**

17. Mathematics standards are very high. The results in mathematics examinations have been consistently high for some time.
18. By all the criteria used for assessing attainment in the Key Stage 3 SATs, the results are well above average. This is the case overall, for the proportion of pupils achieving Level 5 or higher, for the proportion achieving Level 6 or higher and on the basis of the average points score of all pupils.

19. Similarly at GCSE, the mathematics results have been consistently good. In 2000, when more than 98 per cent of Year 11 were entered for the subject, all achieved at least a grade G and two-thirds achieved grades A\*-C, 20 per cent above the national rate. Ten per cent of the entrants achieved A\* grades and a further 15 per cent achieved A grades. Thus almost a quarter of the entire year group achieved A\* or A grades. The pupils entered for mathematics did significantly better than in the average of all the others subjects for which they were entered.
20. There was a large entry for A level mathematics in 2000. Half the entrants achieved the highest A/B grades.
21. These high standards were also seen during the inspection. They are the result of a well-led and well-organised department. The teachers acknowledge how much the pupils already know when they arrive in Year 7 and build understanding and skills throughout the pupils' time in the school by setting challenging work. Much attention is given to learning through investigation, particularly for pupils of average attainment or higher. Much of the teaching is good and some is very good. Questioning is used routinely to require pupils to think mathematically. A good working atmosphere is created in classrooms, with attention to mental skills at the beginning, followed by main class teaching, an activity and then a review of the lesson's learning at the end. Analysing the pupils' achievements and setting targets for improvement are strong features of this department as of others at the school. This is a very strong department by any standards.

#### **General provision for pupils with special educational needs is good**

22. The work being done by special educational needs teachers with pupils withdrawn from lessons for individual tuition is of high quality. It is enabling some pupils to make good progress and in some cases very good progress during Year 7. This is a major contribution to the school's work in tackling weaknesses in the pupils' learning early in their careers at the school. The teachers use a variety of methods, respond effectively when a method is judged not to be successful, assess progress regularly and give appropriate tuition. The Year 7 accelerated learning class is also successful. Good routines, understood by all the pupils, establish a calm working atmosphere in quite a large class for pupils who need special help. The pupils work well on an ICT programme that reinforces learning and acknowledges success, receive tuition in a small group and are heard to read by trained Sixth Form pupils. The school invites a group of new pupils with weaker reading skills to a meeting with their parents, who are given preparation to join in paired reading with their children at home.
23. With the approval of the local education authority, some of the resources allocated to the school for pupils with statements of special educational needs are used to reduce the size of classes in which these pupils are taught. The very good work being done in the special needs department is usually reinforced in the lower-attaining sets where the pupils spend the greater part of their time. The tuition is successful and well matched to the needs of individuals. There are, however, a few occasions when the lack of in-class support, when several pupils may have statements for weaknesses in literacy or for behaviour, does not always allow the pupils to make sufficient progress.

#### **The school is well regarded by its community**

24. Pupils join the school from a wide area. A third of the pupils come from the town of Wigton, where Nelson Thomlinson is the only secondary school and where children have an automatic right of entry. Two-thirds come from beyond the town, with significant

numbers coming from outside the catchment area designated by the local education authority. Many parents have to pay transport costs and do so in order that their child can attend the school. The school has more applicants than it can admit. Parents regard the school highly and value both its academic success and the values that it promotes. Even parents who have suggestions to make on how the school could be even better have no doubts about its overall quality.

