

Astor College

Astor Avenue, Dover, Kent, CT17 0AS

Inspection dates 26-27 March and 1–2 July 2015

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected	
	This inspection:	Requires improvement	3
Leadership and management		Requires improvement	3
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Requires improvement	3
Quality of teaching		Requires improvement	3
Achievement of pupils		Requires improvement	3
Sixth form provision		Requires improvement	3

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

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

- Too few students make good progress in mathematics and science.
- Teaching does not always challenge students to think deeply and acquire a good understanding of the key ideas in each subject.
- Priorities such as the need to improve students' literacy skills, and to close the gaps between the attainment of disadvantaged students and others, are flagged up clearly by senior leaders but are not always given a consistently high profile in lessons.
- Not all teachers adhere to the college's homework policy. Some students have very little homework.
- Some important college improvement priorities become lost in the detail of the college's self-evaluation and development planning.
- Senior leaders are improving the quality of teaching but do not always monitor the impact of their actions thoroughly and quickly enough.
- Directors do not use the wealth of information they possess about the performance of the college to offer consistently high levels of challenge to senior leaders, and hold them closely to account for their work, throughout the year.
- The sixth form requires improvement because too few students achieve high grades across a range of subjects.

The school has the following strengths

- The college's work in expressive and performing arts is impressive. A large proportion of students benefit from a wide range of exciting opportunities to be involved in near-professional standard performances. There are many beautiful pieces of students' art around the college.
- There is some very good teaching and learning, for example in the expressive and performing arts subjects, design and technology, and English.
- Students are offered very high levels of care, guidance and support. Staff are very attentive to the needs of those students who sometimes need extra help and support.
- The majority of students are proud of their college and behave well.
- The cooperative approach to school leadership in the federation gives the Principal useful opportunities to share ideas. The coordinated approach to improvement across all four establishments helps this college to improve.

Information about this inspection

- Astor College was inspected on 26–27 March 2015. This inspection was deemed incomplete by Ofsted and a second team of inspectors visited the college on 1–2 July 2015.
- On the first visit, inspectors observed 34 lessons, of which five were joint observations with senior leaders. The second visit involved 40 shorter visits to lessons.
- Meetings were held with senior and middle leaders, newly qualified teachers, other teachers, and representatives of the board of directors of the Dover Federation for the Arts Multi Academy Trust.
- In both inspection visits, inspectors talked formally with groups of students and also gathered their views informally in brief conversations around the site, and in lessons.
- Inspectors took account of the 32 responses to Parent View, the online parent survey, and emails, letters and telephone calls from parents. Inspectors also took account of the information from the school's own parent surveys.
- Inspectors scrutinised the 27 responses to the staff questionnaire from the first inspection visit.
- Inspectors examined students' work and a range of documentation, including analyses of students' achievements, the school's self-evaluation and development planning, and minutes of directors' meetings. Records of safeguarding, behaviour and attendance records were also scrutinised.

Inspection team

Alan Taylor-Bennett, Lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector (July)
Matthew Haynes	Her Majesty's Inspector (July)
Simon Hughes	Her Majesty's Inspector (July)
Janet Hallett	Additional Inspector (March)
Steven Colledge	Additional Inspector (March)
David Davies	Additional Inspector (March)
Elaine Smith	Additional Inspector (March)

