

The Commonweal School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	126505
Local Authority	Swindon
Inspection number	360099
Inspection dates	22–23 June 2011
Reporting inspector	James McNeillie HMI

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	1091
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mari Williams
Headteacher	Keith Defter
Date of previous school inspection	17 January 2008
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four additional inspectors. They observed teaching and learning in 34 lessons, or parts of lessons, taught by 33 teachers. Meetings were held with staff, students and members of the governing body. The inspection team observed the school's work and looked at documentation including school reviews of teaching and learning, safeguarding policies and information, analyses of students' achievement and school improvement planning. Responses from 96 parents and carers and those from a sample of students and staff were scrutinised.

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

- Are all students making at least good progress?
- Is the quality of teaching and use of assessment good enough to help students make at least good progress?
- How rigorous is the school's self-evaluation and has this led to extensive impact on students' achievement and well-being?

Information about the school

This is a larger-than-average sized secondary school serving the Old Town community of Swindon. There are lower-than-average proportions of students known to be eligible for free school meals, from minority ethnic backgrounds and who speak English as an additional language. There are an above average proportion of students with statements of special educational needs but below average overall proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

The school has two specially resourced provisions for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities: one for physically impaired students and another for students with specific learning difficulties. These provisions are funded by the local authority but managed by the school. This provision is part of the school's Faculty for Curriculum Support.

The school has been a specialist Performing Arts College since 2004 and holds the Artsmark Gold Award. In addition, the school has been awarded the Geography Quality Mark and Healthy School, Fair Trade and Dyslexia Friendly status. There was a major refurbishment programme in 2009/10 including removal of asbestos and expansion of facilities.

The school's governing body submitted an application to become an academy and is awaiting confirmation from the Department for Education.

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

2

Main findings

The Commonweal School is outstanding. This is because leaders have high expectations for all students and systematically review all aspects of school life to improve the quality of education. As a result, students' achievement and the care and support they receive are outstanding, as is the curriculum. The view expressed by a parent sums it up, 'This is an excellent school.'

Students have positive relationships with their peers and teachers, and behave well. These attributes, and their excellent spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, contribute strongly to the highly inclusive and welcoming atmosphere of the school. Individuals supported by the school's Faculty for Curriculum Support are fully integrated into school life, including the large number of extra-curricular and enrichment activities on offer. Many of these students with highly specific needs make excellent progress and all make at least good progress, attaining well. Students are rightly proud of their school and make positive contributions to its wider community, for example by supporting each other as peer tutors and as members of focus groups. They feel safe in school and know with confidence what they need to do to remain safe and healthy.

Effective teaching is contributing to the good progress students make. Teachers plan lessons well and use a range of resources which engage students and help them develop in their learning. Lively and enthusiastic delivery motivates students and helps them to enjoy lessons. Group and paired work is a regular part of many lessons, but there are missed opportunities for students to develop as more effective independent learners. Many students understand what they need to do to improve. However, there is inconsistency in how well all teachers use oral and written feedback to give clear next steps.

Leaders have an accurate understanding of the school's many strengths. As a result of detailed and systematic procedures for self-evaluation, they also know which aspects could be even stronger. The school is currently showcasing good practice in the classroom as part of its monitoring and evaluation cycle and has planned to extend this further. Leadership of the school's provision for special educational needs and/or disabilities is similarly strong. Since the previous inspection, students' academic and personal achievement has improved, as have many aspects of leadership, the quality of the curriculum and the quality of the support students receive. These confirm that the school's capacity for further improvement is good.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Increase the proportion of outstanding teaching and learning by ensuring that:

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- teachers consistently give students opportunities to become highly effective independent learners
- all teachers use sharply focused oral and written feedback that helps students know how to improve
- existing systems to share good practice among teachers are extended.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

1

All groups of students make good progress. Over time, students' attainment on entry has varied from average to slightly above average. By the time they leave school, the measures of overall attainment for all students are high. One example of this is that the proportion of students achieving five GCSEs including English and mathematics at grade C or above has been consistently well above the national average. The school's rigorous and accurate tracking data confirm that this is set to continue for the current Year 11 cohort.

Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities also make good progress. As a result of the highly effective resource-based provisions, and the school's inclusive ethos, individuals with statements of special educational needs make outstanding progress in their academic and personal development. This was confirmed through observation of students, one of whom made excellent progress in constructing complex sentences and, as a result, felt much more confident to tackle other aspects of reading and writing.

Positive attitudes and good behaviour contribute to students' good learning in lessons. When learning is at its best, students quickly engage in lively discussion about their work and are willing to challenge each other's views and explain their reasons. For example, in a Year 9 class studying 'Of Mice and Men', students gave advice to their partners, using success criteria, on how they could improve their written work. Students did not always agree with each other and in the discussions they had, learning and understanding were extended. On occasions, students did not take responsibility for their own learning when given the opportunity to do so and this led to off-task chatter and minor disruption to lessons.

Lesson topics, such as exploring the subtext in a play or considering the reasons for and against international aid, have enabled students to reflect very well on real and imagined situations. Those students who visit Gambia on an educational exchange usefully share their experiences with the rest of the school on their return. The impact of this is that all students develop their cultural and moral understanding exceptionally well. Students leave with the well-honed academic and personal skills needed to be successful in life beyond school. For example, all Year 11 students complete a 'Young Lifesaver Award' and have the opportunity to take part in a mock job interview. The school enables and encourages students to build and apply business and enterprise skills. During the inspection, one Year 10 student received a national award for her entrepreneurial skills by making almost £500 in the 'Tenner Tycoon' scheme.

