

Didcot Girls' School

Inspection report

Unique reference number	123260
Local authority	Oxfordshire
Inspection number	380632
Inspection dates	25–26 January 2012
Lead inspector	Christine Raeside HMI

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

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Girls
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1,201
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	199
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Dr Marcus Gover
Headteacher	Mrs Rachael Warwick
Date of previous school inspection	24–25 March 2009
School address	Manor Crescent Didcot OX11 7AJ
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Age group	11–18
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Introduction

Inspection team

Christine Raeside	Her Majesty's Inspector
Christine Field	Additional inspector
Gary Kirkley	Additional inspector
John Meinke	Additional inspector
Carol Worthington	Additional inspector

This inspection was carried out with two days' notice. Inspectors observed 40 teachers teach 45 lessons, of which six were joint observations with members of the senior team. In addition, the inspection team made short visits to a number of lessons, sometimes accompanied by a senior leader. They held meetings with four groups of students, members of the governing body, school staff, including senior and middle leaders and a member of the local authority. Inspectors took account of the responses to the online questionnaire (Parent View) in planning the inspection, observed the school's work, and looked at a range of documents, including the school improvement plan, minutes of the governing body and school policies. They also analysed responses to inspection questionnaires completed by 249 parents and carers and others completed by students and staff.

Information about the school

Didcot Girls' School is larger than average. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is lower than the national average. Most students are White British; the proportions from minority ethnic backgrounds or who speak English as an additional language are low. The proportion of students with special educational needs identified at the school action stage of support is about half the national average; the proportion at the school action plus stage or with a statement of special educational needs is also lower than average. Sixth form provision is shared with the local boys' school, St Birinus. The school has specialist status in language and enterprise and holds the International School award. The school exceeds the current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for students' attainment and progress.

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. It has undergone rapid and significant improvement since the arrival of the headteacher in September 2010. Achievement is good and improving rapidly. In 2011, the proportion of girls attaining five or more GCSE results at grade C or higher, including English and mathematics, was significantly higher than the national average, representing good progress over time. The sixth form is good.
- Teaching is good and, in about a fifth of lessons during the inspection, was outstanding. As a result, learning and progress are usually good in all year groups, including the sixth form, where teaching is particularly strong. Disabled students and those with special educational needs make good progress overall, although there is some variation within this group. Some girls who enter the school with low prior attainment in mathematics, for example, find it difficult to catch up. The school has good and rapidly developing provision to accelerate the reading ability of girls who struggle with basic literacy, but this is less well developed for numeracy.
- Behaviour is now good as a result of concerted and effective action for improvement. The headteacher immediately established high standards and expectations of behaviour and learning when she joined the school. Students, their parents and carers and staff all spoke of how much behaviour has improved. Systems for managing challenging behaviour and eradicating any distractions from learning are well understood by everyone and consistently implemented. A similarly rigorous approach to absence has driven up attendance figures, which are now above average.
- The headteacher and senior leaders know the school well. Their evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses is accurate, searching and uncompromising. They are ambitious for every girl to achieve at the highest levels and to have an exceptional educational experience. The governing body is highly supportive of this aim and actively involved in school improvement. The joint sixth form provision benefits from close and effective liaison between school leaders.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Increase the proportion of good and outstanding teaching to secure outstanding achievement for all, by:

- ensuring that all teachers and other adults consistently tailor tasks and activities so that all students make excellent progress, whatever their starting point
- improving the quality of marking and use of assessment so that it is consistently as detailed, informative and developmental as the best in the school
- implementing a planned strategy to accelerate and improve the development of numeracy skills across the curriculum, particularly for those entering the school with low or insecure ability in mathematics.

Main report

Achievement of pupils

Students are enthusiastic learners who develop and acquire skills well. They are responsive to high expectations and to teaching that challenges them to meet or exceed stretching targets. The best learning takes place in lessons where students are enabled to take a lead role in their learning and given time to think about and articulate what they have learned. In a mathematics lesson, for example, the emphasis on sharing ideas, approaches and workings out ensured that students of a range of abilities made good progress and grasped the key concept well. In English, responsibility cards promoted independence; those with 'manager' cards organised and summarised learning for the group. Achievement is improving because teachers are drawing successfully on students' growing capacity for independence and resilience in their learning.

