

The Downs School

Manor Crescent, Compton, Newbury, RG20 6NU

Inspection dates 6–7 June 2013

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Good	2
	This inspection:	Outstanding	1
Achievement of pupils		Outstanding	1
Quality of teaching		Outstanding	1
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Outstanding	1
Leadership and management		Outstanding	1

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school.

- All members of the school community share the commitment of the governing body and headteacher. The drive for all students to be inspired and succeed at the highest level has led to the impressive improvements since the last inspection.
- Students join the school with strong literacy and numeracy skills overall. By the time they finish Key Stage 4, their levels of attainment are very high. Achievement overall is outstanding because students in all year groups make rapid progress from their already high levels of attainment on entry to the school.
- The sixth form is outstanding. Students make exceptional progress and are very well prepared for the next stage of their education or training.
- Highly effective systems to support teachers' professional development have led to outstanding teaching which skilfully enables students to take responsibility for their own rapid pace of learning.
- Students are eager to learn; their behaviour and their application to learning are exemplary. They are polite and respectful to adults and to one another. They feel safe and are extremely proud of their school. They keenly participate in the many sporting and creative opportunities the school offers.
- Outstanding leadership and management pervade the school. Leaders ensure that exceptionally high achievement is sustained and that there is a continuous drive to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed teaching in lessons taught by 43 different teachers. Seven lessons were observed jointly with members of the school’s senior leadership team. Inspectors made brief visits to other lessons. At the time of the inspection, students in Years 11, 12 and 13 were sitting their external examinations; they were not observed in lessons.
- Meetings were held with five groups of students, including sixth-form students, members of the governing body, the headteacher and groups of staff. A discussion was held with a representative from the local authority by telephone.
- Inspectors took account of the views of 197 responses to the Ofsted online questionnaire (Parent View) and three letters received from parents and carers.
- Seventy-nine staff questionnaires were returned and considered by the inspection team.
- Inspectors scrutinised a range of documentation including samples of students’ work, the school’s own information on students’ progress and attainment, attendance and behaviour records, and information about safeguarding. They also looked at school planning and the school’s checks on how well it is doing, including the school’s own surveys of parents and carers, and students, and the performance management of staff.

Inspection team

Sarah Hill, Lead inspector	Additional Inspector
Cliff Mainey	Additional Inspector
Tracey Briggs	Additional Inspector
Paul Jacobs	Additional Inspector
Andrew Lyons	Additional Inspector
Caroline Worthington	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The Downs School is a larger-than-average secondary school.
- The proportion of disabled students and those with special educational needs supported through school action is much lower than that found nationally. The proportion of students supported at school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is lower than the national average.
- Almost all students are of White British heritage with a very small number who speak English as an additional language.
- A small proportion of the students attending the school are known to be eligible for the pupil premium (additional government funding for students known to be eligible for free school meals, those who are looked after by the local authority and those from service families) and this is much lower than the national average. The highest proportion of eligible students is from service families.
- The school uses alternative provision for a very small number of students at Key Stage 4. Students have work experience placements in various locations arranged by the local Education Business Partnership for one day a week. A placement at the local authority's pupil referral provision is used to support a student.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for students' attainment and progress.
- In September 2010, the headteacher of The Downs School also became the executive headteacher of the Compton Primary School. In September 2012, the two schools became federated and a new governing body was established, which includes members of the two previous governing bodies.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure all students receive frequent written feedback from teachers that incorporates guidance as to how students can develop their literacy skills and which precisely informs them how to improve their work.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils

