



Balcarras School

Inspection Report

Unique Reference Number 115759
LEA Gloucestershire
Inspection number 279670
Inspection dates 5 October 2005 to 6 October 2005
Reporting inspector Harriet Harper HMI

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

Type of school	Comprehensive	School address	East End Road
School category	Foundation		Charlton Kings
Age range of pupils	11 to 18		Cheltenham, Gloucestershire GL53 8QF
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	01242 515881
Number on roll	1230	Fax number	01242 250620
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair of governors	Ms Alison Home
Date of previous inspection	6 November 2000	Headteacher	Mr Christopher Healy

Age group	Inspection dates	Inspection number
11 to 18	5 October 2005 - 6 October 2005	279670

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three additional inspectors.

Description of the school

Balcarras is a popular, oversubscribed comprehensive school for pupils aged 11 to 18, located on a pleasant site in Cheltenham. It has almost 1,300 pupils, of whom about 280 are in the sixth form. Most pupils are of White British heritage, with only a very small number from minority ethnic groups. The majority of pupils come from fairly affluent backgrounds. The number of pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities is low for a school of this size, as is the proportion eligible for free school meals. The school has specialist technology status.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Balcarras is an extremely effective school. Through excellent leadership and management, the school has improved considerably since its last inspection. Pupils of all abilities make excellent progress and standards are very high at all stages and across almost all subject areas. The school's self-evaluation is analytical and rigorous. In a few cases, though, it is too modest. This is largely due to the relentless drive by the headteacher to keep improving. The headteacher is well supported and challenged by the chair of governors and assisted by a committed and energetic senior management team. All pupils, including those with learning difficulties or disabilities, are well supported. The school's specialist technology status has enabled it to improve resources across the school. The up-to-date and plentiful computing facilities are used well and much appreciated by the pupils. The way in which different courses are offered and timetabled is a key strength. Inspectors agree with the school's own view that the school's success 'owes a lot to the opportunities offered to students of all abilities to choose courses which meet their needs'.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 1

The sixth form is outstanding. It is particularly well led and managed. The curriculum, which includes both academic and vocational courses, is timetabled in such a way as to provide all students with a considerable range of choices. Students benefit from high quality, and often dynamic, teaching. They respond enthusiastically and work hard. They have access to very good resources, a highly supportive environment and regular supervised private study. It is no surprise, therefore, that they achieve very high standards.

What the school should do to improve further

- The most important thing to do is:
- to ensure that all teaching exhibits the excellent qualities already evident in a high proportion of lessons.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Standards are very high. Pupils start at the school with many different abilities and these are broadly in line with national averages. They then go on to make excellent progress.

Standards have risen significantly since the last inspection and the school expects them to rise further. They are already well above average compared with other schools. In the national tests in English, mathematics and science for pupils aged 14, results are exceptionally high. Results in GCSE examinations have gone from 63 per cent of pupils gaining five or more high grades in 2000 to 80 per cent in 2004. They dipped

slightly in 2005. All pupils aged 16 obtain at least five GCSEs. A much higher proportion of pupils than nationally achieves the highest grades of A or A*. In 2004 this occurred in art and design, business studies, design and technology, English language, mathematics and statistics. Results in A-level examinations are also well above average and demonstrate students' outstanding achievements, particularly for girls.

The school checks progress thoroughly. It has identified some inconsistencies in performance between subjects or groups of pupils, for example, between boys and girls, and has acted swiftly to address them. The schools sets challenging targets and meets them.

Grade: 1

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Attendance is well above average and behaviour is excellent, reflecting the high moral values promoted by the school. Pupils enjoy their learning and take pride in their work. Very few pupils are excluded.

Social development is very good. Pupils relate well to each other and to adults. They feel safe in the school. One parent spoke for many when she told inspectors 'my daughter's confidence level has massively increased since starting Year 7 and this has made her much more willing to participate in extra-curricular activities'. Pupils are encouraged to adopt a healthy lifestyle, although many still do not take the school's advice about eating healthily at lunchtime. Pupils readily accept opportunities to take responsibility and initiate change through, for example, the School Council. As confident and articulate young people, they have the kind of skills that employers, parents and universities value. They are very aware of social issues, and are keen to help whenever they can. They are actively involved in charity work and environmental projects, which benefit the community. Spiritual development is good. Cultural development is exceptionally good, leading to pupils having a good understanding of life in a multicultural community.

Grade: 1

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 1

Teaching and learning are excellent, particularly in the sixth form. The majority of lessons move at a cracking pace with brisk and punctual starts. Teachers are energetic, they plan their lessons well and they use an imaginative range of resources. Carefully chosen tasks and very good questioning techniques help to ensure that teachers challenge everyone in the class at just the right level. In lessons, pupils are quick to apply and demonstrate their newly learnt knowledge and skills. They confirm that the work is suitably hard but that they always get help if they need it. Not all lessons are

of the same very high standard and just occasionally teachers talk too much and do not give pupils enough opportunities to express their views. In the sixth form, teachers' enthusiasm for their subjects makes for inspirational and exciting lessons. Students rightly say that this makes sixth form teaching quite exceptional.

