

The Ashcombe School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	125264
Local Authority	Surrey
Inspection number	359872
Inspection dates	10–11 November 2010
Reporting inspector	Joanna Beckford-Hall

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

The registered childcare provision, managed by the governing body, was inspected under section 49 of the Childcare Act 2006.

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	1522
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	305
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Janet Howsden
Headteacher	David Blow
Date of previous school inspection	13 February 2008
School address	Ashcombe Road Dorking RH4 1LY
Telephone number	01306 886312
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Age group	11–18
Inspection dates	10–11 November 2010
Inspection number	359872

**Number of children on roll in the registered
childcare provision**

**Date of last inspection of registered
childcare provision**

Not previously inspected

Age group 11–18
Inspection dates 10–11 November 2010
Inspection number 359872

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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three additional inspectors. Inspectors observed 32 lessons and teachers with five observations conducted jointly with senior leaders. In addition, inspectors held meetings with staff, students and the Chair and Vice Chair of the Governing Body. A range of documentation was scrutinised including department development plans, information about students' attainment and progress, school policies, records of lesson observations and the governing body minutes. The inspection team reviewed responses from staff and students' questionnaires and 331 questionnaires returned by parents and carers.

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

- The extent to which evidence from lesson observations support the school's judgement that attainment is high and that progress is at least good for all students.
- The consistency of the quality of teaching across the school and how effectively assessment information is used to plan learning that stretches all students.
- The extent to which the curriculum in the sixth form and in Key Stages 3 and 4 offers academic and personal development opportunities for all students.
- How effectively middle leaders drive improvement at department level and how senior leaders nurture talent for succession planning.

Information about the school

Ashcombe School is a larger than average school with a sixth form. The percentage of students known to be eligible for free school meals is well below that found nationally, as is the proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The large majority of students are of White British heritage and the vast majority speak English as their first language. Very few students join or leave the school at times other than the start of the school year. The school achieved a specialism in languages in 1998 and became a Leadership Partner School in 2009.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?

2

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

2

Main findings

Ashcombe School provides a good quality of education and there are a number of features which are outstanding. Outcomes for students are outstanding as a result of high quality assessment information to track students' progress, good quality teaching and good behaviour. Students speak proudly about their ambitions, both personal and academic, and they know that staff do their utmost to help them succeed.

The commitment to and vision for improvement by senior and middle leaders, complemented by effective work with the governing body, ensures that high standards are maintained year-on-year. Student attainment is high and the school has sustained a trend of GCSE results over three years where the percentage of students achieving five or more A* to C grades including English and mathematics is significantly above that found nationally, rising to a high of 71% in 2009. The specialism in languages is well used to support achievement and enhances partnership working. For example, students enjoy performing children's tales in French to local Key Stage 2 children and helping Year 5 children who come to Ashcombe for a technology and languages day. The percentage of students gaining at least one GCSE A* to C grade in a modern foreign language is significantly above that found nationally.

Students enjoy Ashcombe School because many lessons are good and they take advantage of the wealth of opportunities to develop as young citizens through enrichment and fundraising activities, and being responsible ambassadors on international trips. The view of one parent was echoed by many recognising the value of these experiences: 'Extra-curricular activities are tremendous and run by enthusiastic and dedicated staff. Overseas trips are so beneficial giving children a broader perspective on the world.' A sixth form student commented that the 'trip to Tanzania had been a life-changing experience'. Many international trips complement the good curriculum throughout Key Stage 3 to 5.

Students make an outstanding contribution to the school and wider community, committing to events in the annual charities week and keenly participating in activities with local schools. During the inspection, the pile of brightly wrapped Christmas present boxes ready to be sent to Link Romania was a vivid symbol of students' willingness to support those less fortunate.

Attendance is good and improving because students enjoy lessons. Teaching is good overall and the large majority of students make good progress. In good and outstanding lessons, students are challenged in their thinking and can assess their own learning. When teaching is no better than satisfactory this is often because planning is not tightly focused on using assessment information to plan learning that is targeted to every student in the class.

