

INSPECTION REPORT

THE BLUE SCHOOL

Wells, Somerset, BA5 2NR

LEA area: Somerset

Unique reference number: 123892

Headteacher: Steve Jackson

Reporting inspector: David Potter
1027

Dates of inspection: 13th – 15th March 2000

Inspection number: 185095

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INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL

Type of school:	Comprehensive
School category:	Voluntary Controlled (Church of England)
Age range of pupils:	11 to 18
Gender of pupils:	Mixed
School address:	Kennion Road Wells Somerset
Postcode:	BA5 2NR
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Appropriate authority:	The Governing Body
Name of chair of governors:	Sylvia Smith
Date of previous inspection:	7 th – 11 th November 1994

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PART A: SUMMARY OF THE REPORT**INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL**

Number of full-time pupils:	1368	larger than average
Pupils with English as an additional language:	7 (0.5%)	below the national average (7.8%)
Pupils entitled to free school meals:	82 (6%)	below the national average (18%)
Pupils on the register of special educational needs:	199 (17%)	broadly in line with the national average (18.7%)
Average number of pupils per teacher:	18.1	higher than other schools of this type

The school serves the city of Wells and surrounding villages – generally an advantaged area. The school population is rising steadily, and pupil mobility is low. The school is over-subscribed. Pupils' attainment on entry is broadly average.

HOW GOOD THE SCHOOL IS

The Blue School is a very good school in which high-quality leadership, consistently good teaching and very good care combine to enable pupils to learn well, make good progress and achieve high standards. The school provides very good value for money.

What the school does well

- Standards in tests and examinations at all levels are well above national averages and those of similar schools. Excellent results are achieved in several subjects.
- Pupils of almost all abilities achieve well.
- The attitudes and values of the pupils are very good and support their learning. Pupils are courteous and hard working.
- Teaching quality is consistently good and promotes good learning and progress.
- The range of learning opportunities, through the curriculum and extra-curricular activities, is good.
- Provision for pupils' personal development, especially their moral and social development, is very good.
- The care provided for pupils is of a very high standard.
- The school is well led, and the quality of day-to-day, including financial, management is excellent.

What could be improved

- The implementation of consistent systems for assessment, monitoring and target-setting and combining them to establish a secure basis for further improvement.
- The quantity and quality of homework.
- The challenge provided for the most-able pupils, consistently across subjects.
- The use of information and communication technology (ICT) in lessons.

The school has improved the quality of its tutorial (personal, social and health education, or PSHE) programme; further improvements to both the curriculum and the quality of teaching are necessary to prepare the programme for the new National Curriculum requirements from September of this year.

The school's strengths far outweigh the areas for improvement.

The areas for improvement will form the basis of the governor's action plan, which will be sent to all parents and carers of pupils at the school.

HOW THE SCHOOL HAS IMPROVED SINCE ITS LAST INSPECTION

The school was last inspected in November 1994. Since that time, it has maintained high standards in test and examination results at all levels and in almost all subjects. The quality of both teaching and learning has improved significantly, with more which is good and very good. Attendance has been static at around 92 percent; this figure, which was good in 1994, is now average.

Of the key issues raised by the last inspection, the requirement to improve reporting to parents in Key Stage 3 has been met, and there has been significant improvement in the provision of religious education (RE) in the sixth form. Collective worship still does not comply with the law.

In the case of the other three key issues – monitoring the quality of teaching, the match of teaching to the individual needs of pupils and the consistent use of assessment to set targets for improvement – the school has improved significantly, but has not kept pace with development in other good schools: these remain areas for attention.

There has therefore been satisfactory improvement since the last inspection. In the last year, improvement has been rapid; the quality of leadership and management ensures that the capacity for further improvement is very good.

STANDARDS

The following table shows the standards achieved by 14, 16 and 18 year olds based on average point scores in the national Key Stage 3 tests, General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and Advanced (A)/Advanced Supplementary (AS)-level examinations.

Performance in:	compared with			
	all schools			similar schools
	1997	1998	1999	1999
Key Stage 3 Tests	A	B	A	B
GCSE Examinations	A	A	A	A
A/AS Levels	A*	A	A	

Key

very high
A*

well above average A

above average B

average
C

below average
D

well below average E

very low
E*

Results in tests and examinations at all levels and in most subjects are well above national averages and those of similar schools.

In recent years, in the national tests at age 14, results have been well above the national average in the core subjects (English, mathematics and science), especially so in English. English results are also well above those of similar schools; results in mathematics are above, while those in science are in line with, the results of these schools.

