



Reading Girls' School

Inspection Report

Unique Reference Number 110096
LEA Reading LEA
Inspection number 285239
Inspection dates 27 June 2006 to 28 June 2006
Reporting inspector Roy Blatchford HMI

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 which gives Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools the authority to cause any school to be inspected. The inspection was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

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|------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| Type of school | Comprehensive | School address | Northumberland Avenue |
| School category | Foundation | | Reading |
| Age range of pupils | 11 to 18 | | RG2 7PY |
| Gender of pupils | Girls | Telephone number | 0118 986 1336 |
| Number on roll | 688 | Fax number | 0118 986 6938 |
| Appropriate authority | The governing body | Chair of governors | Mr Richard Cunningham |
| Date of previous inspection | 21 February 2005 | Headteacher | Mrs Ruth Allen |

| Age group | Inspection dates | Inspection number |
|-----------|--------------------------------|-------------------|
| 11 to 18 | 27 June 2006 - 28 June 2006 | 285239 |

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an Additional Inspector.

Description of the school

Reading Girls' School is situated in the south of Reading and draws the majority of its students from the immediate area. Although the school is comprehensive, some students are selected by means of an entrance examination. The proportion of students who are eligible for free meals is below the national average, as is the number with learning difficulties or disabilities. About one in three of the girls has English as an additional language, a percentage well above that found nationally.

Sixth form courses are provided within a developing consortium arrangement.

When the school was inspected in February 2005, it was judged to require special measures. Following a period of steady improvement, the school is now providing a satisfactory and improving standard of education, and is benefiting from stable staffing and effective leadership.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

In accordance with section 13 (4) of the Education Act 2005, HMCI is of the opinion that the school no longer requires special measures.

The school judges and inspectors agree that Reading Girls' is providing a satisfactory and improving standard of education in Years 7 to 11 and in the sixth form. At the heart of the school's welcome renewal has been a concerted effort by teaching and support staff to improve the everyday classroom experiences for the girls. There have been radical improvements to the quality of the environment which have had a profound impact on the girls' attitudes towards their school. Systems for monitoring within the school are effective and well designed to sustain further improvements.

The quality of teaching and learning is now consistently satisfactory, with many good elements. The girls make broadly satisfactory progress in lessons, and many make good progress, although there is not a consistent pride in presentation of work and approach to homework. The students' behaviour, attitudes and attendance are now satisfactory, with the girls clearly valuing the many ways in which the school has improved. The girls are cared for, supported and guided securely.

Standards in Key Stage 3 are broadly average, while at Key Stage 4, below average standards in 2005 are expected to improve in 2006. Examination results in the sixth form are a mixed picture across academic and vocational subjects, which in part reflect inadequacies in the curriculum on offer. However, the school has implemented timely changes to its overall provision and students' progress is satisfactory.

Senior leadership is effective and forward looking, knows well the school's strengths and residual weaknesses, and has a clear focus on future priorities. Heads of year and heads of departments have grown in confidence to the point where they are having a good impact on students' achievements. The school provides satisfactory value for money, although the decline in the school roll presents a particular challenge to securing a balanced budget over the coming years. Reading Girls' School has improved significantly since the inspection of February 2005, and shows good capacity to sustain the improvements made during this academic year.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 3

Provision in the sixth form is satisfactory although the current curriculum is restricted and costly. Not all students are able to study the subjects they would wish. Although the consortium of schools is growing to offer more courses, choice is still limited. The school is attempting to match students' needs more closely by broadening vocational provision. Some students say that they are not fully aware of their targets and what they need to do to meet them in every lesson.

Various agencies, visitors and visits to the workplace are used well in helping students decide about their future employment or preparing for studies beyond school. Students enjoy the welcoming ethos of their sixth form and are looking forward to taking on

greater responsibility within the school to acknowledge their maturity. Attendance figures have improved and are now satisfactory because of new initiatives and careful checking procedures. The interim leadership has shown strengths and has prepared the way well for the new head designate of the sixth form. There is a clearer understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the provision and an excellently conceived plan of action has been embarked upon.

What the school should do to improve further

In order to raise standards, the headteacher and governors should

- sustain the improvements in the quality of teaching and learning through continued monitoring and evaluation at all levels
- ensure students continue to take greater pride in their work and develop their independent learning habits
- monitor rigorously the well judged changes to provision within the sixth form.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Standards on entry to Year 7 are broadly below average, with the exception of the selective stream which is in line with standards found nationally. Achievement overall is satisfactory but the girls make better progress in Key Stage 3 than in Key Stage 4.