The school's forensic analysis of each girl's progress enables teachers to identify and intervene quickly if anyone is falling behind. This approach is helping to secure good progress and attainment well above national averages. The very large majority of parents and carers feel that their daughter is making good progress at school and that their individual needs are met. Inspectors agree with this view. The small numbers of girls from minority ethnic backgrounds and those who speak English as an additional language achieve particularly well. Disabled students and those with special educational needs have made more uneven progress in the past, but gaps are closing rapidly and this group, on balance, also achieves well. A focus on mathematics has been particularly successful in increasing rates of progress, which are now above national averages for all levels of prior attainment and significantly strong for the most able. Sixth form students also achieve well; attainment generally meets or exceeds national averages and progress is good across AS, A2 and applied courses.

Quality of teaching

Approaches to teaching are often imaginative and engaging. The best lessons have been carefully planned to include everyone. The purpose of the lesson is clear from the outset and students can make links between the learning and their individual improvement targets. Teachers target their questioning so that everyone is expected to answer and questions challenge individuals at the appropriate level. Parents and carers view teaching as good and many commented on the enthusiasm and

commitment of teachers. One commented on how certain teachers 'inspire and motivate' his daughter; and another that their daughters were exceeding their predicted grades 'thanks to the quality of teaching and learning'.

The impact of the curriculum can be seen in the strongest teaching which supports students' good social, moral, spiritual and cultural development. In a geography lesson, the teacher's continual reference to the learning objectives and close monitoring of understanding enabled students to work independently at a brisk pace. High expectations and trust elicited outstanding behaviour for learning; by the end, students understood 'tectonic plates', but had also reflected on the implications for vulnerable communities in the face of natural disaster. Students in assembly were asked to think about how long it would take them to count to six million. The impact of the answer – about 10 weeks – enabled deeper spiritual reflection on the theme of Holocaust Memorial Day. Across the curriculum, lessons are increasingly effective in developing students' personal learning and thinking skills, for example through group collaboration, or taking leadership roles in lessons. The emphasis is on a 'can do' approach.

Teachers know students' individual needs well. Information about how to support disabled students and those with special educational needs provides clear and specific advice on the best approach to learning for each individual. Many teachers make skilled use of this information to structure groups and plan activities, so that learning is effective for all. Where teaching is only satisfactory, however, it is often because activities are not sufficiently well tailored to meet the needs of all learners. Support from additional adults is improving and appropriately focused on developing independence. However, they are not always proactive about adapting materials or activities to help all girls access the lesson.

Students know their targets well and can explain what they need to do to reach them. This is supported by some high quality marking and guided use of assessment within lessons, although this is not fully embedded or consistent in all subjects. Attitudes to learning are highly positive. Girls told inspectors how they value teaching that is passionate and knowledgeable about the subject. In an A-level English lesson, students engaged in a 'silent debate', responding in writing to one another's emerging thoughts about complex relationships between texts. The technique ensured that everyone was equally challenged and elicited sophisticated and highly perceptive responses. The teaching engendered a shared passion for literature and a safe climate in which to explore new and challenging concepts.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

The school's ethos as a 'values-driven' community is evident in students' respectful attitudes towards one another and adults. The environment is calm, well ordered and friendly. Students mix well together and interact with adults with good humour and good manners.

Positive behaviour management strategies have been firmly and consistently enforced since the arrival of the headteacher. Students understand and value the clear boundaries now in place. They welcome the wide range of opportunities to take responsibility for others, such as mentoring a younger student, partnering a

struggling reader or becoming a school council member. Anti-bullying campaigns, led by the school council, have left a deep impression. Students feel very safe at school and express confidence that the school will act immediately and effectively if they have concerns.

Parents and carers overwhelmingly agree that their daughters are safe at school. The large majority also agree that the standard of behaviour is good. Many recognised and commented on the significant improvements in this area since the last inspection. However, a significant minority also expressed anxiety about the impact on learning of poor behaviour. The school acknowledges that, although good behaviour is now the norm, the legacy of lower standards in the past will take time to shift. There is no complacency about the marked success in this area; senior leaders are determined to secure and sustain outstanding behaviour.

