

# The Astley Cooper School

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

**Inspection dates** 15–16 May 2014

<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	Previous inspection:	Requires improvement	3
	This inspection:	<b>Requires improvement</b>	<b>3</b>
Achievement of pupils		Requires improvement	3
Quality of teaching		Requires improvement	3
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Requires improvement	3
Leadership and management		Good	2

## Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

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

- Although progress in English and science is better in current GCSE classes than previously, standards in these subjects require further improvement because students have not made enough progress in the past.
- Students' skills in writing are not high enough.
- The progress of disabled students and those who have special educational needs at school action plus is not as high as it should be.
- Students do not always show positive attitudes to their learning and not all teachers manage their behaviour in lessons consistently and effectively.
- Students' difficulties in understanding their work are not always identified quickly enough by teachers.
- Students, especially the more-able, do not always know how well they have achieved in lessons and how they can further improve.

### The school has the following strengths

- Students' progress in mathematics is in line with national expectations and improving strongly.
- The sixth form is good. Achievement across the range of subjects is good.
- Teachers make sure that students know what is expected of them in lessons and what they have to do to be successful in their learning.
- Students from all backgrounds work well together and feel safe in the school.
- Teachers' marking helps students to improve their work.
- Standards are rising for students supported by the additional funding because the extra help they are given is organised well.
- Senior leaders, governors and subject leaders check students' progress and the quality of teaching regularly so that they clearly identify any improvements needed.

## Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 33 lessons, including two joint observations with a member of the senior leadership team. In addition, inspectors made short visits to other lessons, tutor periods and an assembly. They looked at samples of students’ work and interviewed groups of students across the age range.
- Meetings were held with the headteacher and other members of the senior leadership team, heads of subject departments, teachers, members of the governing body, and a representative from the local authority.
- Inspectors scrutinised a variety of school documents, including: the checks on the school’s performance, the school action plan, behaviour records, safeguarding records, governing-body documents, and documents relating to the management of teachers’ performance.
- Inspectors also considered the views expressed in 54 questionnaires returned by school staff, together with 24 responses submitted by parents to the on-line, Parent View, survey.

## Inspection team

Roger Waddingham, Lead inspector	Additional Inspector
Michael Lavelle	Additional Inspector
Sally Lane	Additional Inspector

## Full report

### Information about this school

- The Astley Cooper School is a smaller than average-sized secondary school, with a small sixth form.
- The proportion of students known to be eligible for support through the pupil premium is above average. This is additional funding allocated by the government for groups of pupils, including those looked after by the local authority and those known to be eligible for free school meals.
- The number of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is broadly similar to most schools of this size and the proportion of students who speak English as an additional language is below average.
- The proportion of disabled students and those with special educational needs receiving extra support through school action is average. The proportion of students supported at school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is above average.
- The number of students who join or leave the school other than at usual transfer times is higher than in most secondary schools of this size.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for the attainment and progress of students by the end of Year 11.
- The school shares sixth form provision with two local schools in the East Dacorum Partnership.
- The school is in its second year of an educational partnership with a local outstanding school.
- The school offers work-related training for a small number of Year 10 and 11 students through provision from the Dacorum Education Support Centre (DESC).

### What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve teaching at least to good by making sure:
  - expectations for good behaviour are consistently reinforced by all teachers throughout lessons
  - teachers identify and support promptly students who need help with their learning
  - that all teachers ensure that students, especially the more-able, know how to check their work to see how well they are achieving.
- Raise achievement in English and science by:
  - improving students' writing skills
  - improving the progress of disabled students and those who have special educational needs
  - ensuring more consistent approaches to science teaching through greater continuity in staffing in the department.

