



The Astley Cooper School

Inspection Report

Unique Reference Number 117552
Local Authority HERTFORDSHIRE
Inspection number 290869
Inspection dates 7–8 February 2007
Reporting inspector Barbara Hilton

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

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|---|--------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| Type of school | Comprehensive | School address | St Agnells Lane |
| School category | Community | | Hemel Hempstead |
| Age range of pupils | 11–18 | | Hertfordshire HP2 7HL |
| Gender of pupils | Mixed | Telephone number | 01442 394141 |
| Number on roll (school) | 785 | Fax number | 01442 401407 |
| Number on roll (6th form) | 122 | | |
| Appropriate authority | The governing body | Chair | Mr Rodney Tucker |
| | | Headteacher | Mrs Anne Smithers |
| Date of previous school inspection | 4 March 2002 | | |

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| Age group | Inspection dates | Inspection number |
| 11–18 | 7–8 February 2007 | 290869 |

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by four Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

The Astley Cooper School gained specialist arts college status in 2005. It is smaller than most secondary schools. Students come almost entirely from local primary schools, in a neighbourhood which is relatively disadvantaged within a generally affluent area. The attainment of students starting in Year 7 is below average and includes few students of high ability. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and disabilities is well above average but relatively few have statements of special educational needs. The great majority are White British, with a small proportion from a variety of minority ethnic groups. Only a few are at an early stage of speaking English.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

The Astley Cooper School provides satisfactory education and satisfactory value for money. It has several strengths, which give it good capacity to improve. Overall, leadership and management are good. Governance is also good. Arts college status has brought many benefits and in 2006 the school gained the Artsmark Gold award. Improvement since the last inspection has been good, notably in GCSE results, provision of information and communication technology (ICT), and students' literacy skills. The school is rigorous in its self-evaluation and standards are rising. However, staff turnover has limited the effectiveness of middle-management and monitoring and planning to raise standards are too uneven as a result.

Students' personal development and well-being are good. They enjoy school. Arrangements for their care, guidance and support and for the curriculum are good and successful in enabling all students to participate in and benefit from what is offered. Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. They feel safe and adopt healthy lifestyles, including eating well and taking regular exercise. A higher proportion of students than in most schools have learning difficulties and disabilities. Some cope with behavioural and social problems and join as late as mid-year in Year 11. They are helped to develop confidence in themselves and to progress satisfactorily.

Achievement and standards are satisfactory. In the past, weaknesses at Key Stage 3, sometimes lingering on from students' poor foundation in basic skills, have undermined efforts to raise achievement at Key Stage 4. Standards are improving and in line with those attained nationally at Key Stage 3. In 2006, while GCSE results were below average, they represented a generally satisfactory improvement from students' starting points. However, the proportion of 5A*-C grades was below average because some of the more able students underachieved.

Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Many lessons are interesting with worthwhile activities. However, in some, planning lacks rigour and does not take sufficient account of the levels at which students are working and their targets for improvement. The use of assessment is mixed. In some subjects, it is well focused on moving students forward in their learning but some marking is superficial. Most students behave well and want to learn but a few can be challenging and disrupt lessons, especially with temporary teachers who are not familiar with the school's approaches to class management.

Arts college status has enriched the curriculum. At Key Stage 4 a good variety of well-taught creative and vocational arts courses has been introduced. These are popular and have improved the motivation of many students. Facilities and out-of-school activities have been greatly enhanced. Other benefits include increased community links and new partnerships with local schools.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 3

Standards and achievement in the sixth form are satisfactory. The number of students, and their standards on entering Year 12, are both rising. As a result, nearly all stay for the full length of their courses and standards are improving. Leadership and management are good.

The quality of teaching and learning is good. The school is a member of a local post-16 partnership within which a good range of academic and vocational courses is provided. However, the requirements for religious education are not met. Students' personal development and well-being are good. They are encouraged to take responsibility for their studies and as leaders in the school community. The standards of students' work are monitored satisfactorily. Students are given effective guidance on available courses and how to improve their work. Links with Hertfordshire University promote interest in progression to university. Students enjoy their education and are very positive about their experience in the sixth form.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise the achievement of all groups of students especially those of higher ability.
- Provide more challenging targets for students and reflect these in lesson plans.
- Strengthen the support for and monitoring of supply staff.
- Improve the skills of middle managers and their impact on raising standards.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Students' achievement is satisfactory but results remain below average. GCSE results have improved significantly since the last inspection. In 2006 the proportions of students gaining at least one GCSE certificate, and those gaining 5A*-G grades, were a little better than the national averages. However, the proportion of 5A*-C grades was below average because some of the more able students did not achieve as well as they could. Students' GCSE results in mathematics and science represent satisfactory achievement, but there is scope for improvement in English. Their results in art are relatively good, compared with their other subjects.