Leadership and management

Senior leaders have been energised by the highly effective leadership of the headteacher. There has been a rapid pace of change since her arrival. School systems have been scrutinised for their effectiveness and some completely overhauled to focus on learning and achievement. Middle leaders make an increasingly strong and cohesive contribution to school improvement. There is a genuine commitment to excellence and a determination to instil ambition, resilience and leadership in the students. Parents and carers recognise this. One described their daughter's 'great sense of empowerment, confidence and achievement'; and another that their daughter had 'blossomed continuously since joining DGS'.

School leaders are sharp and accurate in their judgements and demonstrate high expectations of the quality of teaching and learning. Actions to drive continuous improvement in teaching are coherent and effective. They include student input into defining what constitutes an excellent lesson and peer coaching for teachers to improve their practice. Staff training and development are focused on individual need, as well as responsive to emerging whole-school priorities. Senior leaders demonstrate detailed knowledge of individual teachers as well as departmental strengths and areas for development. Expertise and good practice in the specialism is used effectively to develop teaching across the curriculum. Plans for continued improvement are appropriate and sharply focused. The governing body supports and drives the strategic direction of the school and holds it to account rigorously. Along with senior leaders, governors have ensured that arrangements for safeguarding are robust and meet statutory requirements. The school's capacity to improve further is strong.

The curriculum is broad, balanced and enables progression. Significant changes have provided more appropriate pathways and more timely assessment. The sixth form curriculum benefits from the economies of scale achieved through partnership, widening the offer available to both schools. A strongly academic core delivers a robust 'English baccalaureate' model, supported by strong teaching in humanities and a wide choice of languages through the specialism. Students whose reading ability is below Level 4 on entry are identified for additional support. This includes partnership with Year 11 reading mentors, trained in strategies to support and develop literacy, which they implement confidently and successfully. A wide range of

extra-curricular opportunities enriches students' experiences and contributes to their wider development. 'Super Learning Days' allow a deeper focus on key aspects of learning, for example the 'Not in our Name' anti-racism day. A wide range of sport, music, dance and drama enhances cultural awareness and participation. The forthcoming school production, 'Return to the Forbidden Planet' will involve over 100 girls. Students' awareness of modern democratic society is well developed, for example through the work of the school council, public speaking competitions and visits to parliament. The school's specialism is well used to embrace diversity and promote understanding of different cultures across the school.

The ambition for every individual, the focus on excellence and a 'values-driven' ethos are rooted in a commitment to equality. Students recognise that they are valued and free to express themselves. Some described how they had used the 'friends' group' to share and raise awareness of different languages and cultures in the school. One girl used her citizenship lesson to stimulate debate about religious difference and promote better understanding. There is a buzz among students about the multicultural fashion show they have planned for the spring to celebrate the school's diversity.

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.

27 January 2012

Dear Students



Inspection of Didcot Girls' School, Didcot OX11 7AJ

Thank you for the warm welcome you gave us when we inspected your school recently. We very much enjoyed hearing your views about your school and how much it has changed in recent years. We agree that the school has improved greatly since its last inspection and is now a good school.

You told us, and your parents and carers strongly agree, that you feel very safe at school. You are confident that staff will act effectively to resolve any concerns. You work with them to tackle bullying head-on, making it clear, through the school council in particular, that it will not be tolerated. You welcome the firm line on behaviour led by the headteacher. Behaviour is now good and procedures for dealing with any disruption are clear and effective.

Lessons are often stimulating and interesting and you are enthusiastic and committed learners. Everyone is expected to work hard towards meeting or exceeding challenging targets and senior teachers monitor your progress closely to make sure no one falls behind. The result of this is that your GCSE examination results have improved considerably, to well above the national average. Sixth form achievement is also good, the result of high-quality teaching and the strong partnership between the two schools.

You enjoy the wide range of opportunities to get involved in your learning and to take on additional responsibilities. This is good preparation for the future. Year 11 girls, for example, show great maturity and sensitivity in developing younger girls' literacy skills through the paired-reading programme. This is a good initiative and we have asked your senior teachers to devise a similar one to develop your numeracy skills across the curriculum.

You appreciate the feedback you receive to help you improve. However, this is better in some subjects than in others. Some lessons are also less good than the majority because they rely on one approach, instead of planning different ways of including everyone. We have asked your teachers to ensure that all lessons are planned to support and challenge everyone, whatever their level of ability, and that marking and assessment are consistently good in all subject areas.

Yours sincerely

Christine Raeside
Her Majesty's Inspector

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