

Arden School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	104111
Local Authority	Solihull
Inspection number	308515
Inspection date	12 March 2008
Reporting inspector	Clive Kempton HMI

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

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1222
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Derek Smart
Headteacher	Ann Green
Date of previous school inspection	16 May 2005
School address	Station Road Knowle Solihull B93 0PT
Telephone number	01564 773348
Fax number	01564 771784

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one Additional Inspector. Inspectors investigated the school's overall effectiveness and the following issues: achievement and standards; leadership and management; personal development and well-being; and care, guidance and support. Evidence was gathered from the national published assessment data for the school, the school's own records and other documentation, and observation of the school at work. Parents' responses to the inspection questionnaire, and interviews with senior and other staff, students and parents also informed inspectors' judgements. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but inspectors found no evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments of these areas, as given in its self-evaluation, were not justified, and these have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

Arden is an oversubscribed school and lies at the heart of the Knowle community. Despite its close proximity to the M42 and Birmingham, it has a very rural quality. In addition to the 1222 students on roll, there are 103 post-16 students receiving A-level education at the school in partnership with, and enrolled at, the Heart of England School, four miles away.

The vast majority of students are White British and join the school with above average attainment. A small proportion have learning difficulties. Most students live locally and are drawn from one of the five feeder primary schools. The specialist language status achieved in 1996 allows staff to work with the primary schools delivering language teaching.

In 2006 the school was awarded High Performing Specialist School Status and added the second specialism, vocational education in April 2007. It has recently been re-designated as an 11–18 school and will open its own sixth form with 130 students in September 2008.

At the request of the local authority, the headteacher is currently also providing support to another neighbouring school.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Arden is an outstanding school at the heart of the community, where students thrive. They develop into confident articulate young people who trust and care for each other. One pupil described the school as 'a positive place where learning and enthusiasm are encouraged.' A parent commented that 'Arden is a happy and safe environment for my child.'

Whilst there are some students of lower ability, students generally enter the school with above average attainment. They make excellent progress as they move through the school and achieve exceptionally high standards at both key stages. In the 2007 GCSE examinations, 100% of the students gained 5 A*-C grades; the highest results the school has ever achieved and well above the national average. This places the school as one of the highest attaining comprehensive schools in the country. Eighty-seven per cent of students achieved the benchmark of 5 A*-C grades, including English and mathematics, an increase of seven per cent on the previous year, due in part to the additional focus on literacy and numeracy skills in the vocational subjects. Students meet, and often exceed, the challenging targets set for them. The progress made by students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is equally impressive. The outstanding achievement of students results from a combination of high quality teaching and excellent pastoral care, guidance and support. One appreciative parent captured this by describing the school as a place where 'the teachers genuinely care for the students.' The tracking and monitoring of students' progress is very rigorous and there is rapid intervention when an under-achieving pupil is identified.

The quality of teaching is consistently good, with an increasing percentage of lessons in which it is outstanding. As well as having very secure subject knowledge, teachers create an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust in their classrooms. They plan lessons thoroughly to include a number of challenging activities, although in some lessons, students are not given enough opportunities to learn independently. The curriculum is excellent and really does meet the needs of individual students well. Its range and flexibility means that students experience academic and vocational courses that prepare them well for their future lives. Able students are fast-tracked in a number of subjects so that they are appropriately challenged. The specialist language and vocational school status has had the impact of improving standards across the whole school and developing an international dimension to the curriculum. For example, drama classes have been taught through the medium of French and a history topic through German.

Another considerable strength of the school is the personal development and well-being of the students. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding and evident around the school, for example the high quality musicals regularly produced, the wide range of music and drama groups, the way students look out for and support each other, and the numerous travel opportunities which contribute to their well-rounded personalities. They also develop confidence and self-esteem through a wide range of experiences such as visits overseas and exchanges, some to China and Poland. Parents and students report the significance of these visits in developing their children's cultural awareness, independence and ability to empathise with other children around the world. The charity work is impressive and in excess of £10K is collected most years. Students value their own achievements through the popular 'Colours' awarded for achievement in subjects. These badges, sewn onto their blazers, are worn with pride. The development of this initiative into similar awards for friendship or being a good listener, for example, are welcome developments and reward different aspects of emotional intelligence.