Full report

Information about this school

- Astor College is a slightly larger than average-size, non-selective academy. It is in an area where a relatively high proportion of students attend selective schools.
- The college is federated with Barton Junior School, White Cliffs Primary College for the Arts, Pebbles Nursery, and Shatterlocks Infant and Nursery School. These schools make up the Dover Federation for the Arts, which converted as a federation to academy status in June 2012. When Astor College's predecessor school, which had the same name, was last inspected by Ofsted, it was judged to be good overall.
- A board of directors exercises governance of all four schools in the federation.
- The proportion of students who are disabled or have special educational needs is above average. The proportion of disadvantaged students for whom the school receives the pupil premium (additional government funding) is well above the national average.
- The proportion of students joining the college after the start of Year 7 is higher than average.
- The college serves a community with relatively little ethnic or cultural diversity.
- Some students attend the Enterprise Learning Alliance in Dover. Mentors from Enterprise Learning Alliance also support students in the college's own inclusion centre.
- In 2014, the college did not meet the government's current floor standard, which sets minimum expectations for attainment and progress.
- The college has strong links with other schools in the federation, and with Duke of York's Royal Military School. The Chief Executive Officer of the Dover Federation for the Arts is Executive Principal of Duke of York's Royal Military School.
- Astor College is a former specialist school for the arts. The arts continue to have a very high profile within the life of the school and the federation.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that teaching supports at least good learning in all subjects, throughout Key Stages 3 and 4 and in the sixth form, by:
 - building more opportunities into lesson planning for students to experience higher and more sustained levels of challenge and be able to make good progress
 - developing students' capacity to question their understanding of key ideas and identify misconceptions more confidently
 - making the strategies used to develop students' literacy skills more consistent across subjects to raise their status with students and enable students to use literacy skills learned in one subject in others
 - checking that teachers adhere to the college's homework policy
 - devising ways to use the outstanding teaching in the college to support better learning in all subjects.
- Improve the impact of leadership and management on students' achievement by:
 - refining the college's self-evaluation process so that it pinpoints key development needs clearly
 - defining the outcomes expected at key points in the implementation of developments to enable good evaluations of progress
 - making clearer connections between whole-college priorities and the work of all teachers, particularly with regard to improving the achievement of disadvantaged students
 - developing the existing useful links with other local schools to raise teachers' aspirations for students to achieve at the very highest levels in all subjects, for example in mathematics and science
 - ensuring that directors use their good knowledge about the work of the college to hold leaders to account and challenge any underperformance.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved. An external review of the college's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Inspection judgements

The leadership and management

require improvement

- The Principal and his senior team are bringing about improvements in the college. There are strengths in the provision for students' welfare. Achievement is rising securely but not rapidly, and leadership and management need to be more effective in bringing about the necessary improvements in teaching and students' quality of learning.
- Senior staff, and directors, know what needs to be done. Self-evaluation is honest and detailed, but key issues are sometimes lost in the high level of detail presented. These priorities are represented in the development plans but there is a lack of sharp focus on essential actions, and clear statements of what will be achieved at various points in the year. This compromises the college's capacity to use its frequent monitoring and evaluation of lessons and students' work to measure the differences being made.
- Middle leaders are keen to bring about improvement and they have the necessary skills. They are enjoying being held much more closely to account over recent years through regular meetings with the Principal and their line manager, at which students' progress is the main agenda item. Good tracking procedures are used to present a clear picture of achievement at individual, class and subject levels. The achievement of different groups of students is also analysed carefully to ensure all groups have equality of opportunity.
- Despite these good systems, key priorities are not always translated into changes in teaching and learning in all subjects. For example, there is good awareness of the need to improve the progress made by disadvantaged students, and a great willingness to do so. Yet there is a lack of subject-specific strategies in many areas. The need to improve students' literacy skills is a clear priority, and many teachers use agreed ways of addressing students' written, speaking and listening skills. However, monitoring does not require their regular use in every lesson to reinforce the message strongly and bring rapid improvements.
- The college has begun to align its self-evaluation, development planning, monitoring and performance management systems under one system in order to address some of these issues. This gives it the opportunity to sharpen the ways in which it drives improvement.
- When an initiative is carried through with commitment, it is successful. For example, the new marking policy has raised the standard of feedback offered to students across the college. However, even here, monitoring of students' work has not picked up significant variations in the extent to which good use is made of this feedback by students.
- Pastoral systems operate with close attention to students' welfare. All necessary safeguarding processes are in place and of appropriate quality, and staff are very sensitive to the needs of students. There is an appropriately effective concentration on eliminating discrimination and an emphasis on equality of opportunity through, for example, using pupil premium funds to support extra-curricular opportunities.
- Strategies to improve behaviour are largely successful. They are well understood by staff and students and enable low-level disruption to be tackled without unnecessary interruptions to the learning. They are operated consistently and, in the students' eyes, fairly.
- Leaders are bringing about improvements in teaching. Underperformance is identified, and there are regular opportunities for training and development. However, there is sometimes a lack of rigour in monitoring the impact of professional learning across the college. This means that the 'call for action' identified in the training, is not always heard by teachers.
- The quality of teaching is judged accurately in lesson observations, but students' progress data do not play a large enough part in judgements of its effectiveness over time. Strategies to capture elements of the best teaching, such as in the performing and expressive arts, design and technology, and English, and use them to bring about improvements in students' learning in other subjects, are under-developed.
- There are good systems in place to monitor the behaviour, welfare and progress of students who attend the Enterprise Learning Alliance.
- The structure of the Dover Federation of the Arts enables the Principal to draw on ideas and support from each of the other schools quickly and effectively. Working relationships are close and there is a genuine sense that all of the students and pupils in each school matter to every headteacher. There are also strong and useful links with Duke of York Military School, including support for the work of the mathematics department here; a recent mathematics residential study opportunity was enjoyed by students. All of these links strengthen the college's capacity to bring about further improvements. The Principal is well aware of the need to make a wider range of other links with similar schools locally and nationally in order to learn from their experiences, and there are plans in place to do so.
- There are some links with the local authority and the college meets with its improvement partner to discuss its work. Any further involvement is limited to the college's buying-in specific subject support as it feels appropriate.