is outstanding

- Students make very rapid progress across all year groups and in a wide range of subjects. The proportions of current Year 11 students making more than expected progress from Key Stage 2 in English and mathematics are very high. Together with students' very high levels of attainment, this represents outstanding and sustained high achievement throughout Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4.
- Students' attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 has increased over recent years and is much higher than the national average at grades A* to C for all subjects. In 2012, almost 40% of all students' entries to GCSE examinations were graded at A* or A, which is very high compared to national figures. Students' progress in mathematics from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 is very strong, with almost half of all students making much more than expected progress.
- The school's data for current Year 11 students predicts those attaining five A* to C grades at GCSE, including English and mathematics, to be considerably higher than national standards and higher than in 2012. The school does not use early entry for GCSE.
- In the sixth form, the progress has been rapid over time and achievement is outstanding. A higher proportion of students attain grades A* to B at both AS- and A-level than found nationally. Retention and success rates compare to national figures very favourably. As a result of high quality guidance and education, students advance appropriately to a wide range of higher education routes and vocational pathways.
- Students' progress is monitored closely. Teachers' detailed interventions for any individual student whose progress slows ensures the school's high standards are maintained for all students.
- Disabled students and those with special educational needs make progress at least as good as other students because of the tailored support they receive, including working in small groups, one-to-one tuition and adaptations in lessons while working with their classmates. The school uses the government's catch-up funding to effectively provide extra support for Year 7 students who join the school with attainment below that expected at age 11. These students are set to reach the expected standards in English and mathematics by the end of the summer term.
- Students from minority ethnic backgrounds and those who speak English as an additional language achieve in line with all students.
- The progress of those students whose education includes off-site alternative provision is in line with their classmates and all have placements for the end of the year, including some moving on to apprenticeships.
- Students who are eligible for pupil premium funding join the school with attainment which is much lower than that of most students. In 2012, the gap in English and mathematics between their attainment and that of their peers was more than a grade. The school's interventions are ensuring that they are making progress at a faster rate than similar students nationally, and that the gap is currently closing to less than a grade.
- Students in all year groups spoke clearly and confidently in lessons and during their discussions with members of the inspection team. They are self-assured readers. In a Year 10 history lesson, students confidently made rapid progress towards their targeted A* to B grades at GCSE, working in pairs and groups to develop extended answers to questions posed by their classmates and by the teacher.
- Students recognise the high expectations set for their achievements and they have equally high expectations of themselves.

The quality of teaching

is outstanding

- The school's relentless focus on improving the quality of teaching has ensured the improvements evident across the school. Parents and carers endorse the view that teaching is outstanding,

and students hold a similarly high opinion. They are particularly appreciative of the support they receive from their teachers. Teachers know that only good or better achievement is acceptable for students of all abilities, and are continually seeking to improve their own teaching practice.

- Outstanding teaching is characterised by teachers' excellent subject knowledge applied enthusiastically to well-structured lessons which meet the needs and capabilities of all students. High-quality planning offers students exceptional learning experiences because it leads to demanding, well-paced and interesting lessons. Teachers use skilful questioning to probe students' understanding and give them the confidence to articulate a wide range of responses.
- Year 8 students were observed learning to apply their knowledge and skills to the visualisation of two-dimensional projections of three-dimensional shapes. Their progress was outstanding. The teacher ensured students' interactive involvement from the start of the lesson through the use of well-planned progressive activities. The teacher's perceptive dialogue with students inspired them to reflect on the creativity of their own thinking and deepened their understanding step-by-step. The balance of individual and paired work gave students the confidence to apply their skills and knowledge successfully to these higher-order mathematical concepts.
- Excellent relationships between teachers and students create a very open environment for students to raise their own questions during lessons. Teachers share high expectations through carefully crafted learning outcomes and use skilfully focused questioning to ensure students think deeply and develop their self-assessment skills.
- The school's early literacy interventions and specific reading programmes for students with low reading ages enable slower learners to catch up with their classmates quickly.
- The school's own observations indicate that all teaching in the sixth form is at least good and much is outstanding. This was confirmed by discussions with sixth-form students. The exceptionally high achievement in the sixth form indicates that the quality of teaching is the same as that observed in the main school. The school's records of teaching across other year groups closely matched the inspection team's findings.
- Marking of students' work is mostly very good. It offers clear guidance on how students can improve, and teachers check that students act on the advice. Opportunities are sometimes missed to link marking with the development of students' literacy skills, and in some classes, detailed marking of students' classwork is too infrequent to precisely guide students as to the improvements needed.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are outstanding

