

Larkmead School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	123255
Local Authority	Oxfordshire
Inspection number	359405
Inspection dates	22–23 June 2011
Reporting inspector	Clive Kempton HMI

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Community
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	908
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	101
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Dr David Lever
Headteacher	Mr Chris Harris
Date of previous school inspection	14 May 2008
School address	Faringdon Road Abingdon OX14 1RF
Telephone number	01235520141
Fax number	01235533179
Email address	office.4125@larkmead.oxon.sch.uk

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Royal Exchange Buildings
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M2 7LA

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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four additional inspectors. Inspectors observed 21 lessons with 20 teachers and one external provider. They held meetings with the senior and middle managers of the school, six representatives of the governing body, a group of parents and carers, and eight outside professionals associated with the school. They spoke to nine groups of students in all year groups. They observed the school's work, and looked at the school development plan as well as subject development plans. Evidence was also provided by 338 parents and carers, staff and students who completed questionnaires to express their views of the school.

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

- The quality of the data tracking system and its effectiveness in tracking students' progress.
- The consistency of teaching quality across the school.
- How well students are guided and supported.
- The rigour of self-evaluation strategies at all management levels.
- The impact of the staff professional development programme on improving student outcomes.

Information about the school

Larkmead School is situated on the outskirts of Abingdon. The number of students on roll has grown considerably over the last few years. It is now an average sized popular and oversubscribed school. Nearly all students come from White British backgrounds but there are a few students from other white backgrounds and a few from Black British and Asian backgrounds. The school has a specialist unit for up to 10 hearing impaired students and also takes students with physical disabilities. The school works in partnership with two local schools and the local college to provide a broad range of sixth form courses. The proportions of students known to be eligible for free school meals or who speak English as an additional language are both below the national average, whereas those with special educational needs and/or disabilities is a similar proportion to that found nationally. The school became a specialist visual and performing arts college in 2004. It has gained other prestigious awards, for example Artsmark Gold and Healthy Schools Award.

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?

3

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

3

Main findings

Larkmead is a satisfactory and improving school. One parent rightly described it as, 'a dedicated and caring school, centred on mutual respect'. Attainment has improved each year since the last inspection in the main school and sixth form, so that for the first time in its history, it is now in line with the standards expected nationally, especially in the key benchmark of the proportion of students attaining five good GCSEs including English and mathematics.

The school has a number of strengths, all of which are good:

- the high levels of attendance, which are well above the national average
- the behaviour of students in lessons and around the school
- the curriculum
- the care, guidance and support provided for all students, especially those whose circumstances make them vulnerable
- the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of students
- the reputation the school has established with the local community, and the pride the students have in their school
- the governance, and partnerships with parents and carers and other outside agencies
- students' active contribution to their school and local community.

School tracking data are now detailed and confirm that students make satisfactory progress from their average starting points as they move through the school. This is why the school is judged to be satisfactory overall. Students' attainment is too variable across the school and they make better progress in some subjects than they do in others. Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities make better progress relative to their starting points than the majority of students. This is due to the inconsistency in the quality of teaching and learning, especially the lack of sufficient focus on ensuring students make enough progress in lessons. While there is some good and outstanding teaching, in too many lessons learning objectives are not always made clear to students. Furthermore teachers do not check frequently enough that students understand the work and adjust their teaching accordingly. Questioning strategies are not used effectively enough and students are not provided with sufficient opportunities to use information and communication technology (ICT) in lessons to support and extend their learning.

The headteacher has worked tirelessly to engage staff and generate a culture of student aspiration. He is held in high esteem by staff and students as well as parents and carers. The year-on-year improvement in attainment is evidence of his commitment to improving

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the life chances of students. He has been hindered from making quicker progress with key issues by the instability of staffing, and the lack of a sufficiently focused development plan for school improvement that contains measurable success criteria, regular milestones to check on progress towards targets, and the accountability of senior staff clearly identified. Additionally, the school's self-evaluation of its effectiveness in the past has been too generous. The Visual and Performing Arts specialist school status is not having a significant impact on improving whole-school attainment, although some individual staff are successfully incorporating more creative ideas into their lessons. For example, acting out poems written in history lessons, or the whole class moving in the same way as a mechanism to understand how it worked in design and technology. However, a new senior leadership team is now in place and there is a tangible and renewed energy to accelerate students' progress and improve the quality of teaching and learning. For these reasons, while the headteacher has demonstrated a good capacity to improve outcomes in the school, it is too early to judge the capacity of leaders and managers at all levels to make improvements and raise attainment. Currently, the school has a satisfactory capacity to improve.

