

Ashcroft High School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	109707
Local Authority	Luton
Inspection number	356608
Inspection dates	22–23 March 2011
Reporting inspector	Peter Thompson

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	998
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	John Baines-Holding
Headteacher	Ms Monica Austin
Date of previous school inspection	21 November 2007
School address	Crawley Green Road Luton LU2 9AG
Telephone number	01582 436100
Fax number	01582 436124
Email address	admin.as@campusluton.org.uk

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M2 7LA

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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by five additional inspectors. The team observed 37 lessons taught by 37 teachers. Inspectors held meetings and discussions with groups of students, a parent, staff, the Chair of the Governing Body and the School Improvement Advisor. The inspectors observed the school's work and looked at a representative sample of students' work, some policy documents and school reports. They scrutinised questionnaires returned by 112 parents and carers and 227 students.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at a number of key areas.

- What is the impact of the school's partnership arrangements on attainment and progress?
- Do the curriculum and schemes of work enable all students, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, to achieve as well as they can?
- How effective are the directors of learning and directors of student achievement in raising students' learning and progress?

Information about the school

This is an average-sized urban comprehensive secondary school with a diverse student population. The majority of students have White British heritage and the remainder mainly Black Asian or Caribbean heritages. The percentages of students who speak English as an additional language and those who are known to be eligible for free school meals are well above average. The percentage of students with special educational needs and /or disabilities, including those with a statement of special educational needs, is above average. The number of students entering and leaving the school at non-standard times is above average.

The school holds the Basic Skills Quality Mark, Healthy Schools status, Sportsmark and silver Eco-schools awards. In 2010, extensive refurbishment of the school began under the Building Schools for the Future programme. This will include a new theatre and technology block in order that student numbers may be increased.

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

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

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?

1

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

1

Main findings

This is an outstanding school that works in the most challenging of circumstances. It is founded on the principles that every student has something unique to offer and should be given every opportunity to learn and mature as a young person. The school has maintained exceptional improvement and now provides an excellent education for all its students. By means of good teaching, outstanding targeted support, and a very effective curriculum, the school has overcome its challenging circumstances extremely well. The school's promotion of equal opportunities is outstanding and all students are treated equally without discrimination. Their progress is good.

The headteacher and other senior leaders have a very clear vision of the future and ways to continue to improve the education the school provides. They communicate their vision and high expectations to the staff exceptionally well and have identified improvements in teaching and learning as the foci for further development. Morale is very high and belief in the school's success runs through all levels of staff. The headteacher and the senior leaders have been conspicuously successful and are justifiably proud of what they have achieved. Rigorous and accurate self-evaluation of what needs to be done and the challenging targets that have been met on the way are evidence that the school has an outstanding capacity to sustain improvement. Leaders have recognised that whilst teaching is good it is still variable. Aspects that are very occasionally weaker include pace and challenge, and the quality of dialogue between students and teacher. The school is extremely well placed to continue on its journey of improvement.

Ashcroft High school is an exceptionally caring school and places the excellent guidance and support it provides at the heart of its work, enabling students from many different backgrounds to make the very best of the opportunities it provides. Many of the staff act almost like carers to students whose circumstances make them some of the most vulnerable in order to help and encourage them to learn. Parents and carers very much appreciate and value the care, guidance and support the school provides. Students enjoy coming to school because they know staff provide for their needs outstandingly well and that they are very safe, and because they are interested in the exceptional opportunities they are given. Students respond by participating in and contributing to school and community activities extremely well. The range of opportunities they have is greatly enhanced by the partnerships with other schools and the number of local consortia that make very effective contributions to students' achievement.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise the quality of teaching to a more consistently high level and increase the proportion of outstanding lessons by:

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- ensuring activities are fine tuned to be consistently challenging to all abilities
- maintaining a rapid pace throughout all lessons
- raising the quality of dialogue between teacher and students during lessons.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

2

The prior attainment of students entering Year 7 is below average. It varies from year to year and is in slow decline. The progress made by students that complete all five years in the school is good and, as a result, their attainment at the end of Year 11 is above average. A significant proportion of students enter the school at other times, many speak very little English when they join the school, some have low motivation, and some have refugee and looked-after status. As a result, their attainment on entry is usually lower than their contemporaries who have been in the school since the beginning of Year 7. They too make good and sometimes outstanding progress but as a result of their lower starting points their attainment at the end Year 11 is generally below average. The net result is that overall attainment at the end of Year 11 is average. Achievement is good for all groups of students.

