

Ralph Allen School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	109305
Local Authority	Bath and North East Somerset
Inspection number	356519
Inspection dates	22–23 June 2011
Reporting inspector	Robert Pyner HMI

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 under pilot arrangements; it was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1,108
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	213
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Matt Gott
Headteacher	Libby Lee
Date of previous school inspection	13–14 November 2007
School address	Claverton Down Road Combe Down Bath BA2 7AD
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Age group	11–18
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Introduction

This pilot inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three additional inspectors. Inspectors carried out observations of two full lessons and 23 part-lessons taught by 25 teachers. One fifth of the lessons were jointly observed by members of the school's leadership team. Learning walks comprising short visits to 20 lessons in a range of subjects were carried out to assess the quality of behaviour and the work undertaken by specific groups of students. One tutorial group was observed. Discussions took place with senior and middle leaders, staff, the Chair of Governing Body and another governor, two members of the Foundation Trust, a parent, the School Improvement Partner and different groups of students. Inspectors observed the school's work, and looked at progress tracking and performance data, the school development plan, students' work and numerous policies, guidelines, plans and reviews. The questionnaire responses from 382 parents and carers, 150 students and 85 staff were also analysed.

Information about the school

Ralph Allen School is larger than average and serves the southern side of Bath and the surrounding area. Since 2004 the school has had specialist status in science, and in 2009 it became a Foundation Trust working with a range of partners from the education and health sectors, charities and commercial organisations. Most students are from a White British heritage and the proportion known to be eligible for free school meals is lower than average. The percentage with special educational needs and/or disabilities is below average, although the proportion with a statement of special educational needs is slightly above the national figure. Students' needs include speech, language and communication difficulties, physical disabilities and behavioural, emotional and social difficulties.

The school has met the government's floor targets for academic performance in each of the last three years.

Although there have been building improvements in the last 10 years, approximately one third of the school is housed in temporary accommodation. The school is planning to build an applied learning centre for science, with work to commence this year.

The school has achieved the following national awards: Investors in People, Healthy Schools status, Sportsmark Gold, Artsmark Silver and the Inclusion Quality Mark.

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	2
Achievement	2
Teaching	2
Leadership and management	2
Behaviour and safety	2
Does the school adequately promote the pupils' well-being?	Yes
Does the school adequately promote community cohesion?	Yes
Does the school provide value for money?	Yes

Key findings

- Ralph Allen School is a good and improving school. The headteacher has a clear vision for the school's future as an inclusive community committed to improving achievement for all. She has been highly successful in developing the provision for vulnerable students and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities.
- The outcomes, provision and leadership in the sixth form are outstanding. Students report that they appreciate the high quality teaching and the guidance available regarding their academic progress and options for future study.
- Students enjoy learning and achieve well in a range of subjects. Attainment in English is consistently high. They make good progress in acquiring literacy and communication skills across the curriculum, with some recent improvement in mathematics. Attainment in the specialist subject of science is broadly average overall, and stronger for more-able groups but courses are less effective for the less able. Provision for students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding.
- Behaviour is good, and a significant proportion is outstanding. Attitudes to learning are generally highly positive and students exhibit confidence and respect for others, as evidenced by good relationships throughout the school. Students say they feel very safe and their parents and carers agree. Attendance has improved significantly and is now above average.
- Teaching is good overall. The best lessons are carefully planned so that students are engaged in activities which motivate and challenge them individually or in groups. Teachers use questioning effectively to assess understanding and adjust their teaching as a result. In weaker lessons the pace can be slower and this affects the rate of progress.
- The school has systems to provide information for parents and carers, but responses to questionnaires indicated that these are not fully effective.

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Additionally, a minority of staff felt that communication within the school is not always good enough.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- By July 2012, raise achievement in mathematics and science at the end of Key Stage 4 so that it is in line with English by:
 - developing the use of data on students' progress by middle leaders and teachers to identify and support learners in danger of underachieving
 - introducing and developing courses in science which are more appropriate to the needs of all groups of students.
- Improve communication systems with parents, carers and staff to provide information about the work of the school, and use consultation procedures more effectively in determining the strategic direction.