- The range of subjects on offer, and the way in which they are structured in each year group, meets the needs of students well. Changes to the balance between the very successful expressive and performing arts subjects and other subjects were introduced recently to match national expectations of students' curriculum experiences. Nevertheless, these subjects still present a marvellous range of opportunities for students during and well beyond the college day.
- Students are prepared suitably for life in modern Britain. They are taught through a variety of subjects about different world religions, the need to respect and value differences, and how the police and judiciary work. Many enjoyed exercising their democratic responsibilities in the college's mock general election.
- The pupil premium is spent on provision which has the potential to improve the standards achieved by disadvantaged students. Its effectiveness is not monitored closely enough to be able to drive improvements strongly and securely, however. The use of the Year 7 catch-up premium is similarly well directed but not rigorously monitored for impact.
- **The governance of the college** is provided by the board of directors. Directors are well informed by the college about all of its work, and the minutes of their meetings reflect the detail of their scrutiny. They exercise good oversight of the quality of teaching and ensure that systems operate fairly and effectively, so that only the best is rewarded. Directors ensure that all statutory requirements around safeguarding are met. They are given detailed analyses of the achievement of all groups of students and are well aware that mathematics and some other subjects are in need of rapid improvement. Directors sometimes fail to isolate the key priorities and hold them in the front of their minds, such as the magnitude of, and the trends in, the gaps between the achievement of disadvantaged students and others and hence the impact of the pupil premium grant throughout the year. Their capacity to gauge the degree to which specific improvements are being brought about, at key points in the school year, is limited by the lack of focus in the college's self-evaluation and in its development planning documentation. Some important national initiatives, such as the requirement to promote fundamental British values, are represented strongly in directors' work but the monitoring of implementation and impact is not rigorous. These factors mean that directors are not offering the senior team the consistently very high levels of challenge they deserve on all of the priority areas.

The behaviour and safety of pupils

require improvement

Behaviour

- The behaviour of students requires improvement.
- Behaviour around the site and in many lessons is usually cooperative, calm and respectful. Although some students are a little wary of visitors, when approached in a calm and friendly manner they are very willing to be friendly and helpful, in return. They are generally punctual to lessons, despite the sometimes large distances they need to travel between classes.
- Many students lack confidence in their learning. They need constant reassurance and are sometimes reluctant to try things out for themselves. Many tend to take failure personally rather than seeing it as a natural and useful part of learning.
- Behaviour in lessons is usually good but when the teaching fails to interest and stimulate, students sometimes become inattentive and a few disrupt learning. The system of 'consequences' works well when students need reminding to behave well. Many accept the signal to change their behaviour when they receive a 'C1', and relatively few move beyond C3 and receive a yellow card, which means that they are referred to senior staff and parents are informed. Students respect this system and say it helps them to behave better.
- Students feel that the rewards system is fair and effective. It recognises consistently cooperative and reliable behaviour as well as exceptional or improved behaviour. The treats for those who accumulate a lot of rewards are liked, and many students aspire to gain certificates and be a part of special trips to theme parks. In these ways, the college is helping students to develop a strong moral compass and to be confident about using their understanding of the differences between right and wrong.
- Attendance is improving but remains below the national average. The college has a range of strategies to encourage and require good attendance, and the proportion of students who are persistently absent is higher than average, but is falling.
- The number of students who are excluded for unacceptable behaviour has been very high in the past. It is reducing rapidly because behaviour is now managed better and more consistently.
- Students in Key Stage 4 wanted to make clear to inspectors how keen they are to value differences and show respect for people regardless of their sexuality, background, ethnic group, or religion. They value the information around these issues provided in personal, social and health education lessons. Students in

Key Stage 3 were less aware of the need to examine their prejudices and avoid using terms such as 'gay' in a negative way. In this and other respects, students' behaviour, and their social skills, improve significantly the longer they are in the college.