Lesson observations and school data show the quality of learning is good and sometimes outstanding. As students progress through the school most acquire knowledge, develop understanding and practise skills well and sometimes extremely well. For example, in a Year 10 English lesson students were seen learning about the structure of paragraphs well and in another Year 10 lesson in mathematics learning the rules of congruency of shapes extremely well. In both these lessons the students were inspired to learn by the deep subject knowledge and lively delivery of the teachers and greatly enjoyed their work. In a few lessons the level of inspiration is much lower, mainly because of a more pedestrian delivery. Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities and those who speak English as a second language make good and often outstanding progress, particularly when they are provided with targeted support. In a Year 7 science lesson a small group of selected students with a variety of learning and behavioural needs learnt the vocabulary associated with the human reproductive organs well. The teacher and two special needs teaching assistants took great care when helping the students to learn and spell key words exceptionally well.

Students make good progress in developing their spiritual, moral, social and cultural awareness. They reflect well on their experiences and success in sport and other curriculum activities, and are very sympathetic to other people's feelings, values and beliefs. Most students are well aware of the history and culture of the society in which they live and those of other cultures through their family's links with other countries and involvement in the Luton in Harmony project. The school's behaviour policy ensures that students' behaviour in lessons and around the school is good and in some lessons outstanding. Most students have a good understanding of how to lead safe and healthy lives. Students of all backgrounds show great pride in the school and make a strong and wide ranging contribution in the local community. For example, students provide sporting activities in local primary schools, and participate in the Luton in Harmony project and the local carnival. Students entertain senior citizens in the school at Christmas and host an annual band concert. They play a very active part in the school council, and raise funds for charities and to support a free school in The Gambia. The rate of attendance is above

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average. Students are eager to work together and with their teachers. This and the students' good and improving key skills prepare them well for the future.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	2
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment ¹	3
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	2
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	2
The extent to which pupils feel safe	1
Pupils' behaviour	2
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	1
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attendance ¹	2
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low

How effective is the provision?

Teaching is good in the majority of lessons but only outstanding in a little over one in ten lessons. In the best lessons, pace and expectations are high and sometimes very high, and teachers use their excellent knowledge of the subject to inspire students to learn. Teachers are confident and usually introduce topics well. Questioning is used effectively to gauge students' understanding and when to reinforce explanations to improve progress. Relationships between students and their teachers are always outstanding. The best lessons feature a good range of teaching styles. Effective targets are set and students know how to improve. As a result, students show considerable interest, enjoy learning and make good progress. For example, in a Year 9 physical educational lesson the teacher gave a very good demonstration of the use of the trampoline and explaining how to use it safely. He had high expectations when coaching the students to use it themselves and helped them to make very good progress. The variety of different learning activities added to students' enjoyment of the lesson. Where teaching is good rather than outstanding, activities meet the needs of students but are not thoroughly fine tuned to the stage they are at, so there are periods in the lesson of slower progress. In a small number of lessons, some low expectations and less engagement between teacher and students led to less

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effective learning. Assessment is good and most students know how well they are doing. Students' work is marked and corrected well. Most teachers give constructive comments to help students to understand how to improve their work and reach higher grades.

The curriculum is very well-organised, imaginative and provides a wide range of learning opportunities to suit the needs and interests of students. In Years 7 to 9, the most vulnerable students in each year are taught fewer subjects by a limited number of different teachers in what is known in the school as the 'golden curriculum'. A parent said, 'The golden curriculum is brilliant and has helped my child so much'. The provision for students who speak English as an additional language is highly effective in rapidly developing the acquisition of the English language in the earlier stages. Students that come from abroad and enter the school at non-standard times are given specific advice to help them understand and succeed in the English educational system.

The curriculum in Years 10 and 11 is tailored to the needs of students by providing a core of compulsory subjects and a very good range of optional subjects at various levels. The school has taken the lead in establishing collaboration between a number of local high schools which has been taken as a model by the local authority. It has also created another consortium of local high schools to jointly provide vocational courses and enhance the curriculum for gifted and talented students by providing some additional GCSE subjects and AS courses. Vocational courses include building construction, hairdressing, hospitality and catering, and motor vehicle maintenance. Students are guided to subjects which suit their needs well and some to an alternative programme following discussion with parents and carers. A wide range of outstanding extracurricular activities in drama, music and sports are offered and very well attended. The students particularly enjoy the sports activities.

The school has very effective links with its feeder schools to foster smooth transition of students into Year 7 and undertakes joint projects in information and communication technology, mathematics and physical education with them. Students are known as individuals and treated according to their different needs exceptionally well, particularly those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. The school can demonstrate many instances where its support has had exceptional impact. Its well-targeted arrangements result in significant improvements in attitudes, behaviour and achievement. A parent said, 'The school has been great in supporting and helping my child who has a history of emotional and behavioural problems to improve'.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	2
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	2
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	1
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

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How effective are leadership and management?