In the 2005 set of Year 9 national tests, the girls' results were in line with national averages overall and reflected good progress. The school's projections for 2006 justly indicate continuing good progress. In 2005 at GCSE, only 34% of the students achieved five or more A*- C grades, below the school's own target, the national average and that of schools in similar contexts. The number of girls achieving at least five A*- G grades was also below that found nationally. However, achievement is now satisfactory in Key Stage 4. Progress in lessons this year and the school's own tracking records indicate that this summer's GCSEs will bring results closer to the national average.

Overall, students' performance in advanced level examinations was unsatisfactory in 2005. Recently, achievement has improved and most students are now making satisfactory progress. A few are making very good progress compared with their grades in Year 11. For example, all Level 1 and Level 2 students have achieved either passes or merits this summer in their vocational subjects.

Progress in lessons across the key stages is satisfactory or better for all groups of students. They are, in the main, meeting challenging targets, and in many sets where the teaching is good the students are making rapid progress. Girls who have English as an additional language or who have special educational needs make good progress as a result of the quality of support and intervention they receive.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 3

The personal development and well-being of students are satisfactory and most enjoy their education. Their attitudes and behaviour in lessons and around the site are satisfactory; the careless behaviour of a minority of students has now all but disappeared, and for example, litter is no longer thoughtlessly discarded as once was commonplace. The girls' social, moral, cultural and spiritual development is satisfactory, with particular strengths in their understanding and appreciation of the school's rich cultural and linguistic diversity.

The students' views on all aspects of the school's provision have been thoughtfully harnessed by the staff. Whether talking about school uniform, the environment, laptops or business and enterprise, the girls observed to inspectors that everyday life for them at the school has seen great changes for the better in recent months.

Following dedicated efforts by staff and support agencies, the attendance of students is now in line with the national average for secondary schools, and punctuality to school and to lessons is satisfactory. Tutor time in the morning is used productively and assemblies offer good opportunities for the girls to see one another's achievements celebrated. In a Year 8 assembly observed, students appreciated the time given to private reflection on aspects of compassion, a theme for the week. The girls value opportunities to meet visitors and go out on visits, and Year 10 students spoke enthusiastically of their 'Aim Higher' experiences. Girls in Years 7 and 8 said they would welcome more trips out, but were equally looking forward to the end-of-term Activities Week.

Students say they feel safe and secure at school and know to whom to turn when in difficulties. They appreciate the importance of adopting healthy lifestyles within and beyond school, and a range of curricular and extracurricular courses contribute well to the students' future economic well-being. The school has not yet developed the range of responsibilities for the girls which they themselves identify is needed, including greater involvement by sixth formers in the whole school.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

'The quality of teaching has improved'. 'The teachers help us to get correct answers'. 'We enjoy working in teams and using laptops'. 'We are doing much more practical work than we used to'. 'The desks are new and we have more textbooks'. These comments from the girls are palpable evidence of the significant improvements across all subjects in the quality of teaching and learning. It is now satisfactory with many good elements. As one teacher also observed: 'There is a real sense of celebration and pride when colleagues' lessons are judged outstanding.'

The best teaching is characterised by clear expectations and consistent classroom management, warm rapport between staff and students, and careful planning with demanding objectives set relative to the students' abilities and interests. Teachers enthuse students with their love of subject, for example in English and art; time is skilfully orchestrated in the classroom; questioning is tantalising and focused; and the fun and fundamentals of learning are celebrated. The displays in the science area on cloning and on investigating insulating material, the latter signposted with national curriculum levels, offer positive examples of work to which all students can aspire.

The pace of lessons sometimes slackens and occasionally subject content can still be undemanding. The quality and regularity of marking and of homework are much improved; robust monitoring procedures at all levels now highlight inconsistencies where they occur. The improved presentation of work by students and the development of their independent learning habits are seen by the school as priorities for next academic year.

Teachers cater well in lessons for students with learning difficulties and those who have English as an additional language.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 4

The curriculum is satisfactory and meets statutory requirements, with the exception of some aspects of information and communication technology (ICT) provision in Key Stage 4. Suitable plans are in hand to resolve these for September 2006. Preparation for adult life and economic well-being are promoted very well through the school's enterprise and business work; the girls in Years 10 and Year 12 mentioned this programme frequently when asked to identify parts of the curriculum they particularly enjoy. The extracurricular programme is still largely reliant on sport, although ICT, music and drama activities have begun to flourish.

The school is ambitious to keep under review its curriculum across the 11 - 18 age range in order to move provision from satisfactory to good. Students in Year 9 shared with enthusiasm the new science skills course for the 21st century which they have just embarked upon.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

Systems for the care, support and guidance of students are secure. Child protection procedures are in place appropriately. Health and safety procedures are satisfactory and risk assessments are attended to carefully. Parents value the additional support given to girls who have English as an additional language and those with learning difficulties and disabilities. The school is reviewing how it can improve further its already effective support, academic and social, for those girls and their families who join the school during the year. The school is currently examining how the views of all parents can be harnessed more consistently.