Main report

Achievement

In most of the lessons observed during the inspection, students made good progress and achieved well. They enjoy lessons, and particularly those that require them to work on practical learning in pairs or groups. Students listen to instructions well and are encouraged to ask questions that help their understanding. Standards are rising. In 2010 for example, the proportion of students gaining five or more higher GCSE grades including English and mathematics was significantly higher than the national average, as it had been consistently for the previous two years, but with a continued trend of year-on-year improvement. This reflects a consistently strong performance in English over time together with a range of subjects including geography, art and design, and English literature. The senior leadership team is increasingly rigorous in holding individual departments to account for students' progress. Work on the identification of students who are underachieving and providing appropriate support through the Golden Key group led last year, for example, to a significant improvement in outcomes in mathematics. The science specialism makes a satisfactory contribution to students' achievement and enjoyment, but courses are more effective for higher ability students than other groups.

Students enter the school with broadly average attainment. They make good progress overall throughout their time at the school. The progress students make in English is consistently good and successful intervention strategies in mathematics have resulted in a significant improvement in outcomes for this subject. Girls make better progress than boys, although progress for both is above the national averages for all students. Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities generally make good progress, and for some it is outstanding. This is the result of the strong inclusive ethos found in the school and the specific support developed through, for

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example, the Green Room and enhanced by work with partners in the Foundation Trust to meet complex needs. However, progress data for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities are not routinely analysed against national figures.

In the sixth form, students' outcomes are outstanding. They generally make very good progress through a curriculum which is being broadened to become even more inclusive. This has been achieved through effective work with partners, and especially the Bath Educational Trust, a consortium of school and college providers. This, together with highly effective guidance from staff, means few students embark on inappropriate learning programmes.

Behaviour and safety

Students are polite and courteous to each other and staff, creating a very pleasant and harmonious working environment. Students appreciate belonging to a supportive community where everyone is valued for their contribution and encouraged to make the most of the opportunities available in the school. They say they enjoy their lessons. This has supported by the improvement in attendance over the last few years, following an intensive focus by the school. Overall attendance is above average and students are punctual to school and lessons. Students say they feel very safe at school because they are well cared for by adults who know them very well. This is confirmed by parents and carers. Students have a very good understanding of how to stay safe in and out of school. They say that bullying is rare, but when it does occur it is dealt with quickly and effectively. There is a highly effective system based on the Green Room to support students whose circumstances make them vulnerable. As a result, for example, there have only been two permanent exclusions in the last five years.

Students' behaviour is particularly good in lessons which motivate and challenge them through active learning. Students report that behaviour is good over time and that generally there is little disruption to their learning in lessons. Most parents, carers and students agree that standards of behaviour are good. A small minority of students who returned the questionnaires said that there were occasions when their learning was disrupted by others. A similar proportion of parents and carers also noted this in questionnaire returns. Inspectors found that behaviour and attitudes in lessons and around the school were at least good and often better. Where teaching is not sufficiently challenging or the pace drops, students can display off-task behaviour but this rarely escalates to a level that consistently disrupts others' learning.

Teaching

Most parents and carers agree that teaching in the school is effective. Strengths include effective planning so that work meets the needs of all groups of students, high expectations which challenge learners to apply their understanding when

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working collaboratively, and good use of support staff to focus their help on specific students' needs and so ensure that they make good progress. Teaching in some subjects provides effective opportunities for reading, writing and numeracy skills; examples of this were observed in English, science and history lessons. A strong feature of the most successful teaching is the effective questioning which engages students and ensures high levels of student participation. This, linked with appropriate pace and challenge, develops activities which foster students' curiosity and encourage independent learning.

However, some inconsistency in teaching still exists. Where teaching was satisfactory it was characterised by a slower pace which reduced involvement by students and consequently the progress made, missed opportunities by teachers to reinforce and develop understanding through focused questioning, often at the end of lessons, and overlong introductions by teachers which precluded opportunities to develop active learning. Marking is variable across the school. The best marking was seen in English, history and some science books, but where it was weaker there was little evidence of clear guidance on how individual students can make the next step in their learning.

In the sixth form there is some inspirational teaching, based on excellent subject knowledge which supports independent learning at a high level. Students appreciate this high quality support, both in lessons and in the preparation of coursework. Relationships are excellent and, in the lessons observed, students asked questions confidently of teachers and classmates to check their own understanding.

Leadership and management

The headteacher, senior leaders, governing body and members of the Foundation Trust display a strong commitment to improvement, building on the success the school enjoys as an inclusive community. Strong leadership by the governing body and increasing links with partners in the Foundation Trust are leading to improved provision for students across the school and the wider community. Examples of this include work with the University of Bath supporting modern foreign languages in the school and support for vulnerable young people through the charities Barnardo's and the Nowhere Foundation. These developments demonstrate good capacity to improve further.