- The Downs School is an inclusive and supportive environment where students are exceptionally proud of their school and feel very safe. Parents and carers agree strongly that their children are safe, happy and well looked after.
- Attendance is high, and punctuality to school and lessons is exemplary. Students' views are valued by other students and by staff alike. The formal communication channels such as the school and year councils are held in high regard.
- Exemplary behaviour in lessons is characterised by students' strong collaborative working, their exceptionally positive attitudes to learning, and taking responsibility for their own progress. They understand the importance of behaving well.
- Behaviour is also typically outstanding around the school. Students are calm and well mannered, adding to the school's purposeful ambience, and contributing significantly to exceptionally high achievement. Students report that any disruption to learning is extremely rare.
- The school deploys a range of strategies to support students who are at risk of not engaging appropriately, including working with parents and carers. Exclusions are rare and decreasing because of the school's strong emphasis on rewarding students and securing individualised support. All staff who responded to the questionnaire agree that students are well behaved, as affirmed by the overwhelming majority of parents and carers in their questionnaire responses.

- Students say that bullying is very rare. The school's records confirm this. Students know how to keep themselves safe, including when using modern technologies. The curriculum is well planned to ensure students are aware of the potential for harassment including that of homophobic and racist bullying.
- The school's welcoming and inspiring atmosphere supports students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Students enjoy a wide variety of extra-curricular sports and the creative arts activities. The school's weekly Christian Union group welcomes all students. Class tutor periods and assemblies set a purposeful tone for the day.

The leadership and management are outstanding

- The headteacher and governing body transmit high expectations to staff and students alike. The headteacher's aspirations for all students permeate the school and are realised by skilled senior and middle leaders who share her commitment to inspiring the school community to continuous improvement. These factors contribute to the school's excellent capacity and impetus to keep improving.
- School leaders respond effectively to issues arising from their precise and accurate view of the school's strengths and weaknesses. They are rigorous in tackling underperformance. This is evident when promoting equality and tackling discrimination, the school having successfully closed the gap in the rates of progress between boys and girls of average ability at Key Stage 4.
- Teachers value the personalised pathways and structured coaching programmes that are provided to help them develop their teaching and maintain it as their focus for improvement. Heads of faculty and heads of year take full advantage of the opportunities to enhance their skills as leaders through secondment to the senior leadership team and their work with an external consultant.
- Procedures for teachers' performance management are rigorous. Teachers are rewarded only where objectives and the teachers' national standards are fully met.
- The local authority supports the school with its identified improvement priorities. It provides a customised external view of the school's progress against agreed priorities and national measures.
- The school keeps the curriculum under review to meet the needs of different year groups to ensure that it continues to provide rich and relevant opportunities for all students.
- Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is promoted particularly well through the fortnightly and full-day programme of 'Personal Development Programme' lessons. Music, art and drama are integral to the life of the school, with the recent production of Shakespeare's '*A Midsummer Night's Dream*' receiving high praise from parents and carers.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - The governing body is highly ambitious for the students, the school, and its role in the recently established federation. It is working with the National College to secure the high standards it has set itself. Governors hold the school's senior leaders robustly to account. They skilfully probe all aspects of the school's work including student achievement and standards of teaching. Members of the governing body have a good understanding of assessment data and ably compare the school's performance within a national context. They scrutinise decisions relating to teachers' salary progression appropriately with an awareness of the standards in different areas. Governors are aware of how the pupil premium funding is allocated and its impact on standards. They ensure that all statutory requirements are met, including those for safeguarding and health and safety.

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	110102
Local authority	West Berkshire
Inspection number	403108

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	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1,161
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	260
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Janice Roberts
Headteacher	Valerie Houldey
Date of previous school inspection	21–22 November 2007
Telephone number	01635 270000
Fax number	01635 579084
Email address	contact@thedownsschool.org

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