## **WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED**

### **Standards of English, whilst being high, do not match those of mathematics and science**

25. Standards in English are high, being well above the national average, for example in the Key Stage 3 SATs results and GCSE results. There is, however, evidence that in most national tests and by various criteria, standards in English are not as high as in the other core subjects and at GCSE as in some other subjects.
26. At Key Stage 3, the English results, like those of mathematics and science, are well above average, yet the English results are not as far ahead of the national average as those of the other two subjects. Boys in particular are much closer to the national average for boys than they are in the other two core subjects. When compared with those of similar schools, the English results are not so far above average as those for mathematics and science. The proportion of pupils at the school achieving Level 5 and higher is the same as that for similar school (schools with a similar proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals). The English Key Stage 3 SATs points score was the same in 2000 as it was three years earlier in 1997, whilst the national score has gone up.
27. In 2000 there were fewer of the highest A\* grades at GCSE than in mathematics and science. When the GCSE results of pupils taking English (based on average points score) are compared with the average of the results in all their other subjects, pupils are shown to have done significantly worse in English. Although the A-level group in Year 12 is now much larger, the number of entries in 2000 was quite low, being only half the number entered for mathematics, biology and chemistry and fewer than the number entered for physics, history and geography, although the proportion of pupils achieving the higher A/B grades was only slightly lower in English than in most of these subjects.
28. The school is aware that appreciation of the very high overall examination results in English needs to be qualified by the above data. It has allocated more time to English in Year 7, introduced a secondary school version of the literacy hour and begun tests that measure attainment levels for all pupils at the beginning and end of Year 7. It has engaged a literacy assistant to provide in-class support at Key Stage 3. The school has thus responded with typical vigour to an acknowledged need.
29. There is a close correspondence between the school's results and the standards seen in English during the inspection. The difference between the attainment of pupils in top sets and those in the lower groups is more marked than it should be. Pupils in lower sets are not making the progress they should, for a variety of reasons. This is partly due to the fact that, as they move up the school, a significant number of pupils have increasingly low self-esteem and poor motivation, although this does not have as significant an effect on their achievement in mathematics as it does in English. A further factor affecting progress is some unevenness in the quality of teaching of these groups, although the quality of teaching in English is generally good and frequently very good. The pupils need a more carefully structured teaching programme, appropriate to their

learning needs, together with teaching approaches that interest, challenge and maintain motivation.

30. There is a lack of consistency in marking. While the marking of the work of pupils in higher sets is detailed and rigorous, that of pupils in lower sets, particularly at Key Stage 3, tends to be encouraging rather than sharply analytical. These pupils are neither regularly given clear information about their levels of attainment, nor is there consistently effective use of target-setting to promote progress.
31. The English department plans to develop the Year 7 curriculum along the lines of the Literacy Strategy approach, building on the introduction of the literacy hour. This is an encouraging proposal and should help pupils whose literacy is weak to consolidate basic skills as well as ensure for all pupils greater continuity with work done in primary schools.

**The number of fixed-term exclusions is very high and the school has not considered alternative approaches that would indicate strong disapproval of misconduct without releasing pupils from the obligation to attend school**

32. The number of fixed-term exclusions is very high, putting the school well into the top third nationally of schools of a similar size. In the last school year, 57 pupils were excluded for fixed terms, meaning that about 6 per cent of the pupils in the school, omitting the Sixth Form, were excluded at least once. Some pupils were excluded more than once so that the total number of exclusions was 69. These are very high figures by national comparison. In comparison with Cumbria, the number of days spent out of school by pupils who are excluded is average.
33. The school is very reluctant to exclude pupils permanently and seldom does so. There were two permanent exclusions in the previous school year, a higher figure than usual, and this was similar to the average for comprehensive schools nationally. Comparisons, based on such a small incidence of permanent exclusions both nationally and at the school, have their risks, but there is no evidence to suggest that The Nelson Thomlinson School might have a high number of fixed-term exclusions because it is excluding fewer pupils permanently.
34. The pupils have a clear understanding of the school's expectations about their conduct. The graduation of sanctions is clear. Pupils at risk of being permanently excluded are given an additional opportunity to improve by being interviewed at governor level, so that they are aware of the danger and can draw back. The overall effectiveness of the school's procedures is not in question. The school has not, however, considered putting in an interim stage before fixed-term exclusions, such as those practised in other schools, which have the merit of withdrawing pupils from their classes, isolating them from their fellow pupils, and thus demonstrating to them and to other pupils the school's intolerance of their behaviour, whilst not allowing them to miss school.

**The Governing body has been very supportive of the school but has not provided its professional management with the challenges and critique that would be helpful**

35. The strong focus provided by the headteacher's leadership of the school has not been balanced by a governing body performing the role of a well-disposed but challenging critic. Apart from the financial aspects of the school, which are regularly and carefully scrutinised by a committee of the governing body, the governors play a largely passive role.