Standards are high at GCSE, with 64 percent of pupils achieving five or more higher grade results in 1999 (compared with the national average of around 46 percent), all pupils achieving at least one graded result, and excellent performances in several subjects, notably mathematics, science, design and technology (D&T), history, geography and economics. The standard of work in D&T is outstanding at all levels. In modern languages and art, standards should be higher. In the sixth form, results at A level and in General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQ) subjects have

been consistently high in terms both of the pass rate and the quality of grades achieved; boys' performance has been above the national average while that of girls' has been well above it. In recent years, there has been some narrowing of the gap between the school's performance and the national average, at all levels.

Pupils of almost all abilities achieve well. Pupils with special educational needs (SEN) make good progress and achieve some success at GCSE. While able pupils achieve excellence, those of the very highest ability should be challenged more.

Pupils' standards of literacy and numeracy are good; their information and communications technology (ICT) skills are not high enough, and they make too little use of computers in lessons.

PUPILS' ATTITUDES AND VALUES

Aspect	Comment
Attitudes to the school	Attitudes are very good. The great majority of pupils like the school. This has a positive impact on their learning and the way they look after the environment.
Behaviour, in and out of classrooms	Behaviour is very good. The prevailing sense of good order sets a positive tone for the school. The number of permanent exclusions is low for a school of this size.
Personal development and relationships	These aspects are very good. Older pupils use the opportunities provided to develop a sense of responsibility. Good relations between teachers and pupils lead to productive learning in almost all lessons. Pupils work well when asked to collaborate.
Attendance	Attendance is in line with the national average, with low rates of unauthorised absence. Punctuality to lessons is good given the large site.

The attitudes and values of the pupils constitute areas of strength for the school and clearly benefit their learning. Pupils are both courteous and hard working

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teaching of pupils:	aged 11-14 years	aged 14-16 years	aged over 16 years
Lessons seen overall	good	good	good

Inspectors make judgements about teaching in the range: excellent; very good; good; satisfactory; unsatisfactory; poor; very poor. 'Satisfactory' means that the teaching is adequate and strengths outweigh weaknesses

The consistently good quality of the teaching contributes strongly to the quality of pupils' learning and the progress they make.

In one in eight lessons observed the teaching was very good or excellent, with examples of outstanding flair and effectiveness in mathematics and physical education (PE). A high proportion of sixth form teaching is good or very good. Overall, 95 percent of the teaching seen was at least satisfactory; the remaining five percent lacked pace by the teacher or involvement by the pupils.

The school is successful in meeting the needs of pupils of all ability levels, except on some occasions those of the most-able pupils, who are sometimes under-challenged. The quantity and quality of homework varies too much between departments and teachers; a high proportion of timetabled homework is not set.

Literacy and numeracy are well taught; plans to co-ordinate the teaching of literacy are well advanced while those for numeracy are at an early stage.

Pupils' learning is good; they work at a good pace and take care with their work. In the very best lessons, pupils understand their own learning, helped by good quality assessment which makes clear the strengths and weaknesses of the work and what the pupil should do to improve it.

OTHER ASPECTS OF THE SCHOOL

Aspect	Comment
The quality and range of the curriculum	The broad, well-balanced curriculum provides pupils with a good range and quality of learning opportunities. Planning to adapt to the forthcoming changes to the National Curriculum and the post-16 curriculum is very good. The range of courses provided in the sixth form is good.
Provision for pupils with special educational needs	Provision is good. Arrangements to provide these pupils with additional support within and outside lessons are effective in enabling them to learn and make progress.
Provision for pupils' personal, including spiritual, moral, social and cultural, development	Overall, provision for pupils' personal development is very good. It is especially good for their moral and social development, and good for their spiritual and cultural development. Although the planned programme is satisfactory and has improved, the tutorial (personal, social and health education) period is brief and the quality of delivery varies among teachers.
How well the school cares for its pupils	The school has very good procedures to ensure the health, safety and care of its pupils, including very effective measures to promote high standards of behaviour and to combat bullying.

The school complies fully with the National Curriculum; time for RE is short in Key Stage 4. There is a good range of extra-curricular activities, and the curriculum is enriched by a wide range of contacts with the local, including business, community. The school does not comply with the statutory requirement for a daily act of collective worship, as it did not at the time of the last inspection.

Pastoral care is a strength of the school, through tutors, heads of year and specialist counselling. Good liaison among various members of staff ensures efficient child protection procedures. Health and safety procedures are efficient and well managed.

