

The Astley Cooper School

St Agnell's Lane, Hemel Hempstead, HP2 7HL

Inspection dates 7–8 November 2012

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Satisfactory	3
	This inspection:	Requires improvement	3
Achievement of pupils		Requires improvement	3
Quality of teaching		Requires improvement	3
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Requires improvement	3
Leadership and management		Requires improvement	3

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement. It is not good because

- Standards are not high enough in academic subjects. GCSE results in English and science are lower than in other subjects.
- There is too much variation in the progress made by different groups of students. Boys make less progress than girls.
- The quality of teaching varies too much. Teachers' planning of work does not take enough account of what students need to learn over time.
- Leaders and managers have not given teachers enough opportunities to learn from the best teaching.
- Students do not always take an active part in lessons. There are missed opportunities to use the social skills that students develop well.
- The sixth form requires improvement because standards reached in A-level examinations are too low.

The school has the following strengths

- The headteacher and senior team concentrate on the right things. Teaching, the curriculum and attendance have all improved.
- The governing body, the local authority and another school are helping the school to improve further.
- Leaders have made it clear there is no room for weak teaching, student support or leadership and management at the school.
- Students show great pride in their school. Sporting achievements, arts performances and displays are highlights of the school week.
- Progress is good on work-related courses. The clear purpose of learning motivates students. Almost all progress on to training or into work.
- Students get on well with each other and with staff. Older students support the younger ones, for example through mentoring.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 30 lessons, of which six were joint observations with senior staff. In addition, inspectors made a number of short visits to lessons.
- Meetings were held with senior and middle leaders, representatives of the Governing Body, three groups of students, parents and a representative of the local authority.
- Inspectors took account of 19 responses to the online questionnaire (Parent View) received during the inspection and 35 questionnaires completed by staff.
- The inspection team observed the school's work; scrutinised current data about students' achievement; examined records relating to safeguarding, behaviour and attendance; and looked at documents used by leaders in monitoring and evaluating the school's work.

Inspection team

Ian Middleton, Lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Jane Davies	Additional Inspector
Lisa Fraser	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The Astley Cooper School is smaller than the average sized secondary school, with a small sixth form.
- Girls outnumber boys in all years.
- The proportion of students eligible for the pupil premium (extra government funding to support particular groups of pupils) is above average.
- The proportion of disabled students and those with special educational needs is above that found nationally. An above-average proportion of students are supported through school action, school action plus or have a statement of special educational needs.
- The proportion of students who join or leave the school other than at usual transfer times is higher than in most secondary schools.
- The school has specialist status in visual and performing arts.
- The school meets the government's floor standards which set the minimum expectations for students' attainment and progress.
- The school shares sixth form provision with two local schools in the East Dacorum Partnership.
- A small number of students access alternative provision at the Dacorum Education Support Centre (DESC).

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that teaching is at least good by:
 - preparing work that matches students' stage of learning and helps them progress over time
 - making it clear how learning is relevant to everyday life
 - providing students with regular and constructive feedback, and checking their response.
- Improve students' achievement by:
 - raising standards, particularly in English and science
 - helping boys make the same progress as girls
 - increasing the proportion of students attaining A*, A and B grades at GCSE and A-level.
- Promote consistently good behaviour in all aspects of learning by:
 - enabling students to show initiative and develop independence in more lessons
 - continuing to help students understand the importance of good attendance.
- Strengthen the impact of leaders, managers and governors at all levels by:
 - focusing on students' learning and achievement when evaluating the quality of teaching
 - sharing what works best between subjects
 - making sure that pupil premium funding always helps disadvantaged students catch up.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils

requires improvement

- Students' skills in reading, writing and mathematics when they join the school are below average. The gap was wider than usual for those students who took their examinations in 2012.
- The proportion of students achieving five A* to C GCSE grades or equivalent qualifications in Year 11 is consistently above average. However, although students do well in their work-related courses, their academic achievements are generally lower. Girls achieve higher standards than boys. Students from less well-off families do not do as well as other groups. More-able students do not all attain the higher grades that they could. Disabled students and those with special educational needs make the same progress as their peers.
- Standards in mathematics have risen since 2009. The gap between students' results and higher grades nationally, has narrowed. In English, standards also improved until 2012 when they declined sharply. This contributed to results that were below the standard expected by the government for five A* to C GCSE grades including both English and mathematics. Very few students are entered early for examinations, which is appropriate to their needs.
- The school's focus on improving students' reading, writing, speaking and listening skills is starting to have an impact. Students' enjoyment in reading at the start of the day is promoting better reading habits, evident in the growing use of the school library. Students' speaking and listening skills develop particularly well through the school's strengths in performing arts. Occasionally, they draw on their cultural experiences very well as a context for writing. However, untidy presentation sometimes leads to inaccuracies in spelling and punctuation.
- Students show what they are capable of through their above-average attainment in GCSE French, Spanish and drama. In contrast, results in English, science, geography and history have been low. However, students' current work shows that boys and girls are making the progress expected across a wider range of subjects. This shows that teachers new to the school are helping to raise standards. A parent visiting parents' evening during the inspection commented, 'I was particularly impressed with the new staff members I met.'
- Students join the sixth form with below average starting points. Very positive attitudes to their work help students succeed and go on to university, including Cambridge. However, results at A level, particularly the low proportion of A*, A and B grades achieved, are not high enough to judge achievement in the sixth form good.

The quality of teaching

requires improvement

- Although there is some good and outstanding teaching, in too many lessons students all complete the same work. This limits students' progress over time, particularly those who are able to work accurately and quickly. Teachers know the students well but they do not use this information well enough to match work to students' individual needs.
- A feature of the stronger lessons is the active participation of all students. In these lessons, teachers' good knowledge of students is used to group them, give them different roles, direct questions or decide which students require additional support. In Year 7 dance and physical education lessons, these features contributed to the good or better progress made by students with wide ranging starting points.
- The quality of feedback given to students does not help them to improve their work in all

subjects. However, there is exemplary marking in art and design, skilled use of students checking each other's work in history and effective tracking of progress in mathematics that involves the students. Students also respond well to the 'recommended actions' used on their work-related courses to let them know what they have to do to reach higher standards. Staff are starting to share ideas about the approaches that work best but this is too recent to show any improvement in students' attainment.

- Teachers know their subjects. At the start of lessons they make clear the subject skills and knowledge students are expected to learn. The best lessons go further, by explaining how the skills and knowledge learned could be used in everyday life. This is a particular strength of teaching on work-related courses. Students really respond well to the authentic kitchen created for the hospitality and catering course in which rules and students' uniforms reflect professional standards. Not all teachers inspire students about their subject.
- Some, but not all, teachers are skilled at developing students' reading, writing, speaking and listening skills in their subject. For example, in art and design a teacher skilfully used images of Hurricane Sandy alongside Turner's paintings to extend the vocabulary of Year 8 students. The students discovered a wide range of words that could be used to write about paintings.
- There is some good-quality teaching in the sixth form. Very positive relationships exist between staff and students, including those based in schools that share the sixth form provision. Group tasks are used well to maintain a lively pace of learning with often very small groups. Teachers rightly expect students to take more responsibility for their learning in the sixth form. However, not enough is done to develop students' organisational skills at A level.

The behaviour and safety of pupils

requires improvement

- Students behave well in lessons and around the school. Staff, students and the parents and carers who responded to 'Parent View' agree. However, students' approaches to work that are less guided by the teacher, such as research, are not as good. This means that although they often progress well in lessons, limited follow-up or preparation for lessons slows their progress over time.
- Following concerted efforts to follow up any absences, students' attendance has improved. The school is aware there is still more to do to match attendance figures nationally. Its plans are focused on groups of students whose attendance is not yet good. These include students from less well-off families. The parents and carers interviewed valued the successful reintegration of students who have used off-site provision to address their needs. The school is now increasing school-based support to match the good quality of individual support received off-site.
- There are very few disruptions to lessons. Students are punctual to lessons. Any off-task behaviour is rare and is a consequence of teaching that fails to capture students' interest. Where teaching involves students in practical activities, for example, in the arts and modern languages, they work confidently and collaboratively. In these lessons students solve problems and answer questions thoughtfully. However, not all teaching enables students to demonstrate the strong personal qualities they develop as a result of good spiritual, moral, social and cultural provision.
- Responsible behaviour and support, such as mentoring by older students, and a clear emphasis on health and safety by teachers in subjects – such as science – contribute to students feeling safe. Students interviewed expressed confidence in the school's work to protect them. They understand the damaging impact of different forms of bullying.