36. The curriculum committee, for example, is not properly constituted with a membership, minutes and reports to the governing body. It meets once a term, but there have been several terms when it has not met. Its purpose is mainly to inform governors about current national developments in the curriculum. Attendance is open to all governors but it is rare for more than six to attend. It is a form of governor training, but does not involve the governors in planning, albeit with professional leadership from the school's management, developments in the school's curriculum.
37. The Governing body in this and other regards is responsive to the school's needs but not itself active in shaping the school. It has largely delegated to the school's management most of those aspects for which it has a statutory responsibility and is not always monitoring the school effectively. The large number of fixed-term exclusions are reported to it in batches, but the governing body has not queried or even been conscious of the high incidence of this sanction and considered other means of indicating that bounds have been crossed.
38. The school's targets for improvement are not forged in discussion between the governing body or one of its committees and the professional managers, but presented by the headteacher and adopted with little discussion. Nobody is more ambitious for the school and more demanding of it than the headteacher, so that there is little danger of any relaxation in action to raise standards, but the present process does not engage the governors. There is one important target, set for itself by the school, which has not been reached – the standard to be achieved by a significant proportion of pupils at the lower end of the attainment range.
39. The governors can claim, quite rightly, that the headteacher is doing a good job running a successful school that is enabling its pupils to achieve ever higher results. Even the most successful schools and headteachers can benefit from a challenging and rigorous governing body which acknowledges success but can still bring an independent view to their work and thus fulfil their statutory responsibilities effectively without interfering with the day-to-day running of the school. The governors are missing the opportunity to make a contribution to the sustenance of the school's dynamism.
40. There is sometimes a difficulty in one-school towns in ensuring that the governing body is sufficiently independent of the school's professional managers. This danger is increased when the school is patently doing well and governors are not required to intervene decisively to prevent decline. The school would benefit from the participation in its governing body of more people with no previous links to the school, to complement those who are appointed by parents and staff as representatives of those interests or who have other associations with the school.

#### **Lower-attaining pupils at Key Stage 4 are doing no better than such pupils in other schools**

41. When the broader range of attainment, shown by the proportion of pupils achieving grades A\*-G in five or more subjects at GCSE, is compared with the national average, the school's achievement is only average, contrasting markedly with what it enables higher-attaining pupils to achieve. The progress made by this same band of pupils from the Key Stage 3 SATs to GCSE is also much less than that achieved by the other pupils in the school.
42. The school enables its pupils overall to make good progress between their attainment on entry to Year 7 and GCSE, and above average progress from the Key Stage 3 SATs to GCSE when compared with similar schools (those having a similar number of pupils entitled to free school meals). This overall good progress masks unsatisfactory progress

by the lower-attaining pupils. The progress from the Key Stage 3 SATs for pupils achieving the wider band of A\*-G in five or more subjects in comparison with similar schools is unfavourable, with Nelson Thomlinson being well below average. This, and the evidence during the inspection itself, confirms the school's own concern that the pupils who are in the lower sets at Key Stage are not doing as well as they should do.

43. The school is not only aware of the problem but has taken action to overcome it. Some of the most experienced and senior staff take the lowest sets at Key Stage 4. Vocational courses have been introduced. The school's determination successfully to teach all its pupils well, including the lower-attaining, is proclaimed, and the evidence confirms the honesty of that aim. All of the other forces of the school are being brought to bear on the problem, including those of the school's strong pastoral team. In this, as in all matters, the school honestly appraises weaknesses and seeks solutions.
44. To date those solutions have not succeeded in overcoming the low morale of pupils in lower-attaining sets. There was evidence during the inspection that some pupils in lower sets at Key Stage 4 had lost most, if not all, motivation. Whilst this may be a general feature of pupils towards the end of their statutory period of schooling, the national comparison for the progress of pupils must always be borne in mind. Some classes in Year 11 are quite large and have high proportions of pupils with learning difficulties or poor records of behaviour with no in-class support.

**The headteacher and the Governing body need to ensure that there are routes by which parental views can be heard**

45. The school has every reason to be satisfied that it is meeting the main wishes of its parents to provide good education in a secure environment. Parents like the school and are pleased that their children attend it. The school can be confident that it has the support of its community.
46. It nonetheless needs to ensure that parental suggestions and worries are more easily heard. Although a large majority of parents feel comfortable about approaching the school with a problem, there is a minority that does not. Even the approving majority were more hesitant on this point than on others. The consultation meeting with parents revealed other areas of concern. Points that were raised by parents included the quality of homework in Year 7, a lack of understanding about setting, lack of consultation or even formal notification when a pupil is moved between sets, and a failure by staff at various levels to respond to written questions or concerns. These are points, amongst others, revealed by committed parents well disposed towards the school when given the opportunity in the neutral forum of an inspection. The school can only benefit by ensuring that parental views are more regularly revealed.