## Inspection judgements

### The achievement of pupils **requires improvement**

- Achievement requires improvement because not enough students, especially the more-able and those with special educational needs, are making good progress. Also, students' achievement is lower in English and science at Key Stage 4 than in mathematics. A significant minority of students lack precision in their writing, and do not take enough care over spelling, punctuation and presentation.
- After a significant drop in performance in 2012, students are now making better progress at GCSE. There is a strong trend of improvement in mathematics and standards in English and science are beginning to rise. The work seen in the inspection, and reliable information on progress provided by the school, show that more students are now working in line with national expectations.
- Achievement in English is now improving. Students' progress at GCSE has been below average for the past two years, but the work seen in lessons shows that the current Year 11 students are making much better progress. They structure their written coursework carefully in response to the clear guidance given by their teachers. Some Year 10 students have made slow progress in the past because of weaker teaching.
- The progress of most students in mathematics is in line with that found nationally and a good proportion of students make above average progress. Students show good interest in their work in the subject, asking for help when they encounter difficulties. Overall achievement in mathematics is good, although sometimes more-able students are not challenged enough and do not show the confidence and skills needed to check their own work. Early entry of Year 10 students has not affected their final grades as they continue to study the subject in Year 11.
- Science results have been below average in recent years, but improved well last summer. This positive trend is being maintained with current Year 11 students who say they feel well prepared for their GCSE examinations. Progress in some classes requires improvement because students have gaps in their understanding related to underachievement in previous years.
- Sixth form achievement is now good overall. Students make good progress in a range of applied and work-related Level 3 subjects, and there is an improving trend at A level. Progress at AS level has been more variable across subjects, with English and biology results comparatively weak.
- Over the past two years, the gap in attainment in both English and mathematics between students supported by the pupil premium and those not supported by such funding has been about one GCSE grade. However, from the work seen during the inspection and the school's own progress tracking information, the gap is set to close considerably this year, because the support for these students is increasingly effective and teachers know the individual needs of these students well.
- Many disabled students and those with special educational needs are now making expected progress from their different starting points, because support for them is well organised, with smaller classes and well-trained teaching assistants. The progress of some of the older students at school action plus requires improvement as this better-planned support has not been in place long enough to make an impact.

- The progress of students who speak English as an additional language and those from minority ethnic backgrounds is similar to other groups in the school.
- Year 7 funding to help students who are behind in English and mathematics on entry to the school is used well to support literacy and number skills. Weaker readers make good progress because regular checks on their learning help the school plan small group support sessions well matched to their needs. Computer software to support students in both literacy and numeracy is readily available and used effectively.
- A senior staff member checks the progress of students educated off-site on work-related courses carefully and it has improved in line with overall student progress. The school has used these courses well to make sure that all students go on to an appropriate form of education or training on leaving school.

### **The quality of teaching**

### **requires improvement**

- Teaching requires improvement overall because staffing in several subject departments has not been consistent enough to make sure that the schools' high expectations for teaching are fully in place.
- During lessons, teachers sometimes do not identify quickly enough where students need further help by questioning them individually or checking their progress in written work. Also teachers do not always give students, especially the more-able, clear guidance on how to check their work to see how well they are achieving.
- Teaching is improving strongly as a result of the well-targeted professional development opportunities offered to staff and now has several strong features.
- Teachers use their good subject knowledge to plan and explain appropriate tasks that extend students' learning, and in many lessons to select questions that develop their understanding in greater depth.
- Teachers mark students' written work in good detail overall, giving helpful guidance on what they need to do to improve. In the best cases teachers follow up these comments with further questions for students to respond to, and staff feel they have benefited from recent school training opportunities in developing these skills.
- The school has clear policies for managing students' behaviour which are known to staff and understood by the students. Teachers' management of classroom behaviour requires improvement because teachers do not consistently reinforce expectations for good behaviour throughout lessons. In a significant minority of lessons, students allowed their attention to wander and they were not challenged over this quickly enough.
- The work of teaching assistants is managed well by class teachers who plan carefully for the support they give to individual students. Most assistants are clear what questions to ask and aware of the need to allow students to develop their own ways of approaching a problem.
- Sixth form teaching is good overall, with teachers giving due emphasis to the examination course requirements and drawing students' attention to these in marking their work. Homework is used appropriately for students of all ages to set tasks that give them opportunities to practise their learning.