Up to 40% of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory may receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning so that 80% is good or better by ensuring:
 - all lessons have clear, appropriate and measurable learning objectives that are shared with and understood by students
 - teaching is adjusted in response to students' feedback on their learning
 - questioning is used effectively to check, deepen and challenge the learning of all students
 - students use ICT in lessons to support their learning.
- Improve development planning at all levels so that plans identify the key areas that will improve student outcomes, have regular termly milestones to measure progress towards meeting the targets, and assign a member of the senior team to be accountable for each key area.
- Raise attainment in all subjects throughout the school to match and subsequently exceed national averages.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

3

Students make satisfactory progress as they move through the school. At the time of the last inspection their attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 was below average. Over the last three years, there has been a strong increase in the proportion of students who attain five A* to C grades at GCSE including English and mathematics. As a result, attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 has now caught up and is in line with the national average. The improvement trajectory is faster than that nationally. However, evidence from a significant number of lessons observed during the inspection, work seen, and in the school's assessment information indicates that students' progress is no better than satisfactory

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overall because of the inconsistent quality of teaching across subject areas. The attainment of different student groups is more uniform and none performs significantly below expectations. However, those students whose circumstances make them vulnerable and those who are identified as having special educational needs and/or disabilities, including those who access the hearing impaired resource base provision, make good progress as evidenced in their progress in lessons, public examinations and through the school monitoring data.

Students enjoy coming to school and this is reflected in their high attendance, which is well above the national average. The school successfully uses a range of strategies to encourage students to come to school regularly, and publicly celebrates good attendance at every opportunity. Behaviour is consistently good in lessons and around the school. Students are polite and respectful. They value their own and others' achievements. Rare incidents of poor behaviour are dealt with swiftly and effectively. Students adopt healthy lifestyles, for example in the school restaurant where over one third of students eat a healthy meal each day, and in the large number of students who cycle to school. Students make a positive contribution to the school and local community. They develop leadership skills through their work as sports leaders and mentors and have a strong sense of responsibility to their community. Outside school, they perform in the town centre and sing to senior citizens in local residential homes.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	3
Taking into account: Pupils' attainment ¹	3
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	3
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	2
The extent to which pupils feel safe	2
Pupils' behaviour	2
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	2
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	1
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

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How effective is the provision?

Students have a good attitude to learning and the relationships between students and teachers are very positive. Where the teaching was judged good or better the lessons provided activities that were challenging and there were opportunities for students to work independently and in groups. In one outstanding Year 9 geography lesson, from the moment the students entered the room they were engaged in purposeful learning, delivered at a brisk pace and with regular challenge and review of their progress. Teachers model good assessment procedures and the students are provided with clear targets for improvement. While the school has made progress in improving teaching and learning, they are judged to be satisfactory overall rather than good as there are still too many inconsistencies in practice. Some lessons are still not planned sufficiently well to meet the learning needs of all students or provide a variety of learning activities and opportunities for students to use ICT to assist learning. Some teachers still talk too much in lessons. Students are aware of their target grades but not all marking provides students with clearly focused targets for improvement.

Students are provided with a broad and balanced curriculum in both key stages and they value the range of cross-curricular opportunities available to them. The introduction of courses, such as the diploma, Skill Force and foundation learning, is having a positive impact on the learning of the students, especially those at risk of leaving school without qualifications. Students involved in these courses say they have developed their confidence as learners. The school plans to develop similar courses in Key Stage 3 for students whose circumstances make them vulnerable. Students who are able, gifted and talented are encouraged to participate in focused learning days and after-school activities that extend their learning. However, able students report that they are not sufficiently challenged in all lessons. The curriculum is currently organised in three ability bands and students work in these bands throughout Key Stage 3. This banding arrangement limits the learning opportunities of students in some subject areas as they are not being sufficiently challenged. The school has plans to review curriculum organisation.

The school has a range of highly effective systems in place to support students in the transition from primary to secondary school and works closely with its partner primaries. The transition arrangements for students whose circumstances make them vulnerable are good, as is the support they receive at every transitional stage within their school career. The provision for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is good and the school works well with parents, carers and a number of partners to ensure that appropriate support is provided. Communication with parents and carers is strong and they appreciate the time and effort school staff make to keep them in touch with how their child is coping at school. One commented, 'Every child really matters in this school.' Teachers encourage students to understand their strengths and how they can use them to their advantage. The personal development curriculum provides opportunities for students to explore careers and consider the suitability of Key Stages 4 and 5 options. The students appreciate and value the advice they receive prior to option choices in Year 9 and Year 11.

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These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	3
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	3
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	2
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	2

How effective are leadership and management?

The headteacher offers visionary leadership but he has shouldered too much responsibility for whole-school improvement. He has embedded ambition and driven school improvement but the new senior team and middle leaders are aware that they need to make a greater contribution than has always been the case in the past. The management of teaching and learning is currently not sufficiently robust. The system for monitoring and recording teaching quality is too simplistic and does not provide sufficient evidence of individual teacher and department quality. As a result, the programme for the professional development of teaching staff has not been sufficiently focused on the key priorities to improve teaching quality. However, there are now plans in place to monitor teaching more effectively, share the outstanding practice of key staff and provide individual coaching support. It is too early to judge the impact of these new monitoring arrangements.

Equal opportunities are promoted and discrimination tackled. Those students whose circumstances make them vulnerable are well integrated into the life of the school and make good progress. Of note is the support provided for students with hearing impairments. The school is a cohesive community and knows its local community well. Plans are in place to work with identified areas in the community to support students and their families. There are currently few opportunities for students to contrast their school community with other national communities, although good links have been made with schools in other countries, for example in Africa.