## WHAT SHOULD THE SCHOOL DO TO IMPROVE FURTHER?

47. The school's already high standards will be enhanced by the headteacher and governors taking action to:

- (1) raise the already high standards in English to match those of the other core subjects by:
  - concentrating on bringing up the standards of pupils in lower sets, particularly by raising their expectations and self-esteem
  - ensuring that the quality of teaching with such groups is consistently high
  - providing a carefully structured teaching programme, appropriate to these pupils' needs
  - ensuring that the marking of their work is analytical, detailed and rigorous, as it is for higher-attaining pupils
  - use target-setting consistently to promote progress;
- (2) reduce the number of fixed-term exclusions and the learning time lost by:
  - considering additional interim stages before exclusion, such as isolation within the school, which have the merit of signalling strong disapproval of misconduct whilst not releasing the pupil from the obligation to attend school and learn
  - reducing the length of exclusions to the time required by a parent to accompany the child back to school if this is less than three days;
- (3) achieve greater involvement of the governing body in setting the school's strategic plan and monitoring its performance by:
  - ensuring that the Curriculum Committee (and any other committee that is established) is properly constituted with a membership, minutes and its own agenda, so that it contributes with the school's professional management to the development of curriculum policies and reports regularly to the full Governing body
  - extending the accountability that the staff have to the headteacher, so that the school itself benefits from the friendly criticisms and monitoring by the governors to ensure that the few weaknesses, such as the achievement of the less able pupils in the school, are noted with agreed action to follow;
- (4) tackle the relative underachievement of lower-attainers, particularly at Key Stage 4, by re-examining the curriculum arrangements and ensuring high quality teaching at all times for these pupils;
- (5) devise means by which parents can bring concerns and suggestions, such as those voiced to inspectors, more readily and routinely to the school's notice.

## PART C: SCHOOL DATA AND INDICATORS

### Summary of the sources of evidence for the inspection

Number of lessons observed	84
Number of discussions with staff, governors, other adults and pupils	23

### Summary of teaching observed during the inspection

Excellent	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Poor	Very Poor
1	20	42	31	6	0	0

The table gives the percentage of teaching observed in each of the seven categories used to make judgements about lessons.

### Information about the school's pupils

Pupils on the school's roll	Y7 – Y11	Sixth form
Number of pupils on the school's roll	966	190
Number of full-time pupils known to be eligible for free school meals	78	1

Special educational needs	Y7 – Y11	Sixth form
Number of pupils with statements of special educational needs	13	0
Number of pupils on the school's special educational needs register	250	0

English as an additional language	No of pupils
Number of pupils with English as an additional language	0

Pupil mobility in the last school year	No of pupils
Pupils who joined the school other than at the usual time of first admission	12
Pupils who left the school other than at the usual time of leaving	16

### Attendance

#### Authorised absence

	%
School data	6.6
National comparative data	7.7

#### Unauthorised absence

	%
School data	0.2
National comparative data	0.4

Both tables give the percentage of half days (sessions) missed through absence for the latest complete reporting year.

### Attainment at the end of Key Stage 3

Number of registered pupils in final year of Key Stage 3 for the latest reporting year	Year	Boys	Girls	Total
		2000	80	92

National Curriculum Test/Task Results		English	Mathematics	Science
Numbers of pupils at NC level 5 and above	Boys	49	60	53
	Girls	78	81	76
	Total	127	141	129
Percentage of pupils at NC level 5 or above	School	74 (69)	82 (80)	75 (76)
	National	63 (63)	65 (62)	59 (55)
Percentage of pupils at NC level 6 or above	School	43 (45)	58 (51)	42 (47)
	National	28 (28)	42 (38)	30 (23)

Teachers' Assessments		English	Mathematics	Science
Numbers of pupils at NC level 5 and above	Boys	50	62	71
	Girls	75	84	86
	Total	125	146	157
Percentage of pupils at NC level 5 or above	School	73 (85)	85 (81)	91 (86)
	National	64 (64)	66 (64)	62 (60)
Percentage of pupils at NC level 6 or above	School	57 (59)	65 (58)	65 (56)
	National	31 (31)	39 ([37)	29 (28)

Percentages in brackets refer to the year before the latest reporting year.