Grade: 1

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The curriculum provides many innovative ways of meeting the needs of different groups and types of pupils. During Years 10 and 11, for example, some pupils study for fewer GCSEs than other pupils and use the extra time to get additional support for their other GCSEs. This, combined with the excellent support for pupils with learning difficulties, ensures that all pupils leave with at least five GCSEs. It has the added benefit of improving pupils' behaviour because they know that their hard work will pay dividends. Boys' achievement, already high, is being further improved by the effective use of some single sex classes.

The school ensures that all pupils study a broad range of subjects, whilst allowing them to study the subjects they want to. Many pupils extend their knowledge and skills by taking part in extra-curricular activities. This flexibility is brought about by very efficient use of teachers' subject specialisms.

Grade: 1

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Care for all pupils is outstanding. Vulnerable pupils are well supported, as are those with learning difficulties or disabilities. Child protection procedures and risk assessments are fully implemented. Health and safety procedures are followed rigorously. Pupils are involved in developing a code of practice for acceptable behaviour and feel that rare incidents of bullying are dealt with thoroughly. The house system, tutors and mentors all contribute to creating a sense of belonging for pupils. The PSHE (personal, social and health education) and careers programmes help pupils to make appropriate choices about their school and home lives. In the sixth form a very good programme looks at confidence building, sexual health, diet, nutrition and staying safe as a young adult.

Grade: 1

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Balcarras thrives on continual improvement. Throughout the school, the headteacher's philosophy of striving to improve in all areas has been wholeheartedly adopted. The headteacher is supported by very able and enthusiastic senior and middle managers.

This high level of shared commitment and vision has led to remarkable levels of improvement. In the past seven years, standards have improved significantly and attendance has risen from 89 per cent to 95 per cent. The sixth form, created in 1998, now has standards that are among the highest in the country.

A key feature of the school is the way in which the headteacher and senior managers ensure that what they think is being done is actually being implemented. Teachers, for example, know that the headteacher may arrive at any lesson, either as part of his extensive programme of visits to lessons or on one of his 'pupil trails', where he spends a day with one or more pupils. These activities contribute to an environment where it is the accepted norm to be self-critical. Governors are effective and supportive. The views of parents, pupils and students are sought and taken seriously. It is the pupils, for example, who guide the governors on improvement to the catering facilities. With students who achieve very well, good resources and high quality teaching staff, the school is providing good value for money. The headteacher and senior management team know the school well and they have the capacity to improve it still further.

Grade: 1

Inspection judgements

<i>Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate</i>	School Overall	16-19
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Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	1	1
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	1	1
The quality and standards in foundation stage	NA	NA
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	Yes	Yes
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	1	1
The standards ¹ reached by learners	1	1
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	1	1
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	1	

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1	
The behaviour of learners	1	
The attendance of learners	1	
How well learners enjoy their education	1	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	1	1
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1	1

¹ Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1	1
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	1	
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets, through quality assurance and self-review	1	
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	1	
How effectively and efficiently resources are deployed to achieve value for money	1	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1	
The adequacy and suitability of staff to ensure that learners are protected	Yes	Yes

The extent to which schools enable learners to be healthy	
Learners are encouraged and enabled to eat and drink healthily	Yes
Learners are encouraged and enabled to take regular exercise	Yes
Learners are discouraged from smoking and substance abuse	Yes
Learners are educated about sexual health	Yes
The extent to which providers ensure that learners stay safe	
Procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements	Yes
Risk assessment procedures and related staff training are in place	Yes
Action is taken to reduce anti-social behaviour, such as bullying and racism	Yes
Learners are taught about key risks and how to deal with them	Yes
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution	
Learners are helped to develop stable, positive relationships	Yes
Learners, individually and collectively, participate in making decisions that affect them	Yes
Learners are encouraged to initiate, participate in and manage activities in school and the wider community	Yes
The extent to which schools enable learners to achieve economic well-being	
There is provision to promote learners' basic skills	Yes
Learners have opportunities to develop enterprise skills and work in teams	Yes
Careers education and guidance is provided to all learners in key stage 3 and 4 and the sixth form	Yes
Education for all learners aged 14–19 provides an understanding of employment and the economy	Yes

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

7th October 2005

Dear pupils and students,

Following our visit to inspect your school we would like to thank you for the valuable contributions many of you made in helping us with our work. We were impressed with your very good behaviour and positive attitudes. We were also pleased to learn that you enjoy school, find most of your work interesting and feel safe.

We tried to find out as much as we possibly could about your school. We listened to what you had to say, we looked at your work and visited many of your lessons. We also had meetings with teachers and other staff at the school. We received over 200 replies to the form we sent your parents and so we looked at those, too. We managed to talk to pupils of all ages, including those of you who have just joined the school in Year 7, through to students in the sixth form.

As you probably know, we judged your school to be outstanding. Between Years 7 and 11 you make excellent progress and produce work that is well above national averages. Those of you in the sixth form achieve extremely well.

The adults in your school care very much about your well-being and work very hard to do their best for you. The teaching at your school is of a very high quality. One of the ways that your school can improve further is to make sure that those features that make the best classes successful are found in all lessons.

Your school is exceptionally well led by the headteacher and the senior management team. Plans are already in place to make your school even better. You have every reason to be confident about your future at Balcarras.

Yours sincerely,

Harriet Harper HMI Lead inspector