The new directors of learning and directors of achievement have been given the main responsibility to bring about further improvements and have risen to the challenge well. They have engaged on a programme of teacher training to encourage teachers to be more innovative, make lessons more interesting, and allow students to become more responsible for their own learning. The improvement in the attainment of students currently in Year 11 provides early evidence that the approach is working. Senior managers oversee developments and set realistic yet challenging targets. The monitoring of students' performance is effective and there is plenty of high quality data available in the school to guide planning.

The governing body is good. It understands the strengths and weaknesses of the school well and has effective ways to monitor performance. The governing body has recently revised its committee structure and is developing a closer focus on data analysis. It places great emphasis on the ethos of the school and in treating every student as an individual with the potential to succeed. The Chair of Governors is an ex-student from the school, many others are ex-students from other local schools, and as a result, they have a passionate belief in what the Ashcroft School is doing. They visit the school regularly and have effective links with the staff, parents, carers and students. The governing body ensures the health, safety and well-being of staff and students well. Rigorous checks are carried out on all newly-appointed staff and good central records kept. The school has clear policies for health and safety, which are reviewed and updated regularly. Safety checks are carried out by appropriate external authorities and any recommendations they make are acted upon well. Extra steps have been taken to ensure that students are safe whilst building work is carried out on the school site.

Leaders have a clear understanding of the complex community they serve based on a good analysis of the religious, ethnic and socio-economic circumstances in their locality. Students from many different ethnic and cultural backgrounds work in harmony together and in the local community. There is some international work and plans to develop links with other regions nationally.

Leaders have developed very effective ways to inform parents and carers about their children's progress, well-being and development through regular newsletters, email alerts, open evenings and an informative website. Questionnaires are regularly used to monitor the views of parents and carers. The school greatly values the relationship with parents and carers and responds very effectively to most queries or concerns.

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These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	1
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	2
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	2
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	1
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	1
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	2
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	2

Views of parents and carers

The response of parents and carers to the questionnaire was below average. The very large majority of parents and carers who responded to the inspection questionnaire support the school and say that they are happy with their children's experiences at the school. Most also say that the school keeps their children safe. A small minority of parents and carers who sent in questionnaires say that the school does not do enough to help their children lead a healthy lifestyle, respond to parents' and carers' concerns or deal effectively with unacceptable behaviour. The inspectors looked into these issues and found that students do adopt healthy lifestyles and that behaviour in the school is good. They judged that the school's response to parents' and carers' concerns is very good.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Ashcroft High School to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school. The inspection team received 112 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 998 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	23	21	76	68	13	12	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	21	19	83	74	6	5	2	2
My school informs me about my child's progress	21	19	75	67	14	13	2	2
My child is making enough progress at this school	29	26	67	60	12	11	3	3
The teaching is good at this school	14	13	80	71	14	13	3	3
The school helps me to support my child's learning	11	10	81	72	16	14	2	2
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	9	8	73	65	24	21	4	4
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	17	15	79	71	6	5	4	4
The school meets my child's particular needs	20	18	74	66	9	8	4	4
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	24	21	56	50	21	19	9	8
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	14	13	62	55	23	21	5	4
The school is led and managed effectively	22	20	72	64	9	8	6	5
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	24	21	75	66	9	8	4	4

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

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	59	35	3	3
Primary schools	9	44	39	7
Secondary schools	13	36	41	11
Sixth forms	15	39	43	3
Special schools	35	43	17	5
Pupil referral units	21	42	29	9
All schools	13	43	37	8

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2009 to 31 August 2010 and are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2009/10 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

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

Sixth form figures reflect the judgements made for the overall effectiveness of the sixth form in secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on 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 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:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement.■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils.■ The quality of teaching.■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships.■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
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.

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.



24 March 2011

Dear Students

Inspection of Ashcroft High School, Luton LU2 9AG

My colleagues and I enjoyed our visit to your school and welcomed the opportunity to see you at work and hear your views. We judged your school to be outstanding which means that many aspects of your education are exceptionally good.

What makes your school outstanding is its leadership, the excellent curriculum and the exceptional way in which the school cares, guides and supports you. As a result you make good progress no matter what your background. The school engages with your parents and carers and provides you all with equal opportunities to learn and develop extremely well. Senior staff are continuously seeking ways to improve your education and very keen to work with other schools in Luton to improve what they provide. We judged that the contributions you make to the school and the community in which you live to be very impressive. I congratulate you on this.

Behaviour in and around the school is good. Whilst inspectors found the teaching you receive to be good overall and there are example of outstanding teaching, everyone want there to be more outstanding lessons. We have asked the senior leaders to improve teaching by:

- making sure work is always challenging enough
- keeping the pace of lessons high
- making sure questions and conversations between you and teachers are focussed and stimulating.

I know the senior leaders are keen to do this. You can all help by cooperating with your teachers and always endeavouring to do your best work.

Yours sincerely

Dr Peter Thompson

Lead Inspector

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