HOW WELL THE SCHOOL IS LED AND MANAGED

Aspect	Comment
Leadership and management by the headteacher and other key staff	The headteacher provides excellent leadership by setting a clear direction for the school and by establishing a clear set of priorities. He is ably supported by the leadership team and governing body. Leadership at middle management (departmental and year head) level is most often good.
How well the appropriate authority fulfils its responsibilities	The governing body fulfils all of its statutory responsibilities, provides good support for the school and has a good understanding of its strengths and weaknesses. It is beginning to hold the school to account for its improvement.
The school's evaluation of its performance	The way the school monitors pupils' progress and evaluates its teaching is inconsistent and does not yet form a firm, "joined up" system to ensure still further improvement in standards.
The strategic use of resources	All resources – people, accommodation and equipment – are well deployed, and the school runs very smoothly. School administration and financial planning, control and reporting are excellent.

The extended management team has begun to focus more closely on its role in improving teaching and learning. The few weaknesses at whole-school and departmental level are well known to the leadership team and governing body, and appropriate plans are in place to secure improvement. Management at departmental level is more variable, but is most often good. Management procedures, including those carried out by administrative and finance staff, are excellent and ensure smooth running.

The school is planning improvements to its systems to assess pupils' work and track their progress; to set targets for them; and to monitor the quality of teaching and curriculum. These should first be implemented consistently and then linked to form a secure system for school improvement.

The school applies the principles of best value carefully to ensure that its spending decisions, from its range of courses and group sizes to matching spending to the school's priorities, are securely based. Given the good teaching, high standards of work and behaviour and the added value they represent, all achieved within modest unit costs, the school provides very good value for money.

PARENTS' AND CARERS' VIEWS OF THE SCHOOL

What pleases parents most	What parents would like to see improved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • most parents believe that their children are receiving good quality education and care; • most also believe that their children are achieving well and making good progress; • parents link this to good teaching and high expectations, and to the way the school helps pupils' personal development; • they believe the school to be a decent place with civilised values, and one which is approachable. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • several feel ill-informed about the progress of their children through reports and meetings; • several see the amount and quality of homework as inadequate, and the link book as ineffective; • a small number criticise behaviour, mainly on the way to and from school.

Inspectors are in full agreement with parents that the quality of teaching, care and support for personal development provided by the school is good to very good; and that the results of the provision in terms of pupils' attitudes and values, achievements and progress are very good.

Inspectors could not take a view on the behaviour of pupils off site; the school is now taking great care to ensure good relationships with the local community. In lessons and around the school, behaviour is very good. The report system has been improved and now provides regular feedback to parents about their children's work. However, the quality of subject reports is inconsistent; several are unhelpful to parents in that they do not state clearly the pupils' strengths and weaknesses, nor set targets for improvement.

Inspectors agree that the quantity and quality of homework is too variable from subject to subject, and that link books are not used effectively by pupils, teachers or parents.

PART B: COMMENTARY

WHAT THE SCHOOL DOES WELL

Standards in tests and examinations at all levels are well above national averages and those of similar schools. Excellent results are achieved in several subjects.

1. On arrival at the school, pupils' attainment in the national tests at the end of primary school is average, and their reading scores show more pupils of below- than above-average ability. By the end of Key Stage 3 at age 14, pupils are achieving results in the national tests which are well above the national average in all three core subjects (English, mathematics and science). Results in English are particularly strong. In comparison with similar schools, results are average in science, above in mathematics and well above in English

2. Results at GCSE are consistently good, with proportions achieving five or more grades A* – C and one or more grades A* – G well above both national averages and those of similar schools. This quality has been achieved consistently over recent years.

3. A level and GNVQ results are also well above national averages, both in terms of the pass rates and the quality of grades achieved. Like GCSE, the quality of A level results have been sustained over a long period and were praised at the time of the last inspection in 1994.

4. Some departments, notably mathematics, D&T, geography and history, achieve excellence in results in all tests and examinations and consistently over time. Science results are excellent at GCSE and A level, but less distinguished in the Key Stage 3 tests; English is the reverse, standards being very high at 14, but closer to the average at 16 and 18. Standards in some subjects which are popular in the school but are so-called "minority" subjects, such as geology and economics, are very high. Standards in art and modern languages, especially German, stand out as being below the national average, and are too low. Achievement in ICT is weak and is described under "what could be improved", but the results achieved by those who study information technology to GCSE and A Level are very good.

5. Standards in 1999, and targets for 2000 and 2001, show some slowing in the rate of improvement. There appears to have been a slowing of the drive for improvement in the school in the mid- to late-1990s which may have caused this; in the last year, there has been a new impetus for improvement and appropriate plans to improve the monitoring of performance and to address areas of weakness have been written.