In some years, as in 2006, girls have achieved better than boys across Key Stage 3. Performance is broadly average in English at the end of Year 9 and much better than in mathematics and science, in which results have been low.

Standards are improving. The school has tackled specific weaknesses, such as reading, vigorously. Standards in lessons at Key Stage 3 are now in line with national expectations and most students progress well. In Key Stage 4, lesson standards are slightly below expectations because there is insufficient challenging work. Year 11 students have made good progress over the last term and a wide range of programmes, including revision lessons and guidance on coursework, is planned to help them to

improve further. Students with learning difficulties and disabilities, including many who are vulnerable, are achieving satisfactorily.

The school sets moderately challenging targets. While these have not been met by all groups of students, they have helped to raise expectations. The monitoring of students' progress is established and is informing teaching, especially in Years 9 and 11. The turnover of staff and changes in leadership in several departments has limited the capacity of the school to raise standards throughout.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Relationships are good. Students respect the contributions others make, including those from different backgrounds and ethnic minorities. The vast majority are considerate and helpful to others. They are keen to participate in the wide range of activities the school offers and to contribute to school life. Their social development is good. Students appreciate that their views are taken seriously and they can be involved in decision-making through the school council.

Students enjoy school. Large numbers are involved in popular and successful school productions. These develop students' understanding of their capabilities, and raise their self-esteem. The self-confidence of students who join the school at a later date than usual is boosted because they are treated as individuals.

Most students are willing to learn and behave well in lessons. However, a small minority can be challenging and disruptive, and a number of parents comment on this. Students say this happens because approaches to class management are not consistent. The school's 'ladder system' is helping students to reflect on the impact of their behaviour. Incidents are well recorded and prompt action is taken. The internal exclusion policy is effective. Individuals at risk of exclusion benefit from approaches that cultivate their participation and raise their attainment. Students are confident that incidents of bullying, which are few, are dealt with rapidly.

The school has a rigorous tracking system for monitoring students' attendance. While attendance has improved since the last inspection it remains below the national average, especially in Year 11. This is mostly due to absence authorised by parents, which undermines the efforts of the school and their children's education.

Students feel safe at school. They adopt healthy lifestyles. Their awareness of health issues has been effectively raised through the curriculum and special events. They are well prepared to make choices about their future lives through their work experience, enterprise education and careers guidance. Their development of key skills, such as their use of ICT, is satisfactory.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. Opportunities to explore spirituality and moral issues through assemblies and class work make students more reflective. The school has a strong sense of community. Cultural development is

explored through many activities linked to art, music, drama and literature. Students develop a good commitment to racial equality.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

Teaching and learning are satisfactory in the main school and good in the sixth form. Students respect their teachers and find them friendly and helpful. They appreciate interesting lessons which are well planned so that they learn step-by-step. Good, and occasionally excellent progress was observed in response to teachers' high expectations, strong sense of purpose and enthusiasm in conveying expert knowledge. Students made effective and imaginative use of ICT and other resources to support their learning. Learning also flourished when teachers skilfully adapted activities and pace to the needs of students, and encouraged independence in learning. Support in lessons for students with learning difficulties and disabilities is effective.

However, the learning of some is held back in lessons where planning lacks the detail to challenge the various levels of ability of students. At times the disruptive behaviour of a few interferes with the learning of others. Students can be challenging to supply teachers who oversee work set, but who do not engage their interest.

The effectiveness of assessment is mixed. Examples were seen of teachers moving students on in their learning through sensitive use of questions and constructive marking of their work. In some lessons students' assessment of their own and others' work was effectively used to heighten their awareness of expectations and how to improve. However, some marking, while encouraging, does not indicate what improvements are needed. Marking by supply teachers has been inconsistent.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The curriculum is good. Specialist status in visual arts enables a richer, more varied and work-related curriculum to be offered. The school provides good courses in art, drama, dance and music in all years. Recent staffing difficulties have limited the school's capacity to offer all aspects of design and technology. Religious education is not provided in the sixth form, which is a legal requirement. Less able students are supported effectively individually and in small groups. Gifted and talented students are identified in all years and given good opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skills through projects, but opportunities are missed to extend them in lessons. Students' self-confidence is enhanced through work experience and opportunities to work with local organisations. Extracurricular activities are good. Performances and concerts are very good and much enjoyed by students. Post-16, the school works

closely with a local consortium and adjusts the curriculum to meet the needs of students each year.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Pastoral support is good in all years. The school knows its students well; they feel very well cared for and confident about approaching a teacher, mentor or counsellor if they have a problem. Those with learning difficulties and disabilities receive appropriate help and progress is satisfactory. Effective use is made of external agencies to extend the school's provision. Appropriate guidance is given to students when they are making their choices about subjects and their futures. Good procedures are in place to ensure the protection of students and their health and safety.