The school has been through a period of change over the last two years. The restructuring of the curriculum to improve the provision for all groups of students, combined with budget projections, has led to changes in staffing and responsibilities. Responses from the staff questionnaires reflect some concern about the scale of change and the effectiveness of the communication within the school during this period. A small minority of parents and carers also noted that the school was less effective than it used to be at responding to their concerns and keeping them informed.

Improved assessment tracking and subject monitoring procedures have enabled

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more effective targeted support for all students and quicker action to be taken for individuals and groups who are in danger of underachievement. Critical to this has been the role of middle leaders, and a range of support has been established for this group. The resulting impact on the outcomes for all groups of students is improving well but remains variable across different subjects.

Safeguarding procedures are a priority for the school, resulting in excellent systems which meet all current government requirements.

The school's commitment to equality of opportunity is outstanding, and exemplified by its work to support students with complex disabilities and young people whose circumstances make them vulnerable. The support based in the Green Room has played a very important part in enabling some students to remain in school to complete their studies. Analysis of school data and evidence from lessons observed show that the impact of the school's support for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities accelerates the progress made by this group, narrowing the gap in achievement with other groups of students.

The school's provision for students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding and sits at the heart of this cohesive learning community. Students' behaviour and attitudes in lessons and around the school show a very strong sense of right and wrong. They treat each other and adults with respect and sensitivity. They respond excellently to the opportunities to use their imagination and creativity, observed most effectively in the Wednesday Window options for all students in Years 7 to 11. Students are very aware of life in a multi-ethnic society as a result of the opportunities provided for them to experience different faiths and cultures, both in Britain and around the world.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted’s questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Ralph Allen 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 12 statements about the school.

The inspection team received 382 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 1,108 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
Q1 My child is happy at school	133	41	176	54	12	4	2	1
Q2 My child feels safe at school	146	45	166	51	7	2	3	1
Q3 The school helps my child to achieve as well as they can	90	28	178	55	44	14	5	2
Q4 The school meets my child’s particular needs	85	26	184	57	41	13	4	1
Q5 The school ensures my child is well looked after	127	39	178	55	14	4	2	1
Q6 Teaching at this school is good	81	25	215	66	17	5	2	1
Q7 There is a good standard of behaviour at this school	39	12	217	67	53	16	10	3
Q8 Lessons are not disrupted by bad behaviour	36	11	166	51	89	27	18	6
Q9 The school deals with any cases of bullying well	73	23	174	54	30	9	5	2
Q10 The school helps me to support my child’s learning	48	15	197	61	62	19	6	2
Q11 The school responds to my concerns and keeps me well informed	71	22	181	56	44	14	17	5
Q12 The school is well led and managed	96	30	182	56	18	6	9	3

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	46	48	6	0
Primary schools	6	47	40	7
Secondary schools	12	39	38	11
Sixth forms	13	42	41	3
Special schools	28	49	19	4
Pupil referral units	14	45	31	10
All schools	10	46	37	7

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 2010 to 31 December 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 2010/11 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 achievement of all pupils■ behaviour and safety■ the quality of teaching■ the effectiveness of leadership and management <p>and taking into consideration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ how well the school promotes pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.
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 June 2011

Dear Students

Inspection of Ralph Allen School, Bath BA2 7AD

Thank you for making the inspection team so welcome when we came to your school to undertake a pilot inspection recently. Special thanks go to the student guides who helped the inspectors find their way around, and to those of you who completed the questionnaire; we found this very useful. The inspector who observed your activities during Wednesday Window was particularly impressed with the range of the activities you undertook and that you clearly enjoyed them a great deal. We found it very helpful talking with all the students we met and what you had to say was very informative and relevant.

Ralph Allen School is good and improving well. Here are some other things that particularly impressed us.

- Your achievement at the end of Year 11 is good, and outcomes at the end of Year 13 are outstanding.
- Behaviour is good because of the high quality relationships found in the school.
- You feel very safe and appreciate the support you receive from adults at the school.
- Teaching is good and you receive effective support to help you learn and ensure that you make progress.
- The headteacher, school leaders, teachers and governing body are all determined that you should have the opportunity to succeed whatever your interests and abilities.

To improve your school even more we have asked your headteacher and teachers to improve achievement in mathematics and science even further by monitoring the progress you make and supporting you more effectively, together with making sure that the courses you follow are the best for you. We have also asked the school to develop its communication systems so all members of the school community have the information they need to play a part in developing opportunities for all students.

You too have an important part to play by continuing to work hard, making the most of the broad range of opportunities you have at school and attending regularly. I am sure that you will and wish you well for the future.

Robert Pyner
Her Majesty's Inspector

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