Safety

- The college's work to keep students safe and secure is good.
- Safeguarding policies and related training are up to date and all statutory requirements are met. There are appropriate systems in place to check on the backgrounds of adults who work with students.
- The site is safe and secure. It is open for community use after school and at weekends quite often, but there are effective systems to monitor the safety of any students on site at such times.
- Staff give students' welfare a high priority. Many give time beyond their working hours to offer a range of trips and visits, some residential, to students who may otherwise not be able to experience such activities. Systems to respond to the need for help with specific problems are organised well and usually work quickly and effectively. Many students really appreciate the good work of the pastoral staff, and the willingness of many teachers to 'go the extra distance' to support them.
- There is some bullying but it is not common and it is generally not tolerated by other, particularly older, students, nor by staff. There are a range of adults ready and trained to help; they are felt by students to be approachable, and effective in their responses.
- Students are taught about potential risks to their health and welfare through the personal, social and health education programme, and in assemblies and tutor periods. This includes key messages around e-safety and risks such as abduction, and violence in the community.
- The overwhelming majority of parents who responded to Parent View said that their child is safe in the college.

The quality of teaching

requires improvement

- The quality of teaching requires improvement because, although there is some outstanding teaching supporting very good achievement, too little is consistently good enough to drive achievement in a wide range of subjects.
- The best teaching encourages students to become more resilient and to have the confidence to explore ideas for themselves, questioning their own understanding. This was seen, for example, in dance and drama lessons where students responded to the stimulus of the teacher inventively, imaginatively and with considerable technical flair. In art, English, and design and technology, students are able to produce work of a high standard and to talk about what they are doing with confidence and sparkle.
- In some other lessons, students do not see the point of the work and regard challenges as hurdles placed in their way. This is the case in some mathematics lessons, where students are not given problems in interesting contexts, encouraged to explore ideas, or talk about and develop their mathematical reasoning.
- There is a consistency and reliability about how students' work is marked across the college, which is the result of a strong drive from senior leaders this year. Virtually all subjects offer students useful feedback at appropriate times. Students' capacity to respond to this varies, however. In some subjects, students' work is improving because of their responses to this stimulus; in others, students tend to regard the questions they are asked, and requests to repeat or re-think work, as an optional extra.
- Teachers are well aware of the need to prioritise the development of students' literacy skills in every subject. Although there is good practice, there is not enough consistency from one subject to the next for students to be able to transfer their literacy learning seamlessly. Students do not obtain a sufficiently strong, simple message from all teachers about literacy skills to be able to respond similarly successfully, whether they are in a science laboratory or a ceramics studio.
- Students have a very impressive range of opportunities to develop their cultural awareness and social skills and confidence. For example, drama offers the chance for students to take part in prestigious events such as The National Theatre Connects Festival, and performances of 'Chess' in Siberia. Rehearsals are currently underway for a performance of 'Les Miserables', to be taken to the United States in the autumn. Students who follow an examination course in photography recently contributed their work alongside that from a link school in Croatia at a joint exhibition in Split. Students are also able to take part in an exchange programme with Valencia, Spain, and to develop their language skills and their understanding of other cultures.