The leadership and management requires improvement

- In his first year at the school the headteacher has provided clear direction. Staff, students, parents and carers are very supportive, although many students are disappointed that improvements are not always acknowledged by the local community. However, high levels of interest by parents considering a secondary school for their child in 2013 indicate that the school's good reputation is spreading.
 - Staff with leadership responsibilities are well supported. Work with the local authority, a partnership with an outstanding local school, and shared sixth form provision with two other schools, all help to speed up the school's improvements. Students' attendance, the range of subjects and courses, and the quality of teaching have all improved.
 - New subject leaders and governors bring valuable experience to the school. However, leadership and management require improvement because there is not enough impact yet on raising standards.
 - The senior leadership team holds staff to account where students' performance is not high enough. This helps to decide whether or not staff should move to the next pay scale. Where teaching is weaker, lesson observations are used well to decide what training teachers need, and the success of the training is evaluated. This approach is not used with all teachers to increase the proportion of good or better teaching. Opportunities for staff to share their teaching techniques between subjects have had limited impact because they are at an early stage, are optional, and do not always explore the impact on students' achievement.
 - The school's improvement plan is focused on the right things. This is because the school has an accurate picture of its strengths and weaknesses, including teaching. The school is on course to reach the overall attainment targets for improvement that have been decided, which are challenging. However, plans do not make clear the progress expected of different groups of students.
 - Pupil premium funding is used to support students who are not doing as well as they could, with disadvantaged students being a high priority. For example, students who find mathematics difficult are catching up because additional support is provided. Similarly, the funding enables five students to benefit from extra music tuition. A new member of staff has been appointed to help students who might have previously needed support off-site. However, students from less well-off families do not yet do as well as others because the funding is not used exclusively for them and their progress is not checked thoroughly enough.
 - **The governance of the school:**
 - Governors bring a range of expertise to the school which is used well. The Chair of the Governing Body is very determined that The Astley Cooper School, his old school, will flourish. He makes sure that plans are working by contributing to an action group that includes representatives of the school, the local authority and the partner school. The governing body understands the school's strengths and the reasons why aspects of the school require improvement, including the quality of teaching and students' progress. Links between particular governors and subjects are being established, to help increase the impact of teachers with responsibilities. Governors ask challenging questions about students' achievement before recommending pay awards as part of teachers' performance management. However, there are not enough questions asked about the pupil premium and how well the money spent is helping disadvantaged students to catch up.
-

What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>

School details

Unique reference number	117552
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	401675

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

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	401
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	59
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Ian Harrison
Headteacher	Edward Gaynor
Date of previous school inspection	16 September 2009
Telephone number	01442 394141
Fax number	01442 401407
Email address	admin@astleycooper.herts.sch.uk

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'raising concerns and making complaints about Ofsted', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk. If you would like Ofsted to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone 0300 123 4234, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.



You can use Parent View to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school. Ofsted will use the information parents and carers provide when deciding which schools to inspect and when and as part of the inspection.

You can also use Parent View to find out what other parents and carers think about schools in England. You can visit www.parentview.ofsted.gov.uk, or look for the link on the main Ofsted website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, work-based learning and skills training, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for looked after children, safeguarding and child protection.

Further copies of this report are obtainable from the school. Under the Education Act 2005, the school must provide a copy of this report free of charge to certain categories of people. A charge not exceeding the full cost of reproduction may be made for any other copies supplied.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 4234, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may copy all or parts of this document for non-commercial educational purposes, as long as you give details of the source and date of publication and do not alter the information in any way.

To receive regular email alerts about new publications, including survey reports and school inspection reports, please visit our website and go to 'Subscribe'.

Piccadilly Gate
Store St
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 4234
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

© Crown copyright 2012