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The interactive system called 'My Ashcombe', including a 'My Bubbles' section for tracking higher, middle and lower attainers, provides staff with extensive and customised detail about progress and attainment. Target setting is challenging and the comprehensive nature of 'My Ashcombe' gives an exact picture of achievement throughout the school. However, use of assessment information does not consistently underpin a cycle of monitoring, evaluation and action planning that drives whole-school and department action plans. This means the relationship between strategic priorities and day-to-day operational practice is not aligned sufficiently well. Leaders know the strengths of the school but self-evaluation is in places too generous. Nevertheless, this does not detract from leaders' good capacity for further improvement exemplified by maintaining high standards, an outstanding sixth form, a rising percentage of good or better teaching and outstanding partnership work.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Increase the percentage of consistently outstanding teaching to at least 60% by July 2011, by:
 - ensuring that the existing good and outstanding practice is shared widely across the school
 - embedding the use of assessment information coherently in all lessons so that planning meets the needs of the most-able and less-able students, and high levels of challenge lead to outstanding progress.
- Ensure that all systems developed for improvement by leaders provide sufficient clarity and direction for school development by:
 - drawing together the already high quality analyses of outcomes for different groups of students with measurable targets in department action plans
 - describing in a single document the connections between department priorities and whole-school monitoring and evaluation to exemplify how development planning leads to improvement.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils**1**

In the majority of lessons seen by inspectors, the quality of learning was good, sustaining student interest. Progress of students is good overall and there are no significant differences in the progress of students from different groups. Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities make good progress because the school uses additional support well to help students with learning needs such as dyslexia and sensory, behavioural, social and physical needs. Students' achievement is outstanding and attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 has remained significantly above that found nationally. The percentage of students achieving five or more GCSE A* to C grades including English and mathematics remains high. Senior leaders have acted quickly to identify why some subjects have underperformed, subsequently securing improvement in areas such as dance and drama.

The student council voice is respected by leaders, and taking the initiative to research healthy food options and better pricing for the canteen is one example of the council's proactive approach to find solutions for issues raised by students. Students understand

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why healthy living is important but students in Key Stage 3 and some parents and carers request more choice and additional time for physical education on the weekly timetable.

Behaviour around the school is good. Most students get on well at break and lunchtimes. A small minority of parents and carers raised concern about behaviour and bullying but students are confident that if incidents occur leaders take robust action and help resolve any minor conflict. Largely positive relationships between staff and students at Ashcombe lead to good and some outstanding behaviour in lessons.

Students possess an outstanding knowledge of keeping themselves safe and benefit from very good guidance about contemporary issues such as knife crime and teenage sexual health. An overwhelming majority of students feel safe at school and know that school trips are diligently managed.

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. Students develop a secure understanding of multicultural Britain and they recognise that links with international schools enhance their understanding of different cultures and religions.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	1
Taking into account: Pupils' attainment ¹	1
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	2
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	2
The extent to which pupils feel safe	1
Pupils' behaviour	2
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	1
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2
Taking into account: Pupils' attendance ¹	2
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low

How effective is the provision?

Teaching is good and an increasing proportion is outstanding. Good and outstanding teaching observed in a number of subjects for example art, science, modern foreign languages, English and mathematics was characterised by good questioning to probe

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knowledge, energetic pace, teachers' very good subject knowledge and exemplary planning precisely matched to levels of ability. However, there is too much inconsistency across the school in using the assessment data to plan different learning tasks or modify the pace of lessons. Some students do not receive sufficient stretch, especially more-able students. Students are enthusiastic in lessons and in satisfactory, rather than good, lessons, there are missed opportunities to capitalise on students' ideas for group work, self- or peer-assessment.

Rigorous marking in some subjects provides detailed feedback successfully guiding students about how to improve. This is not consistent across subjects. Students know their targets and can link these to how the school tracks their progress but a few are much less secure in linking targets, comments in work and feedback in lessons to judge how well they are doing. This mirrors the views of some parents who want to know more clearly about the progress of their son or daughter against national indicators as well as performance against the year group.