Because students enjoy school, their attendance is well above the national average and their behaviour in lessons is exemplary. Students adopt healthy lifestyles through the highly-rated food provided at break and lunchtimes by an independent caterer. The high take-up of school lunches and out-of-school activities demonstrates the school's commitment to developing healthy active students, ready to learn. Students report that 'Arden is a safe place to learn where everyone is friendly.' This is borne out by the robust safeguarding procedures that are in place and the very low incidents of bullying or racism that are instantly dealt with by the staff should any arise. Students know there is someone to turn to for support should they need it. An impressive feature of students' personal development is the way large numbers take on leadership roles around the school and within the community. The senior pupil team, Year 10 linguists mentoring Year 7 students, the peer mentoring programme, the Junior Sports Leader Award, membership of various committees such as school council, and acting as charity representatives are just some of the means through which pupils develop leadership qualities. Another example of how students feel valued is the responsibility given to some of the new sixth form students to choose their own furnishings and colour schemes for the new building.

None of these successes can happen without clear and dedicated leadership, and the headteacher provides this in abundance. She has brought about considerable improvement since the last inspection in a number of areas, notably the new sixth form block, the new design and technology accommodation about to be built, and the successful bid to develop a second vocational specialism, highly appropriate in this high achieving school. She is ably supported by a committed senior team who, through a regular cycle of examination review and analysis, hold subject leaders to account for standards achieved in their subject areas. Roles, responsibilities and accountabilities are clear. This is why leadership and management at all levels are outstanding. Collectively, and through their own self-evaluation strategies, the management have an accurate view of their provision and what needs to be done next. However, the formalised self-evaluation form lacks sufficient clarity in its outcomes. Governance is good. Governors are regular visitors in school and hold the school to account for the standards it achieves, although they have not as yet had sufficient involvement with the writing of the self-evaluation form.

Parents are very supportive of the school and are proud to send their children to Arden. They report good home-school communication systems, for example through e-mail or telephone, and are always made to feel 'very welcome' by the staff. They acknowledge that the school 'strengthens the community' and is a place that their children 'are sad to leave.'

What the school should do to improve further

- Provide more independent learning activities in lessons.
- Ensure that all self-evaluation documentation is clearly focused on judgements and outcomes.

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Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall
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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
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	1
The standards ¹ reached by learners	1
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	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
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1
How well learners enjoy their education	1
The attendance of learners	1
The behaviour of learners	1
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?	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1

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.

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	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 leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	1
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2
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, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	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

Dear Students

Inspection of Arden School, Solihull B93 OPT

Thank you very much for your warm welcome when we visited your school. We enjoyed talking with you, looking at your work and watching you learn. We thought you would like to know the outcome of the inspection and what we found the school could do to improve.

- We think you go to an outstanding school and your parents agree.
- The language college status gives you opportunities to learn two languages and to visit other countries; this helps your understanding of different cultures.
- The school is really good at helping you develop the personal and social skills you need to grow into confident articulate young adults.
- You raise an impressive amount of money for charity.
- Your teachers work very hard to prepare interesting lessons for you.
- Any of you who need extra help are quickly identified and given really good support.
- You were all very well behaved in lessons.
- All the adults in the school really care about you and want you to do well.
- You really appreciate the 'Colours' and awards you are given for achievement and commitment.
- You and your parents are proud to say you come to Arden school.
- You all make very good progress in your work and we hope you will all continue to achieve at least 5 GCSEs at A*-C grade. The 2007 results were a tremendous achievement.
- Your headteacher does a really good job and has made lots of improvements to the school since she arrived.
- The vocational specialism is providing a wider range of courses for you to experience.
- The new sixth form in September 2008 is a really exciting development.

In order to get even better, I have suggested to your headteacher and senior staff that they do the following things.

- Make sure that you are given more independent learning activities in lessons.
- Make sure that the senior staff explain the outcomes of the school more clearly in the evaluations they write.

Clive Kempton Her Majesty's Inspector

13 March 2008

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