### Attainment at the end of Key Stage 4

Number of 15 year olds on roll in January of the latest reporting year	Year	Boys	Girls	Total
	2000	67	102	169

GCSE results		5 or more grades A* to C	5 or more grades A*-G	1 or more grades A*-G
Numbers of pupils achieving the standard specified	Boys	41	58	66
	Girls	80	98	101
	Total	121	156	167
Percentage of pupils achieving the standard specified	School	72 (65)	92 (91)	99 (97)
	National	47.4 (46.6)	90.6 (90.9)	95.6 (95.8)

Percentages in brackets refer to the year before the latest reporting year.

GCSE results		GCSE point score
Average point score per pupil	School	44.2 (42.1)
	National	38.4 (8.0)

Figures in brackets refer to the year before the latest reporting year.

Vocational qualifications	Number	% success rate
Number studying for approved vocational qualifications or units and the percentage of those pupils who achieved all those they studied	School	16 37.5
	National	n/a

### Attainment at the end of the sixth form

Number of students aged 16, 17 and 18 on roll in January of the latest reporting year who were entered for GCE A-level or AS-level examinations	Year	Boys	Girls	Total
	2000	25	32	57

Average A/AS points score per candidate	For candidates entered for 2 or more A-levels or equivalent			For candidates entered for fewer than 2 A-levels or equivalent		
	Male	Female	All	Male	Female	All
School	25.6	23.0	24.0	3.7	2.2	3.0
National	17.7	18.6	18.2	2.6	2.9	2.7

Figures in brackets refer to the year before the latest reporting year.

Vocational qualifications	Number	% success rate
Number in their final year of studying for approved vocational qualifications or units and the percentage of those pupils who achieved all those they studied	School	28 96.4%
	National	n/a

### **Ethnic background of pupils**

	No of pupils
Black – Caribbean heritage	2
Black – African heritage	0
Black – other	0
Indian	0
Pakistani	1
Bangladeshi	0
Chinese	0
White	1149
Any other minority ethnic group	4

### **Exclusions in the last school year**

	Fixed period	Permanent
Black – Caribbean heritage	0	0
Black – African heritage	0	0
Black – other	0	0
Indian	0	0
Pakistani	0	0
Bangladeshi	0	0
Chinese	0	0
White	69	2
Other minority ethnic groups	0	0

*This table gives the number of exclusions, which may be different from the number of pupils excluded.*

### **Teachers and classes**

#### **Qualified teachers and classes: Y7 – Y13**

Total number of qualified teachers (FTE)	65.9
Number of pupils per qualified teacher	17.5

*FTE means full-time equivalent.*

#### **Education support staff: Y7 – Y11**

Total number of education support staff	10
Total aggregate hours worked per week	175

#### **Deployment of teachers: Y7 – Y13**

Percentage of time teachers spend in contact with classes	79.1
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#### **Average teaching group size: Y7 – Y11**

Key Stage 3	22.9
Key Stage 4	23.1

### **Financial information**

Financial year	1999-2000
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	£
Total income	2,684,814
Total expenditure	2,584,419
Expenditure per pupil	2,376
Balance brought forward from previous year	223,316
Balance carried forward to next year	323,711

## Results of the survey of parents and carers

### Questionnaire return rate

Number of questionnaires sent out	1,156
Number of questionnaires returned	179

### Percentage of responses in each category

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
My child likes school.	51	43	4	1	0
My child is making good progress in school.	63	34	2	2	1
Behaviour in the school is good.	36	54	4	1	3
My child gets the right amount of work to do at home.	32	55	11	1	1
The teaching is good.	52	45	1	0	2
I am kept well informed about how my child is getting on.	37	45	13	3	2
I would feel comfortable about approaching the school with questions or a problem.	51	39	4	5	1
The school expects my child to work hard and achieve his or her best.	79	19	2	0	0
The school works closely with parents.	32	47	11	4	3
The school is well led and managed.	63	28	4	1	3
The school is helping my child become mature and responsible.	50	42	4	1	2
The school provides an interesting range of activities outside lessons.	32	38	13	2	12

### Other issues raised by parents

Parents are confused about the sets in which their children have been placed and concerned at changes in sets without notification. The issue of reports on the last day of term prevents discussion until after the long summer holiday and causes a loss of momentum. Several parents with children in Year 7 and with children also in other years feel that homework in Year 7 is not as well structured or of the same quality as it is for older pupils. Several parents who were otherwise strong supporters of the school told of letters that had gone unanswered and of problems not raised early enough by the staff but left until reports were issued, commenting that these experiences contrasted with the good response from the school when parents and teachers meet face-to-face.