The good curriculum is enriched by the language specialism. Students understand the importance of studying at least one language at GCSE level and most draw connections between bilingual ability and career opportunities. Visits to France, Germany, Italy, Spain and China successfully extend students' fluency in contexts other than the classroom. The international business week promotes linguistics skills and Year 10 students benefit from team-building for competitive business tasks and sessions to practise Italian and Chinese.

At Key Stage 4, appropriate pathways exist to meet students' interests. Courses delivered in partnership with East Surrey College and the Surrey Alternative Learning Programme enable students to pursue vocational courses in engineering and beauty therapy. In Key Stage 3, personal learning and thinking skills are increasingly embedded across the curriculum but there has been less innovative work than seen in Key Stage 4. Students receive high-quality guidance to support decisions for Key Stage 4 qualifications and for progression after Year 11.

Good quality care, guidance and support help students feel looked after and the extensive links with external support agencies help vulnerable students overcome barriers to learning and make good progress. The on-site supported learning centre and inclusion room provides additional help for those students with challenging behaviour and offers a quiet work area for those who need support outside of the classroom. The monitoring of welfare by tutors, heads of year and senior leaders is good but evaluating the impact on achievement is sometimes lacking. Transition arrangements from Year 6 to 7 are very successful, helping students quickly settle into Ashcombe. One parent wrote: 'I have been impressed with the excellent support and care given during transition to Ashcombe, impeccable.'

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These are the grades for the quality of provision

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

How effective are leadership and management?

The headteacher is well supported by a strong senior leadership team and increasingly effective middle leaders. Nurturing the talents of staff is well established in a culture of continuous professional development. Many staff are grateful for opportunities to quickly take on leadership responsibilities. Leaders regularly monitor the quality of teaching and help staff to improve their teaching but not all observations give a penetrating insight into the progress and standards in lessons.

The governing body is effective in holding the school to account and knows the school's strengths and areas for development well. The governing body asks challenging questions to support the strategic direction of the school but is not always rigorous enough in evaluating how improvements in provision affect student outcomes. Governors capture views of staff and students regularly, although systematic engagement with ideas of parents and carers is less successful. The school values links with parents and carers and ensures parents' evenings are well managed. A few parents and carers who responded to the questionnaire requested more information about how to support their child's learning.

The headteacher is at the helm of outstanding partnership activity, recognised by many headteachers as a resounding success in the local area. Work with 17 schools in the Dorking School Partnership and as part of the Dorking Schools' Language Group benefits staff and students by sharing resources, joint professional development conferences and using international projects to bring together Ashcombe students, primary children and international visitors. Outstanding partnership work enhances community cohesion but a rigorous evaluation of community cohesion on student outcomes is not in place.

The school upholds equalities legislation. Staff successfully promote equality of opportunity and tackle discrimination, and the quality of assessment information means leaders can quickly close any emerging gaps in student performance.

The safe vetting of the school workforce is secure and staff receive effective child protection training. Newly qualified teachers are complimentary about the clarity of the training fully supporting their understanding of the teacher's role in the welfare of students. Risk assessments for trips are rigorously implemented and well documented.

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These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	2
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	2
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	2
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	2
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	2
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	2
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	1

Sixth form

Outcomes for students are outstanding as a result of rigorous and careful attention to supporting individual students. The percentage of students attaining higher grades at A level has continually risen since 2006 to over 50% of grades at A*, A or B in 2010. Value added data indicate that rates of progress are better than found nationally, although some variation in subjects remains. Achievement at AS level is more variable than at A level and leaders are taking effective action to address underperformance in biology and mathematics. Leaders communicate an inclusive, open access policy so the door is not closed for students who may not have achieved higher grades at GCSE level. Sixth form staff work tirelessly to support these students, who often make better than expected progress and exceed their targets.

Students enjoy opportunities to be role models for younger students and they make an equally vivid contribution to fundraising, school productions and international partnership work. Reviews written by sixth form students in the newsletter, 'Accent on Ashcombe', illustrate the enormous personal benefits gained from demands of learning to live and work in places like Rwanda.