Pupils of almost all abilities achieve well.

6. Pupils achieve well across the ability range. Those with special needs are well supported and achieve a good range of graded results at GCSE. Of the pupils with the lowest reading scores on intake, all achieved at least one grade at GCSE, and many achieved several. Pupils of modest attainment on intake achieve good GCSE and A level certificates; the school is therefore adding significant amounts of value at all levels.

7. More-able pupils are expected to do well: the challenge to them to think, to question and to work hard is high in a number of subjects. As a result, the work of these pupils in many subjects – mathematics, science and history for example – is very good; it shows

extended writing and the ability to reason and to justify argument. More-able Year 11 pupils are writing essays of a sound A level, rather than GCSE, standard.

8. Both boys and girls achieve results, especially at GCSE, which are well above the average for boys and girls nationally; girls out-achieve boys, as they do nationally, and the gap between their performances at the Blue School is similar to the national gap.

9. The inadequate and inconsistent challenge to the most-able pupils is a weakness, and is described under “what could be improved”.

10. Pupils with particular talents are helped to achieve high standards: much music and drama teaching is very good, encouraging all pupils to achieve good standards, and providing opportunities for the talented and motivated to take part in high quality performances, which they clearly enjoy and get a lot from. Much the same can be said of PE and representative sport.

The attitudes and values of the pupils are very good and support their learning. Pupils are courteous and hard working.

11. The great majority of pupils like the school, make positive contributions to its purposeful atmosphere, and are appreciative of the range of opportunities it provides. They behave well in lessons and around the site. Relationships between teachers and pupils are good and are founded on mutual respect. As a result, pupils of all abilities are able to make good progress.

12. There are many opportunities for personal development and the exercise of responsibility. The most apparent of these is the system of year and school councils which enable representative groups of pupils to influence the affairs of the school, assuming that they make their case persuasively. On the evidence of their meeting with inspectors, they will most often be successful!

13. In lessons, too, pupils show that they can co-operate effectively and can be trusted to work purposefully without immediate supervision by teachers. Some pupils were already using the language of negotiation whilst working in groups in a Year 7 English lesson (“This is only a suggestion, right?”); and Year 11 drama students, having committed themselves to considerable extra effort and rehearsal, achieved a good blend of self-criticism and supportive praise for their peers during a review of their performance.

14. In lessons, pupils of all abilities settle to work quickly and sustain their concentration, thus maximising the time for learning. In almost all lessons, their courtesy and good manners ensure that teachers can teach and pupils learn without time being wasted in managing behaviour.

15. Pupils showed marked levels of courtesy to inspectors, helping them at every turn and taking an intelligent interest in the work of the inspection.

Teaching quality is consistently good and promotes good learning and progress.

16. Teaching and learning are good across the age range and the subjects, and are of particularly high quality in the sixth form. Pupils are used to receiving good teaching – almost sixty per cent is good, very good or excellent, and only five per cent less than satisfactory – and respond by concentrating well and participating fully in lessons. Lessons

proceed at a brisk pace and pupils settle quickly to their work; as a result the time to learn is maximised and pupils' productivity is high. They continue to work well when away from immediate supervision by the teacher, in groups and in the library for example. There are very good relationships in most classrooms, creating purposeful working atmospheres.

17. Teachers have a confident command of their subjects and high expectations of their pupils. Some teaching shows outstanding flair and effectiveness, such as in some mathematics and PE lessons observed; there is evidence in pupils' written work that such teaching can be found in other subjects as well. In these lessons, teachers expected pupils to answer challenging questions and to work independently; they also matched the work very precisely to the range of ability present. In a Year 11 mathematics revision lesson, well-timed and varied activities, chosen to address pupils' weaknesses, enabled them to make discernible progress. At one stage, three pupils were proposing solutions on the board, while the rest of the class were keenly comparing these with their own methods and results. Pupils made rapid gains in new knowledge, and recalled earlier learning to good effect. A top English set in Year 11 displayed great maturity and sensitivity in relating to poems under the theme of "when the going gets tough". Penetrative questioning helped pupils unlock the text, while their well-developed learning habits enabled them to listen to each other and challenge the teacher's interpretation in a constructive, positive way which promoted learning.

18. By assessing pupils' work carefully, indicating its strengths and weaknesses and how it might be improved, the best teaching enabled pupils to understand their progress and to take some control over their learning.