Academic guidance and the tracking of students' progress have been significantly improved since the last inspection. The data manager provides information to all staff that highlights the needs of individual students. Their progress is reviewed at half-termly intervals by teachers and students, and annually with parents at review days. Students are well aware of their targets in different subjects. In some subjects effective use is made of targets in planning lessons to move students on in their learning, but students' progress suffers because this practice is not consistent throughout the school. The school has sought parents' views on its provision. While many have been reticent about being involved, specialist college status is enabling more to participate in the life of the school and their children's education.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Leadership is good. It has significant strengths, notably the headteacher's clarity of direction and sense of purpose for the school. Team work among the senior team is good. With the support of the governing body, the school has turned around a budget shortfall to achieve a balanced budget. It has achieved specialist status as an arts college, this aspect of its work being particularly well managed. The senior team and governors have a good sense of the effectiveness of teaching and departments. Learning resources are adequate and the provision of computers is good.

A further strength is the school's accurate evaluation of its performance. It has been assisted in this by the local authority, and thus provided it with an effective tool for further development. Areas for improvement at the last inspection have been dealt with effectively. GCSE results have improved markedly and standards in Key Stage 3 are rising.

The senior team has been enlarged, which has enabled better support for middle managers in their monitoring and planning for improvement. Recent appointments

have strengthened management and students' progress in several subjects, including English and science. Departmental planning reflects school priorities and takes account of results but places relatively little emphasis on raising results at the very highest grades. Systems enable monitoring of students' progress on a regular basis, and information is available to relevant staff. The rigour with which information is used to plan targets for students and lesson activities varies, largely because of staff turnover.

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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 | 2 |
| The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation | 2 | 2 |
| The capacity to make any necessary improvements | 2 | 2 |
| 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 | 3 | |

Personal development and well-being

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners? | 2 | 2 |
| The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development | 2 | |
| The behaviour of learners | 3 | |
| The attendance of learners | 3 | |
| How well learners enjoy their education | 2 | |
| The extent to which learners adopt safe practices | 2 | |
| The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles | 2 | |
| The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community | 2 | |
| 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 | 2 |
| How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners? | 2 | 2 |
| How well are learners cared for, guided and supported? | 2 | 2 |

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

Leadership and management

| | | |
|--|-----|-----|
| How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners? | 2 | 2 |
| 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 | 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, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money | 3 | |
| The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities | 2 | |
| Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements? | Yes | Yes |
| Does this school require special measures? | No | |
| Does this school require a notice to improve? | No | |

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

12 February 2007

Dear Students

The Astley Cooper School, St Agnells Lane, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire HP2 7HL

Thank you for your friendly and helpful approach during our recent inspection of your school. We appreciated our discussions with you. I am writing to let you know what we thought about your school.

We found your school and the sixth form to be satisfactory with several strengths. The school's status as a specialist college in visual arts has brought many improvements, especially in enriching the curriculum and out-of-school activities. The quality of care, guidance and support is good, so you feel safe and secure and receive good guidance on your futures. You enjoy school and major productions, such as *Bugsy Malone*. You make satisfactory progress up to GCSE. Although results have remained below average, standards are improving and are in line with national expectations in lessons at Key Stage 3, which will equip you to do better at GCSE. Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Many lessons are interesting, with varied activities, and you make good use of information and communication technology (ICT). However, sometimes examples of poor behaviour detract from learning in lessons. Overall, direction by Mrs Smithers and her senior colleagues is good. The school has a strong sense of purpose and community.

In order that you can do better, we have asked the school to focus on raising standards and helping teachers who manage areas of work to gain the skills to do this. We have asked that teachers plan lessons more carefully to help you to reach your targets. We have also asked that the school strengthens its support for supply teachers so that you can learn well in all your lessons. You can help teachers to raise standards further by always concentrating in lessons, and working hard to reach your targets.

I and my colleague inspectors hope you continue to enjoy school and all it offers and wish you all the best in the future.

Barbara Hilton

Lead Inspector