Teaching is often good and occasionally outstanding. The very best teaching develops students' analytical and critical skills so they can form their own evaluations of key concepts and meet the demands of advanced level of study. The 'catch-up club' is appreciated by students, helping those who start to fall behind to seek help and quickly rebalance their studies. The curriculum offers good breadth and leaders make judicious choices in modifying courses on offer. High retention rates from Year 12 to 13 and success rates for students progressing to university reflect excellent care, guidance and support. Students praise the support they receive for university applications, writing curriculum vitae and for looking beyond university to future careers.

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Leadership of the sixth form is good and sustains high quality outcomes for students, particularly listening to students' views. Even so, development planning does not extrapolate how outcomes for students inform measurable targets for improving the quality of provision.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	1
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	1
The quality of provision in the sixth form	2
Leadership and management of the sixth form	2

Views of parents and carers

An overwhelming majority of responses to the parental questionnaire were positive, expressing appreciation for good leadership of the school and good care and safety for students. Most parents and carers view teaching as good and think that the school prepares students well for their future. A few expressed concern about the lack of healthy options in the canteen and the need for more choice and additional hours devoted to physical education at Key Stage 3. A small minority expressed concern about how attendance is tracked in the sixth form. The large majority are exceptionally pleased with transition arrangements for Year 6 to 7 and the highly reputable international work at the school.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at The Ashcombe School to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school. In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school. The inspection team received 331 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 1522 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	141	43	176	53	9	3	1	0
The school keeps my child safe	141	43	185	56	2	1	1	0
My school informs me about my child's progress	148	45	173	52	9	3	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	141	43	165	50	14	4	2	1
The teaching is good at this school	132	40	187	56	2	1	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	95	29	199	60	25	8	1	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	70	21	211	64	25	8	7	2
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	126	38	169	51	4	1	1	0
The school meets my child's particular needs	120	36	182	55	16	5	1	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	88	27	193	58	30	9	2	1
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	80	24	198	60	14	4	3	1
The school is led and managed effectively	168	51	148	45	4	1	1	0
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	180	54	136	41	10	3	1	0

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	58	36	4	2
Primary schools	8	43	40	9
Secondary schools	10	35	42	13
Sixth forms	13	39	45	3
Special schools	33	42	20	4
Pupil referral units	18	40	29	12
All schools	11	42	38	9

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2009 to 31 March 2010 and are the most recently published data available (see www.ofsted.gov.uk). Please note that the sample of schools inspected during the autumn and spring terms 2009/10 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100. Secondary school figures include those that have sixth forms, and sixth form figures include only the data specifically for sixth form inspection judgements.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement.■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils.■ The quality of teaching.■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships.■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



12 November 2010

Dear Students

Inspection of The Ashcombe School, Dorking RH4 1 LY

Thank you for the time you gave to talking to the inspectors when we visited Ashcombe recently. We judge that The Ashcombe School is a good school and your headteacher leads staff effectively in giving you opportunities to achieve well. We are pleased to hear that most students enjoy lessons and think behaviour is good at Ashcombe.

You are very well cared for and there is good and some outstanding teaching. This supports good progress for most students. When teaching has good pace, you are challenged, but you told us, and we agree, that in some lessons, both in the sixth form and in Key Stage 3 and 4, the work is not demanding enough and you could be stretched further. We have asked your headteacher to secure at least 60% of outstanding teaching by July 2011 so that more students make outstanding progress and achieve even higher standards of work. The curriculum is well balanced through from Key Stage 3 to 5 with a good range of qualifications to pursue. Your wish for more physical education and recreational sport in Key Stage 3 has been discussed with leaders to try and help you all maintain a good level of health and fitness.

Inspectors were impressed with your outstanding contribution to the school and wider community. You are highly committed to many charity events, working with local primary school children, production events and the extensive opportunities to travel internationally to learn about different cultures and religions. You are excellent ambassadors for The Ashcombe School.

The inspection team have asked leaders to bring greater cohesion to whole-school improvement planning so that changes in each department are linked to the overall strategic priorities.

We wish you all the very best for your future education.

Yours sincerely

Joanna Beckford-Hall

Her Majesty's Inspector

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