19. The teaching meets the learning needs of pupils of almost all abilities successfully, with good support and challenge for both more- and less-able pupils. Pupils of very high ability, although they achieve well at both GCSE and A level, are not always provided with opportunities to extend and deepen their knowledge and understanding. The lack of use of ICT, and the shortcomings of homework, contribute to this.

20. Most of the very small amount of ineffective teaching is in Key Stage 3; in these lessons, the pace dropped and pupils became restless and their involvement in the work diminished.

21. Both literacy and numeracy are well taught. In several subjects, such as geography, geology, D&T and science, as well as in mathematics, pupils' numeracy skills are being extended through well-planned teaching. Likewise, pupils' speaking and listening skills are being extended in a range of subjects, where group discussion and feedback are encouraged, and extended answers to questions demanded. The teaching of history, with its very strong concentration on the interpretation of evidence and the requirement that pupils will justify their answers, makes a strong contribution to pupils' speaking and writing, but particularly to their ability to reason, to dispute and to consider carefully the views of others. Extended writing and good quality presentation are required in many subjects.

22. Homework is a weakness, and is analysed under "what could be improved".

23. The consistently good quality of the teaching contributes strongly to the quality of pupils' learning and the progress they make.

The range of learning opportunities, through the curriculum and extra-curricular activities, is good.

24. Pupils enjoy a broad and well-balanced curriculum made relevant for them by good teaching, such as when Year 11 pupils furthered their understanding of genetics by considering how the selective breeding of plants and animals impacts on their everyday lives. National Curriculum requirements are met at Key Stages 3 and 4, and at Key Stage 4 it is complemented by a good range of GNVQ programmes and additional GCSE courses, such as in leisure and tourism, IT and PE. A good sixth-form curriculum combines choice from a wide range of A level and GNVQ courses with, for example, general studies and enrichment projects such as the preparation of a music web site for the Internet. There is good provision for pupils with SEN in most lessons and through their work with the Additional Educational Needs Department. While the provision for most-able pupils is satisfactory, it is not planned well enough to ensure they are consistently challenged in all areas. The teaching of RE has improved since the last inspection and is appropriately based on the locally agreed syllabus, but insufficient time is allocated to it in Key Stage 4. The PSHE programme is satisfactory and has been improved since the previous inspection, but its delivery by tutors is inconsistent. Planning for future curriculum change is very good; for example, the school is right to rationalise the modern foreign languages curriculum in order to secure better achievement, and the pre-planning for the development of the sixth form curriculum is very good.

25. The local community makes a good contribution to pupils' learning. Local employers support a Year 10 work experience programme and some visit to talk to pupils about, for example, how businesses look after their customers. Artists in residence and craft workers successfully help stimulate pupils' creativity in subjects such as art and D & T. There is a good range of extra-curricular activities such as sporting clubs, music and regular lunchtime debates, like the debate on capital punishment held during the inspection. The curriculum is further enhanced by visits, some of which are residential, and events such as an annual enrichment week. The work experience abroad, organised by the modern language department for A Level linguists, is very good.

Provision for pupils' personal development is very good.

26. The provision for pupils' personal, moral and social development is very good because there is an ethos that pervades the school which encourages mutual respect and collaboration among pupils and between them and adults. Pupils are trusted in lessons, and so are helped to develop their independence further; teachers recognise that pupils know what they should and shouldn't do and expect pupils to work hard independently and to demonstrate good self-control. Many opportunities are provided for pupils to work responsibly and safely in carrying out practical work, such as in laboratories and workshops, and they do so successfully. In a range of subjects, for example GNVQ courses and sixth form enrichment programmes, pupils are expected to collaborate in groups and to work individually to manage extended projects. Initiative and responsibility are developed further through pupils being elected to fulfil roles such as representing their tutor group or year group on year or school councils. Sixth form pupils are expected to carry out responsibilities about the school, such as monitoring the corridors at lunchtime.

27. Pupils often consider the moral issues associated with everyday life in a variety of subjects, as well as through the PSHE programme which covers topics such as drugs and sex education. The school is well organised to enable pupils to respond to their own moral concerns, for example, by raising considerable amounts of money for charity through a variety of entertaining and lively initiatives.

28. The arrangements for spiritual and cultural development are good. Pupils are given opportunities to explore key features of their own and others' lives. For example, Year 11 pupils sensitively interpreted and compared the poems and a deathbed letter written by the same author, while Year 9 pupils considered what it would be like to be an inhabitant of Mozambique following the recent disaster. Pupils are also encouraged to reflect on their own achievements, such as when compiling their record of achievement and sometimes in lessons. For example, Year 10 pupils successfully recalled what they had achieved at primary school and more recently in school, while considering what they should do to improve on their recent school report.

