

Inspection of The Downs School

Manor Crescent, Compton, Newbury, Berkshire RG20 6AD

Inspection dates:	1 and 2 October 2024
The quality of education	Outstanding
Behaviour and attitudes	Outstanding
Personal development	Outstanding
Leadership and management	Good
Sixth-form provision	Outstanding
Previous inspection grade	Outstanding

Until November 2020, the school was exempt from routine inspection because it was judged as outstanding for overall effectiveness at its previous inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. The school has not been inspected under section 5 of the Act since June 2013. Since September 2024, schools have not been awarded an overall effectiveness grade.

What is it like to attend this school?

Standards and ambitions in this school are exceptionally high. Pupils rise consistently to meet these. Professional relationships between pupils and staff are warm and positive. Expert support ensures that pupils' individual needs are known and staff address any barriers to learning rapidly. A strong sense of community permeates the school. Lessons are studious and industrious. Pupils enjoy learning and the school celebrates success regularly. This enables all pupils to flourish, particularly disadvantaged pupils.

The school provides countless opportunities for all pupils to engage in activities that build character. Many pupils relish the high-quality opportunities to contribute to the school community. For example, as peer mentors, prefects, house councillors and ambassadors. The house system builds a sense of belonging. Older students listen to younger pupils read, including in local primary schools.

Pupils make excellent use of a broad range of extra-curricular activities. For example, the school's eco club, a fantasy role-playing game club, a multitude of sporting activities and many more. Responsible pupils in Year 10 and Year 11 lead some activities with support from staff, such as the recent production of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'. This helps them learn and practise vital leadership skills. A wide range of trips and visits supplement the curriculum.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

The curriculum enables pupils to learn exceptionally well. The school has designed a curriculum that incorporates detailed knowledge of the primary curriculum, with aspirational end points in mind. Staff consistently check what pupils know and understand. They skilfully use this information to adapt and refine activities to address any misconceptions or gaps in pupils' learning.

Staff give expert help to disadvantaged pupils, including pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Informative support and challenge documents provide crucial information to staff that enables them to adapt and refine learning appropriately. Dedicated staff champion pupils who find learning challenging. As a result, all pupils can achieve exceptional outcomes. At key stage 4, a large proportion of pupils gain qualifications in the English Baccalaureate suite of subjects. Consequently, they are extremely well-prepared for the next stages of their education. The growing sixth form is highly successful. Students' outcomes in A level and applied vocational qualifications are exceptional.

Passionate teachers are experts in their subjects. They present information clearly and precisely. Lessons inspire pupils to make 'every moment of learning count'. Teachers strive to improve their own subject knowledge continually. Carefully designed whole-school strategies promote effective learning. As a result, pupils build their independence and resilience. For example, in English, carefully designed activities entice pupils to write confidently in their own personal style. In mathematics, pupils use their broad understanding of complex concepts to deepen each other's knowledge and skills.

Reading is a particularly strong focus. The well-resourced library is at the heart of the school and provides rich texts for pupils to engage with, as well as one of many collaborative spaces for sixth-form students to study in. The 'super-curriculum' inspires pupils to engage in research, read specialist books and articles and to prepare themselves for future learning. This encourages everyone to take valuable ownership of their own learning, particularly students in the sixth form.

Pupils' behaviour is impeccable. Staff reinforce routines regularly. This helps everyone move around the school sensibly, purposefully and safely. Pupils arrive at lessons on time and ready to learn. Attendance is strong and the school is quick to address any barriers that may mean pupils miss out on vital learning.

The way the school develops pupils' personal and social understanding makes a significant impact to pupils' behaviour and attitudes. Deliberately chosen activities promote pupils' understanding of the world around them. Enrichment activities, educational trips, assemblies and the carefully crafted tutor programme help to deepen pupils' knowledge of what it means to grow up in modern Britain. Pupils' understanding of equality, diversity and inclusion is praiseworthy.

Throughout the school, everyone receives detailed careers information, education, advice and guidance. Tailored support is prioritised for those who need it. Regular engagement with employers and training providers, and opportunities to visit universities raise aspirations. Sixth-form students receive excellent support when deciding their next steps.

Many aspects of the school's work are exceptional. Knowledgeable governors have a very secure oversight of the quality of education that the school provides. Their systematic analysis and review of the curriculum provides valuable support to the school. However, the monitoring and evaluation of policies and precise practice need sharpening. Staff are incredibly positive about the school. They value the significant investment in their professional development. Staff benefit from the thoughtful well-being initiatives the school has put in place. They know that the school is considerate of staff workload and ensures that priorities and developments are thought through carefully.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- The school has not ensured that staff apply some of their own policies and practices securely and consistently. As a result, leaders, including governors, are not always clear on the effectiveness of some aspects of the school's work. The school must ensure that staff use the agreed policies and check this practice robustly.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, 'disadvantaged pupils' is used to mean pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND); pupils who meet the [definition of children in need of help and protection](#); pupils receiving statutory local authority support from a social worker; and pupils who otherwise meet the criteria used for deciding the school's [pupil premium funding](#) (this includes pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years, looked after children (children in local authority care) and/or children who left care through adoption or another formal route).

School details

Unique reference number	110102
Local authority	West Berkshire
Inspection number	10341266
Type of school	Secondary comprehensive
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1,405
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	386
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governing body	Andy Tow
Headteacher	Chris Prosser
Website	www.thedownsschool.org
Date of previous inspection	6 and 7 June 2013, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- There have been several changes to leadership positions since the previous inspection. The current headteacher took up their post in January 2014. The chair of the board of governors is in their third year of office.
- The school uses two unregistered providers of alternative provision.
- The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 8 to 13 with information and engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.

Information about this inspection

The inspectors carried out this graded inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. During a graded inspection, we grade the school for each of our key judgements

(quality of education; behaviour and attitudes; personal development; and leadership and management) and for any relevant provision judgement (early years and/or sixth form provision). Schools receiving a graded inspection from September 2024 will not be given an overall effectiveness grade.

- Inspections are a point-in-time evaluation about the quality of a school's education provision.
- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: English, mathematics, science, history, modern foreign languages and physical education. For each deep dive, inspectors held discussions about the curriculum, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- Inspectors held meetings with senior leaders of the school, members of staff and some pupils. The lead inspector held a meeting with the members of the governing body, including the chair of governors. They also held a telephone conversation with a representative of the local authority.
- Inspectors visited lessons in other subjects and considered the school's work to support disadvantaged pupils.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, the inspectors: reviewed the single central record; took account of the views of leaders, staff and pupils; and considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils' interests first.
- The inspectors took account of a range of other information, including the school's development plan, school policies and minutes from meetings of the governing body.
- The inspectors considered the responses to the online survey for parents, Ofsted Parent View, and the free-text comments. They also took account of the responses to the confidential online staff and pupil surveys and gathered the views of both staff and pupils throughout the inspection.

Inspection team

Linda Culling, lead inspector	His Majesty's Inspector
Alexandra Aldridge-Gibbons	His Majesty's Inspector
Andy Johnson	Ofsted Inspector
John Burridge	Ofsted Inspector
Neil Strowger	Ofsted Inspector

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