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These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	1
Taking into account: Pupils' attainment ¹	1
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	1
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	1
Taking into account: Pupils' attendance ¹	2
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1

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 and some is outstanding. The best teaching was well-structured and focused on learning, including opportunities for independent learning. In these lessons, teachers were regularly challenging students through excellent questioning to explain their answers and the pace was brisk. In some lessons, teachers took too much control which meant that students were passive for prolonged periods of time. There was clear impact of the school's focus on involving students more in understanding what they needed to do to improve. Some students could be precise about which subject-specific skills they needed to develop or acquire in order to be successful. However, there is still some inconsistency.

The curriculum is kept under constant review and the views of parents, carers and students are taken into account to make changes and improvements. The full breadth of opportunity is available to students, including valued vocational options, and courses which extend the most academic. Adjustments are made when necessary to ensure that students with specific needs have full access to all curriculum subjects. The school's specialist subjects are highly regarded by the students and make an excellent contribution to the large range of extra-curricular activities which enrich their experiences.

High-quality care permeates all aspects of school life. There are striking examples of how individuals with complex physical, emotional and social needs have left school with valuable qualifications and much better self-esteem as a result of the school's work.

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Transition into Year 7 is eased through very good links with primary schools, and effective advice and guidance is offered to students for their next stages. Exemplary work with external agencies supports the school in meeting students' medical, social and personal needs.

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

How effective are leadership and management?

School leaders, expertly guided by the headteacher, lead a constant drive for improvement which means students achieve very well. Excellent work with local, national and international partners contributes to this. Staff morale is high, and both teaching and support staff know what the school is trying to achieve, and share its vision. Almost all teachers hold positions of responsibility. There is a regular and comprehensive cycle of monitoring and evaluation which has empowered middle leaders to shape the direction for their faculties and subjects. The school recognises that more could be done to share the best practice more widely. The regular cycle of teaching and learning reviews are thorough and highly effective, as shown in the improved achievement of students studying history. Forensic analyses of students' achievement and the quality of provision mean that when there have been small pockets of previous underperformance, these have been addressed quickly and successfully.

The school has responded to the views of parents and carers, for example by introducing an electronic 'Parent Mail' to share important information quickly. Parents and carers are involved in shaping aspects of school life, one example being their involvement in the 'Focus Groups', another being the revision to the school's reporting format. As a result of the work of the family and pastoral support workers, parents and carers who had previously been reluctant are now involved in their child's education.

Equality of opportunity is at the heart of the school's work and has resulted, for example, in no groups of students performing less well than their peers and a highly tailored curriculum that matches the needs of the school's diverse population. Safeguarding of students is a high priority; staff at all levels receive high-quality training on child protection and those in charge are knowledgeable and proactive. This has led to an overwhelming majority of parents and carers who responded to Ofsted's questionnaire agreeing that the school keeps their child safe. The governing body is efficiently organised, has a sharp awareness of the school's strengths and weaknesses, and presents an excellent balance of challenge and support to school leaders. The school is a highly cohesive community and it does not tolerate discrimination. Students make an extremely positive contribution to the

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local community, supported by the school's specialism, through supporting events such as 'Big Arts Day' and the Old Town Festival.

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	1
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	1
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	1
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	1

Views of parents and carers

A relatively small number of parents and carers returned questionnaires. The school had, however, already completed a full parent and carer survey this academic year. Of those who responded to Ofsted's questionnaire, the overwhelming majority commented that they were happy with their child's experience at the school and that the school was a safe place. A similar proportion were pleased with the information they received about their child's progress. School leaders are continuing to enhance the existing strong structures that enable parents and carers to have their suggestions taken into account and to help them support their child's learning even more.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at The Commonweal 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 96 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 1091 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	37	39	53	55	6	6	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	35	36	60	63	1	1	0	0
My school informs me about my child's progress	25	26	70	73	1	1	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	32	33	58	60	4	4	2	2
The teaching is good at this school	32	33	61	64	2	2	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	23	24	55	57	17	18	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	14	15	66	69	9	9	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)	28	29	59	61	1	1	0	0
The school meets my child's particular needs	30	31	59	61	5	5	2	2
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	24	25	62	65	5	5	1	1
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	16	17	63	66	9	9	0	0
The school is led and managed effectively	38	40	56	58	2	2	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	44	46	49	51	3	3	0	0

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 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 June 2011

Dear Students

Inspection of The Commonweal School, Swindon SN1 4JE

Thank you for being so welcoming when we visited your school. We were particularly impressed with the ways in which you showed respect for your peers and how well you contribute to the life of the school.

We judge your school to be outstanding. This is because students leave Commonweal with excellent qualifications and the progress you make is good, with some of you making even better progress. The school does a huge amount to support and care for you, making sure that you get specialist help when you need it. You told us you think the headteacher and his team are doing a great job, and we agree with you. The opportunities you are given to be ready for the world beyond school are excellent and you have responded well to these.

We decided that teaching at your school is good and we also observed some outstanding lessons. You can help more lessons to be outstanding by quickly taking responsibility for your own learning, particularly when working in pairs or groups. Many of you know exactly what you need to do to get better in a range of subjects. We have asked teachers to make sure that the feedback they give you during lessons and when marking your work is always sharply focused on what you need to do next. By acting on these comments, you will also be able to help.

We wish you every success for the future.

Yours sincerely

James McNeillie

Her Majesty's Inspector

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