**The behaviour and safety of pupils** requires improvement

- Students' behaviour requires improvement. Students' attitudes to learning are not consistently positive in all subjects.
- Students say that they enjoy practical subjects in particular, however, and many show positive attitudes in their conduct around the school buildings so that their behaviour outside lessons is often good.
- Students arrive at lessons on time, settling quickly to their work, listening well to each other and to the class teacher and following instructions carefully. Low-level disruption in lessons is not common in some subjects, but in others, younger students in particular sometimes lose their concentration when the class teacher does not use the school behaviour policy effectively.
- Sixth form students have positive attitudes to their work and behave well. They are proud to act as role models within the school and are keen to take on responsibility such as charity work and mentoring younger students.
- The school's work to keep students safe and secure is good. Students say they have confidence in the school's procedures to deal with any bullying or incidents of a racial nature and that such incidents are very rare. Students from all backgrounds work well together and feel safe in the school.
- Attendance has been below average for the past three years, although the school's current figures show an improvement to broadly average. Levels of persistent absence have been above average during this time, but following the introduction of more rigorous monitoring and follow-up procedures the school reports current figures to be in line with the national averages.
- The school offers good support to pupils who have behavioural difficulties so that there have been no permanent exclusions in the past year, and fixed-term exclusions have fallen to be in line with the national average rather than above as previously.

**The leadership and management** are good

- The headteacher, senior leaders and governors share a clear commitment to raising standards and achievement in the school through setting high expectations, promoting improvements in teaching and the regular tracking of students' progress. These measures have successfully ensured an improvement in the quality of teaching and a rise in standards, particularly in the sixth form.
- Through regular checks on the school's performance, school leaders make sure they have a clear and accurate picture of what needs to be done to improve further. The school reviews its progress towards the targets in its action plan on a regular basis, and uses these evaluations well to plan for future initiatives. For example, the curriculum for the current Year 10 has been adjusted for next year to improve their progress in key subjects.
- Subject leaders plan carefully for developments in their responsibility areas, linking the actions in their plans well to whole school priorities. They report that they appreciate the support they are given by senior leaders, through clear guidance on their action planning and regular meetings to track students' progress towards their targets.

- The evaluation of teaching has been developed well. Senior staff use a good range of sources of evidence to identify strengths and weaknesses in teaching and offer appropriate further training to both teaching and support staff.
- The school makes very effective use of information about students' progress and this is a strength of the school. Students' attainment is checked frequently and the results are used well by leaders and managers at all levels to identify further support needed for students and for teachers. The school's system for target setting has recently been improved and students are aware of their targets.
- In the sixth form, leadership and management is good. Procedures for evaluating teaching and learning are well established and highly effective personal support is offered to students.
- Students are offered an appropriate range of subjects to choose from at GCSE, including both academic and work-related pathways. There are good opportunities for students to develop their spiritual and cultural awareness in a range of school assemblies, trips and visits. Community links are used well to help develop students' skills in reading and in music. Students report that visiting specialist staff give helpful individual advice on career pathways.
- The support for disabled students and those who have special educational needs is increasingly well organised. The new coordinator ensures that students' needs are identified and provided for quickly. Staff make good use of the detailed guidance notes that show the requirements for support for each these students in their classes. The progress of older students supported at school action plus is not as high as it should be because the provision for them has not been consistently strong in previous years.
- School leaders have a clear commitment to equality of opportunity and make sure that students feel confident there is no discrimination.
- The arrangements for safeguarding meet all national requirements and are highly effective.
- The local authority gives good support to the school. Specialist advisers work closely with the school in carrying out reviews, supporting subject leaders and providing programmes for staff development.
- **The governance of the school:**
  - Governors offer good support and challenge to the leadership team and know the school well through regular committee meetings, written reports and visits to the school. They are well informed about how well the school is doing compared with other schools nationally
  - They pay close attention to the progress of different groups of students with school improvement priorities
  - They understand the importance of tracking students' progress in analysing the strengths and weaknesses in the school
  - Governors know what the school is doing to develop teaching and to tackle any underperformance. They have a good understanding of the arrangements for teachers' pay progression and the procedures for setting targets for the management of teachers' performance
  - They receive reports on the use of pupil premium funding for eligible students and are well informed about how these students achieve. The governing body is experienced and well trained.

## 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

<b>Unique reference number</b>	117552
<b>Local authority</b>	Hertfordshire
<b>Inspection number</b>	442033

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

<b>Type of school</b>	Comprehensive
<b>School category</b>	Community
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	11–18
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Gender of pupils in the sixth form</b>	Mixed
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	431
<b>Of which, number on roll in sixth form</b>	68
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	The governing body
<b>Chair</b>	Eileen Gordon
<b>Headteacher</b>	Edward Gaynor
<b>Date of previous school inspection</b>	7 November 2012
<b>Telephone number</b>	01442 394141
<b>Fax number</b>	01442 401407
<b>Email address</b>	admin@astleycooper.hert.sch.uk

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