Students' individual progress to meet challenging targets is tracked well by teachers throughout the school and reporting to parents is thoughtfully organised. The ways in which the girls' achievements, attendance and contribution to the wider community are now celebrated, and communicated to families, are examples of good practice.

The transformation in the environment has made a singular contribution to the climate of the school and has been crucial to an improved picture of care and support. Some of the vibrant corridor displays which celebrate the girls' activities in classrooms and on visits are outstanding.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

While the impact on standards in national examinations has yet to be seen, the quality of leadership and management at all levels in the school is effective and is evident in the current progress made by students. With the benefit of a range of external support from the local authority, consultants and a headteacher from a neighbouring school, the headteacher and her leadership team have provided good leadership in recent months. They have challenged one another, taken on new roles and responsibilities, and are seen by staff to be working assiduously and imaginatively to effect the school's undoubted improvements. They have been responsible for well devised and sharply focused training, for example on assessment for learning and how staff can best harness prior assessment data to inform their planning of lessons.

Middle managers have responded to this good leadership and effective line management, and have made a significant contribution to improving the quality of teaching and learning, and the girls' everyday experiences. Staff who met with inspectors to talk about the school's work over recent months cited the quality of leadership, attention to detail over efficient systems, and a real shared purpose as key ingredients in the school's achievements. Equally, they recognise that whilst the school is now providing a satisfactory standard of education for the girls, they aspire to creating a good school and know that sustaining what has been achieved is the critical challenge ahead.

The school's self-evaluation is satisfactory; the views of parents and those with whom the school works closely are involved usefully in the process. Support from the local authority has been good, with analytical reports from link advisers and consultants acting as helpful triggers for change. The local authority and governors have an agreed way forward to manage the school's significant budget deficit. Governance is satisfactory and has demonstrated an increasing capacity to hold senior managers to account. The governing body is acutely aware of its role in the coming period to set priorities and support the staff in sustaining the commendable improvements of the past year.

Inspection judgements

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

Overall effectiveness

| | | |
|--|-----|-----|
| How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners? | 3 | 3 |
| How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being? | 2 | 3 |
| The quality and standards in foundation stage | NA | |
| The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation | 3 | 3 |
| 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? | 3 | 3 |
| The standards ¹ reached by learners | 3 | 3 |
| How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners | 3 | 3 |
| How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress | 2 | |

Personal development and well-being

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners? | 3 | 3 |
| The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development | 3 | |
| The behaviour of learners | 3 | |
| The attendance of learners | 3 | |
| How well learners enjoy their education | 3 | |
| The extent to which learners adopt safe practices | 3 | |
| The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles | 3 | |
| The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community | 3 | |
| How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being | 3 | |

The quality of provision

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs? | 3 | 3 |
| How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners? | 3 | 4 |
| How well are learners cared for, guided and supported? | 3 | 3 |

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? | 3 | 3 |
| How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education | 2 | |
| How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets, through quality assurance and self-review | 2 | |
| How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can | 3 | |
| How effectively and efficiently resources are deployed to achieve value for money | 3 | |
| The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities | 3 | |
| 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

Students

You will know that my colleagues and I have been visiting the school regularly over the past eighteen months to check on the standard of education you are receiving. I am delighted to report that we now judge Reading Girls' School to be providing a satisfactory and improving standard of education for all its students.

Talking to groups of girls from different years on our recent visit, it was very clear from what you were saying that the school has transformed itself over the past year. You were quick to comment on significant improvements in teaching, girls' behaviour, books and resources and, critically, in the way your whole environment has been made fresher, more colourful and welcoming. Many of you have made improvements in the way you keep records of your homework, but you can help raise standards further by paying greater attention to how you present, consistently, both your class and homework. Have a careful look with your parents at whether you think your diaries and exercise books are as well presented as you would really like.

As you all said to me, the changes for the better at the school have come about because your teachers and support staff have worked tirelessly. They plan lessons well, use interesting resources, and offer you different ways of learning in classrooms. Having met a group of staff on my visit, they are intent now on working with you to create a good school. In particular, the staff are very keen to involve girls in all years more fully in the effective running of the school. I know Mrs Allen and her senior team would really welcome any sensible and stimulating ideas as you plan together for a successful future. Those of you entering the sixth form have a particularly important role to play. I wish you every success, and trust that those of you who have taken examinations this summer have contributed to the rising trend of improvement at Reading Girls.

Yours sincerely

Roy Blatchford

H M Inspector