29. Across the curriculum, pupils learn about the ways of life and traditions of their own and other cultures. In science, groups of Year 10 pupils imagined they were inhabitants of countries across the world and then shared their views about the impact of environmental issues on these ways of life. In art and D&T, pupils considered German street sculptures and the work of Italian designers in order to widen their perspective of art and design. There is a full and long-established exchange programme in modern languages.

The care provided for pupils is of a very high standard.

30. The school provides a very high standard of care for its pupils, through a well-coordinated system of tutors, heads of year, medical support and school and specialist counselling. There is also a valuable listening service whereby older pupils help younger ones by listening to their concerns

31. Health and safety (H&S) procedures are efficient and well managed; they include regular risk assessments, H&S tours of the site and effective liaison with outside agencies. Care is taken to ensure that safe practices prevail in lessons. Pupils work safely and sensibly.

32. Good liaison among the staff concerned and with outside agencies, and good procedures, ensure that statutory requirements for child protection are met well. There are good systems to inform all staff about these procedures.

33. The school promotes attendance through its prospectus and systematic registration and follow-up procedures. Nevertheless, attendance has remained for several years at around ninety-two percent, which is now an average figure nationally. There are very good, clear and consistent procedures to promote good behaviour and to combat bullying. These are working effectively, such that behaviour in lessons and around the school is very good. The school is making vigorous efforts to improve still further the links with the community and the behaviour of pupils in and around the city.

34. There are very good systems for identifying pupils' individual needs, including special educational needs.

35. By ensuring the attendance, behaviour, safety and wellbeing of pupils, the care and welfare systems enable pupils to feel secure and thereby to make progress.

The school is well led, and the quality of day-to-day, including financial, management is excellent.

36. The new headteacher has provided excellent leadership in setting a clear educational direction for the school. He has analysed the strengths and weaknesses accurately, and determined a well-reasoned, clear set of priorities for action which cover academic achievement, behaviour and resource management. He has established a good leadership team to support him; roles are clear, and the group works very effectively both individually in leading areas of responsibility and collectively as a team to lead the school and make decisions.

37. Management of departments is most often good. Middle managers (department and year heads) are beginning to focus effectively on raising quality and standards in their areas of responsibility; there is some distance to go in perfecting these processes at a whole-school level, as described in the first section of "what could be improved". The vision and commitment to improve still further are uneven across the school, but are increasingly shared by key staff and supported by the governing body; some staff need to be more ambitious for what pupils can and should achieve.

38. The school runs very smoothly on a day-to-day basis. The well-run office and administrative team ensures that "front-of-house" arrangements are of a high standard and that routine communication is effective. Team meetings and briefings are sufficient and are effective, and decisions are communicated efficiently. Financial management is excellent; budget planning takes into account the priorities of the school development plan, including the allocation of extra resources to under-achieving areas, and allocates resources to cost-centre managers on a logical and open basis. Financial control is excellent, providing cost-centre managers and governors with detailed and timely reports and warnings. All funds are properly accounted, and the last auditor's report contained much praise and no recommendations. Not only are these arrangements efficient, they also provide managers with the information they need to plan improvements.

39. By putting learning centre-stage, and by enabling smooth running, leadership and management promote achievement.

WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED

The implementation of consistent systems for assessment, monitoring and target-setting, and combining them to establish a secure basis for further improvement.

40. Practice in the assessment of pupils' work is of sound quality overall, but varies in both style and quality across the subjects. Likewise, systems used in different subjects to monitor pupils' progress and the quality of teaching and curriculum are at a relatively early stage and are also inconsistent in style and quality. The school's attempts to bring routine marking together into a school-wide, consistent system, has been delayed by problems with computer equipment and software. Good partial systems exist in the school, such as the value-added calculations in the sixth form.

41. As a result, the school's ability to track pupils' progress from the tests at the end of primary school until they leave The Blue School, and to set individual targets with them at each stage, are limited. The school therefore cannot evaluate fully its own success or its ability to set itself challenging targets. The school's improvement plan is not yet fully based on a secure evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of pupils' achievements.

42. The necessary computer systems are now in place; the school should proceed rapidly with its plans for assessment, tracking and target setting in a "joined up" way.

The quantity and quality of homework.

43. Parents are right to be concerned about the amount and quality of homework, which varies too much between departments and teachers. The published homework timetable and the link book, a means of recording and checking homework and of communication between parents and school, are potentially valuable tools, but are inconsistently implemented. Too much homework is about completing classwork, lowering the challenge for the able pupil; too much is not set, lowering the expectation of all pupils. On several occasions during the inspection, able pupils had finished or nearly finished the homework during the lesson.