The achievement of pupils**requires improvement**

- Students' achievement requires improvement because in too many subjects too few students make at least the progress expected of them, and the proportion making good progress is too low.
- Achievement in mathematics has been too low for some years. It is beginning to improve; these improvements are secure but are not yet quick enough. Students are not presented with enough opportunities to use mathematics to solve problems, and to develop fluency in using their skills to think and speak mathematically. Students themselves say that more could be expected of them in mathematics.
- Achievement in English is significantly better. Students say they feel that their English teachers are 'pushy, but in a good way' and help them to appreciate the relevance of their work and to enjoy challenges. They respond positively and make good progress.
- Achievement in the expressive and performing arts is a real strength. Students seem not to feel any limitations on their ambition and are challenged and supported very well. Results in art and drama in 2014, for example, were on average between a grade and two grades higher than in other subjects.
- Nearly all students are now being prepared for GCSE science. This represents a significant change to teaching and learning in science and standards are not currently as high as expected.
- Overall achievement in 2014 declined; even standards in stronger subjects such as English fell. The college associates this with students' sensitivity to significant national changes to examination structures during Key Stage 4. They acknowledge that this underscores the need for improvements in achievement to be underpinned by a higher quality of learning in each subject. Current achievement is improving and the college leadership is confident that 2015 outcomes will be back on course.
- Students usually learn well in lessons. They are generally willing to grapple with ideas and challenges, provided that they are supported closely and tasks are broken down for them. Unfortunately, only in a few subjects is this predominantly supportive approach in early Key Stage 3 replaced with a more demanding and challenging style of learning as they move up the school. This reduces the number achieving well and gaining the highest grades.
- Students who attend the Enterprise Learning Alliance achieve broadly in line with their potential because they benefit from the smaller group sizes, and the different subjects offered which meet their needs better.
- Because of the organisation of education locally, there are relatively very few students with high levels of achievement at Key Stage 2 who join in Year 7. Their achievement is broadly in line with expectations in many areas but too few make very good progress and achieve grades A*/A. More could be expected of them by their teachers.
- Disadvantaged students have made less progress than other students in the past. This has caused some large gaps in attainment between them and other students by the end of Key Stage 4. In 2014, disadvantaged students achieved a grade and a half lower than others in the college in mathematics, and around two grades lower than others nationally. In English, they achieved around a grade lower than others in the college and about a grade and a half lower than others nationally. Teachers are now much more aware of the need to make special and different responses to meet the needs of these students, and the gaps between their attainment and that of others in Key Stages 3 and 4 are closing. The college is confident that the proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds obtaining five or more good GCSE grades, including in English and mathematics, in 2015 is set to increase significantly from 2014 outcomes.
- Students with disabilities or special educational needs make similar progress to their peers, but this means they are not catching up on previously lower levels of achievement. Better organised and more assertive intervention, and better use of information about their needs, is beginning to raise their achievement.
- Early entry for GCSE was used in the past, and this limited achievement. Students were sometimes satisfied with a grade C in mathematics or English when they were capable of better. This practice has been discontinued.

The sixth form provision**requires improvement**

- The sixth form is small but offers a useful range of subjects which can be combined into appropriate combinations for students. They use the good and unbiased advice and guidance available to them to make sensible choices at this point, and to steer themselves into the next stage of their lives.
- Too few stay on from Year 12 into Year 13, but many of those that leave take up an apprenticeship or move into employment with a training element.
- Those who have not achieved at least a grade C in English or mathematics when they enter the sixth form

are helped to do so, and many are successful.

- Relatively few students achieve very well, or obtain the higher grades in academic subjects. This limits their opportunities to gain places in Russell Group universities. Students make stronger progress in vocational subjects, with many achieving success, though again only a few at the higher levels.
- Many students are attracted from other schools into the sixth form because of the strengths of the expressive and performing arts provision. They spoke warmly to inspectors about how much they are enjoying the opportunities on offer, and the quality of the teaching in these subjects.
- Students are given good guidance and support. They are well cared for. Higher expectations are needed in some subjects to support better progress, however, and the leadership of the sixth form does not always hold all students, nor sixth form teachers, to account assertively enough in order to drive very good progress.
- Students behave responsibly and maturely and make useful contributions to the life of the college in, for example, the range of extra-curricular opportunities available in expressive and performing arts, by supporting reading catch-up programmes, and being mentors to younger students. They show their pride in their college by choosing to wear the uniform rather than other appropriate dress.

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	138167
Local authority	Kent
Inspection number	456229

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

Type of school	Modern (non-selective)
School category	Academy converter
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	1015
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	139
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	John Peall
Principal	Edward Pallant
Date of previous school inspection	18–19 October 2011
Telephone number	01304 201151
Fax number	01304 200152
Email address	admin@astor.dfamat.com

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