The school's procedures and policies for the safeguarding of students are robust. Staff are very experienced in supporting students in vulnerable circumstances. Record keeping is good. Governors are well informed and regularly review procedures and policies.

Governance is good. Governors are regular visitors in the school, support the headteacher well and hold the school to account for student outcomes. The school works in close partnership with other professionals. Of note is the long-established sixth form link with two local secondary schools and college of further education. Other outside professionals enjoy working with Larkmead staff and students. They are particularly impressed with the students' behaviour and the commitment and dedication of the teaching staff in responding to new initiatives. One described the school as, 'well organised, well led and passionate about making a difference', and inspectors agree.

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These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	3
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	3
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	2
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	2
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	3
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	2

Sixth form

The overall effectiveness in the sixth form is satisfactory. This is because outcomes, attainment and progress for students are broadly in line with expectations. While there is evidence of strong outcomes in some subject areas at AS and A level, such as media, philosophy and physical education, in others, for example biology, the outcomes are below that expected. This contributes to average outcomes overall. Advice and guidance for students are good and improving, ensuring students are increasingly well matched to courses, leading to improved retention rates between Year 12 and Year 13. Students value the wide range of courses available at Larkmead and through the Abingdon Partnership. Where the teaching is good, students are motivated and engaged. They take responsibility for their own learning and work collaboratively. However, in some lessons, students are not challenged enough to work collaboratively. Increasingly effective tracking systems alert students, teachers and parents and carers to any underachievement and attendance issues. Students report that care, guidance and support are strong and they feel that staff help them to make progress because of the improving academic tutoring and personal support from teachers. The head of sixth form's grasp of data is strong as is her ability to identify improvement priorities accurately. This has already contributed to improved confidence reported from students in their ability to learn and work independently.

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These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	3
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	3
The quality of provision in the sixth form	3
Leadership and management of the sixth form	3

Views of parents and carers

A large number of parents and carers responded to the questionnaire sent as part of this inspection. The vast majority were overwhelmingly supportive of the school and its work. Nearly all agreed that the school kept their child safe and that their child enjoyed coming to school. The two questions that prompted the most negative responses were, 'The school helps me to support my child's learning', and 'The school takes account of my concerns and suggestions'. Inspectors spoke to a group of parents and carers and discussed these concerns. This group felt that the school could help them support their child's learning with the use of the school's learning platform. They also felt that the school did take account of their concerns and suggestions. Some spoke of how they had been invited to attend parent consultation groups to seek their views and how they valued this opportunity. In the next newsletter to parents and carers, the headteacher has agreed to provide examples of how the school has taken account of their views and the impact these consultations have had on Larkmead students.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	100	30	207	61	21	6	3	1
The school keeps my child safe	143	42	182	54	7	2	1	0
My school informs me about my child's progress	116	34	200	59	19	6	2	1
My child is making enough progress at this school	106	31	200	59	24	7	5	1
The teaching is good at this school	101	30	205	61	21	6	2	1
The school helps me to support my child's learning	77	23	210	62	38	11	3	1
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	74	22	224	66	26	8	1	0
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)	97	29	209	62	16	5	4	1
The school meets my child's particular needs	96	28	201	59	28	8	5	1
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	115	34	176	52	28	8	9	3
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	77	23	192	57	45	13	3	1
The school is led and managed effectively	146	43	170	50	9	3	1	0
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	142	42	178	53	10	3	3	1

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 Larkmead School, Abingdon OX14 1RF

Thank you for the welcome you gave the inspection team when we visited your school earlier this term. We enjoyed talking to you, looking at your work and watching you learn. I thought you would like to know the outcome of the inspection and how the school could further improve.

I think you go to a satisfactory school that is getting better and better each year. It has improved since the last inspection in 2008 and your exam results now are broadly the same as other schools in the country. I was very impressed with your attendance at school, which is much better than other schools. Your behaviour is good too in lessons and around the school. You were confident to talk to us and share your views. Teachers work hard for you to plan interesting lessons. We were particularly impressed with those lessons where you used the arts, for example dance, to extend your understanding in other subjects. Those of you who need extra help get very good support from a large number of teachers and other adults. All really care for you and want you to do well. You have a very good headteacher who has worked hard to make sure you improve your exam grades which will help you to have more options when you leave school to start work or go to university. Lots of new senior staff have been appointed recently and the school is now poised to make much quicker progress. I am expecting great things when the school is inspected next time.

In order to make the school even better, I have asked your headteacher and senior staff to do the following:

- Improve teaching so that it is all as good as the best so that you learn more in lessons, ask more questions, and use more information and communication technology (ICT).
- Improve the plans that the school writes to improve your standards and make sure they have more measurable success criteria.
- Raise attainment in all subjects throughout the school to match and subsequently exceed national averages.

I wish you all the best for a rich and rewarding future. Make the most of your time at Larkmead.

Yours sincerely

Clive Kempton HMI

Her Majesty's Inspector

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