44. The school should clarify the homework timetable ensuring that two or three good homeworks are set per night. This would benefit pupils' attitudes to learning, already good, still further.

The challenge provided for the most-able pupils, consistently across subjects.

45. The school is generally good at meeting the needs of pupils across the ability range, and more-able pupils are challenged well. However, pupils of very high ability, although they achieve well at both GCSE and A level, are not always provided with opportunities to extend and deepen their knowledge and understanding. There is a range of opportunities through the extended curriculum, such as visits to residential centres for gifted musicians and work with artists in residence, but the challenge provided through lessons is inconsistent. Implementing the valuable work of the member of staff responsible for very-high-ability pupils has not been given sufficient priority.

46. The lack of use of ICT, and the shortcomings of homework, are contributory factors: both provide opportunities for very-able pupils to "fly", and both are under-developed in the school and are among its few significant weaknesses.

The use of ICT in lessons.

47. Pupils' standards in ICT are not high enough, and they have insufficient access to ICT during lessons. They do not have enough opportunity to use ICT applications such as spreadsheets and databases routinely in their work, nor to use the Internet extensively to enrich their learning. The curriculum does not develop ICT skills quickly enough in Key Stage 3, especially in Year 7.

48. The school has chosen a good but challenging route to promote the learning of ICT skills, threading it through the curriculum rather than providing a stand-alone ICT course. For such a system to work well, the school will need better co-ordination of planning and assessment, and also better hardware to give pupils and teachers sufficient access.

49. When pupils are taught ICT skills they make good progress, and when they have access to computers they make use of them confidently and effectively. Computers are used well and good standards are achieved in GCSE information technology (for example to prepare a system to manage the loan of videos in a shop) and in D&T, where computer-aided design is used to very good effect.

50. The school has developed a sound strategy to upgrade its hardware and train staff further.

WHAT SHOULD THE SCHOOL DO TO IMPROVE FURTHER?

Issues for Action

Governors and senior managers should ensure that:

1. plans to improve the assessment of pupils' work, the setting of targets with and for them, and the monitoring of teaching and curriculum are all implemented consistently, and linked to form a secure system for further school improvement; (paragraphs 40-42)
2. pupils receive regular homework which consolidates and deepens their understanding; (paragraphs 43-44)
3. the expectations and challenge provided for the most-able pupils are consistently high; (paragraphs 45-46)
4. pupils use computers more extensively in lessons to enrich their learning. (paragraphs 47-50)

In addition to these key issues, governors should consider the following weakness for inclusion in their action plan:

Further improvements to the curriculum and the quality of teaching of the tutorial (PSHE) programme are necessary to prepare the programme for the new National Curriculum requirements from September of this year.

PART C: SCHOOL DATA AND INDICATORS

Summary of the sources of evidence for the inspection

Number of lessons observed	77
Number of discussions with staff, governors, other adults and pupils	30

Summary of teaching observed during the inspection

Excellent	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Poor	Very Poor
3	10	49	32	6	0	0

The table gives the percentage of teaching observed in each of the seven categories used to make judgements about lessons.

Information about the school's pupils

Pupils on the school's roll	Y7 – Y11	Sixth form
Number of pupils on the school's roll	1158	209
Number of full-time pupils eligible for free school meals	82	-

Special educational needs	Y7 – Y11	Sixth form
Number of pupils with statements of special educational needs	14	2
Number of pupils on the school's special educational needs register	194	5

English as an additional language	No of pupils
Number of pupils with English as an additional language	7

Pupil mobility in the last school year	No of pupils
Pupils who joined the school other than at the usual time of first admission	29
Pupils who left the school other than at the usual time of leaving	35

Attendance

Authorised absence

	%
School data	91.8
National comparative data	91.0

Unauthorised absence

	%
School data	0.3
National comparative data	1.1

Both tables give the percentage of half days (sessions) missed through absence for the latest complete reporting year.

Attainment at the end of Key Stage 3

Number of registered pupils in final year of Key Stage 3 for the latest reporting year	Year	Boys	Girls	Total
	1999	125	110	235

National Curriculum Test/Task Results		English	Mathematics	Science
Numbers of pupils at NC level 5 and above	Boys	98	95	80
	Girls	92	76	67
	Total	190	171	147
Percentage of pupils at NC level 5 or above	School	81	73	63
	National	63	62	55
Percentage of pupils at NC level 6 or above	School	44	49	31
	National	28	38	23

Teachers' Assessments		English	Mathematics	Science
Numbers of pupils at NC level 5 and above	Boys	101	98	106
	Girls	95	78	84
	Total	196	176	190
Percentage of pupils at NC level 5 or above	School	83	75	81
	National	64	64	60
Percentage of pupils at NC level 6 or above	School	48	50	46
	National	31	37	28

Attainment at the end of Key Stage 4

Number of 15 year olds on roll in January of the latest reporting year	Year	Boys	Girls	Total
	1999	110	110	220

GCSE results		5 or more grades A* to C	5 or more grades A*-G	1 or more grades A*-G
Numbers of pupils achieving the standard specified	Boys	74	104	110
	Girls	67	106	109
	Total	141	210	219
Percentage of pupils achieving the standard specified	School	64 (66)	95 (93)	100 (98)
	National	46 (45)	91 (90)	96 (96)

Percentages in brackets refer to the year before the latest reporting year.

GCSE results		GCSE point score
Average point score per pupil	School	47.3 (47.3)
	National	37.8 (36.8)

Figures in brackets refer to the year before the latest reporting year.

Attainment at the end of the sixth form

Number of students aged 16, 17 and 18 on roll in January of the latest reporting year who were entered for GCE A-level or AS-level examinations	Year	Boys	Girls	Total
	1999	39	58	97

Average A/AS points score per candidate	For candidates entered for 2 or more A-levels or equivalent			For candidates entered for fewer than 2 A-levels or equivalent		
	Male	Female	All	Male	Female	All
School	17.4	20.7	19.4 (21.3)	4	0.5	2.4 (2.5)
National	17.7	18.1	17.9 (17.6)	2.7	2.8	2.8 (2.8)

Figures in brackets refer to the year before the latest reporting year.

Vocational qualifications	Number	% success rate
Number in their final year of studying for approved vocational qualifications or units and the percentage of those pupils who achieved all those they studied	School	87
	National	74

Ethnic background of pupils

	No of pupils
Black – Caribbean heritage	0
Black – African heritage	1
Black – other	1
Indian	0
Pakistani	0
Bangladeshi	4
Chinese	0
White	1358
Any other minority ethnic group	1

Exclusions in the last school year

	Fixed period	Permanent
Black – Caribbean heritage	0	0
Black – African heritage	0	0
Black – other	0	0
Indian	0	0
Pakistani	0	0
Bangladeshi	0	0
Chinese	0	0
White	40	1
Other minority ethnic groups	0	0

This table gives the number of exclusions, which may be different from the number of pupils excluded.

Teachers and classes

Qualified teachers and classes: Y7 – Y13

Total number of qualified teachers (FTE)	76.06
Number of pupils per qualified teacher	18

FTE means full-time equivalent.

Education support staff: Y7 – Y13

Total number of education support staff	21
Total aggregate hours worked per week	591.2

Deployment of teachers: Y7 – Y13

Percentage of time teachers spend in contact with classes	77.1
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Average teaching group size: Y7 – Y13

Key Stage 3	25.5
Key Stage 4	22.5

Financial information

Financial year	98/99
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	£
Total income	3079507
Total expenditure	3072825
Expenditure per pupil	2283
Balance brought forward from previous year	859120 *
Balance carried forward to next year	865802 *

** both figures include a sum of over £800,000 awaiting payment for the recently-completed sports centre*

Results of the survey of parents and carers

Questionnaire return rate

Number of questionnaires sent out	1367
Number of questionnaires returned	331

Percentage of responses in each category

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
My child likes school.	33.0	56.0	9.0	2.0	
My child is making good progress in school.	35.0	56.0	6.0	1.0	2.0
Behaviour in the school is good.	22.0	58.0	11.0	2.0	7.0
My child gets the right amount of work to do at home.	18.0	52.0	22.0	5.0	2.0
The teaching is good.	22.0	66.0	6.0	2.0	4.0
I am kept well informed about how my child is getting on.	22.0	50.0	25.0	5.0	1.0
I would feel comfortable about approaching the school with questions or a problem.	43.0	48.0	5.0	2.0	2.0
The school expects my child to work hard and achieve his or her best.	43.0	50.0	6.0		1.0
The school works closely with parents.	16.0	54.0	22.0	3.0	4.0
The school is well led and managed.	26.0	58.0	5.0		12.0
The school is helping my child become mature and responsible.	26.0	64.0	7.0	2.0	2.0
The school provides an interesting range of activities outside lessons.	33.0	54.0	8.0	2.0	4.0