

Altrincham College of Arts

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	106367
Local Authority	Trafford
Inspection number	309109
Inspection dates	12–13 February 2008
Reporting inspector	Jim Kidd

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	778
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr R Aubrey
Headteacher	Mr P Brooks
Date of previous school inspection	11 March 2003
School address	Green Lane Timperley Altrincham Cheshire WA15 8QW
Telephone number	0161 9807173
Fax number	0161 9801783

Age group	11-16
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by four Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

This secondary modern school comprises students from 40 primary schools, some of which are situated in areas of significant social and economic disadvantage. It is smaller than average. Admission to Year 7 is influenced by the several grammar and private schools in the local area. The percentage of students known to be eligible for free school meals is above average. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is more than twice the national average and there are currently 39 students with a statement of special educational need. The school has a resourced unit for students with moderate learning or emotional and behavioural difficulties, who work alongside their peers in mainstream classes. Most students are of White British heritage but there is an increasing number from minority ethnic groups. The school has been a specialist college for the visual arts since 2002 and was designated a specialist school for mathematics and computing in 2007.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

This is an outstanding and fully inclusive school. Through its work as a specialist college for the visual arts, it raises the aspirations of its students, develops their creative talents and fosters community cohesion through its strong links with the local community and with nearby schools. The school is alive with activity from early morning until late at night when its facilities are used to the full by young people and adults.

Excellent teaching and an emphasis on encouraging students to believe in themselves result in outstanding academic progress across the school, and for students of all levels of ability. Examination results have improved consistently since the previous inspection and standards are broadly average. Students are entered early for an increasing number of examinations and, as a result, significant numbers in the current Year 11 have already reached GCSE higher grades, for example in English and mathematics. Students speak highly of their teachers and of the other adults who work with them saying, 'They respect us and we respect them.'

Students feel safe, behave well and recognise that the school is concerned to develop them personally, socially and academically. They accept responsibility willingly, enjoy supporting younger students and treat visitors with courtesy; they are proud of their school. They are well aware of the importance of eating healthily and of keeping fit and sporting activities are a major part of school life. They receive excellent careers advice and are prepared outstandingly well for life after formal education. Most students attend regularly but there is a significant number whose attendance is not as good as it should be.

The curriculum is outstanding and teachers spend considerable time reviewing its effectiveness and modifying it to make sure that it is relevant to each individual and allows students to follow their interests and ambitions for the future. There is a wide range of academic courses, an increasing number of vocational options and many students take part in weekly work placements. The range of extra-curricular activities is extensive and students benefit from subject clubs, homework support, residentials and visitors to school as part of the arts, mathematics and computing specialisms. The school met its arts college targets and was redesignated as a result.

The vast majority of parents are overwhelmingly supportive of the school and are particularly grateful for the excellent support and guidance their sons and daughters receive. Indeed, as a result of the high levels of care and the comprehensive academic guidance they receive, there is no significant difference in the achievement of all groups of students. As parents say, 'The encouragement and dedication of the staff mean that all students are enabled to reach their full potential.'

Leadership and management are outstanding. The headteacher and management team lead by example and are fully supported by a highly committed staff. Governors play an active role in school evaluation and development and challenge the leadership to even higher levels of performance. Excellent progress by students, consistently better examination results and marked improvements since the previous inspection demonstrate that the school has an outstanding capacity to improve further. It provides outstanding value for money. The most important people in school are fully aware of just how good Altrincham College of Arts is. As they say, 'We students know our school is small, but we also know that people are generous and welcoming here. It is our own little community.'

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve the attendance of those students who do not come to school as often as they can.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Students' standards on entry to the school are well below that usually seen, there is a well above average proportion with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and the intake of students of high ability is much lower than in most schools. Nonetheless, students make outstanding progress in their academic work across the school and reach average standards by the time they leave. Although Key Stage 4 results dipped a little in 2007, there is a long established trend of students leaving Year 11 with expected results in the key measure of the average points they reached at GCSE.

Progress has improved in Key Stage 3 over the past three years and is now very impressive, particularly in mathematics. Although standards by the end of Year 9 are still below average, the gap in the performance of girls and boys is narrowing markedly and they make similar progress. Students who often find the work difficult, some of them with a statement of special educational need, make the same progress as their peers because of the excellent support they receive from their teachers and learning support assistants.

Arts college status continues to have a profound impact on standards and achievement and results in arts-related subjects in particular are getting better each year. Moreover, ongoing development of the curriculum and judicious use of early examination entry mean that nearly half of the students in the current Year 11 have already reached higher grades in two or more of their GCSE subjects.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good and arts college status has a profound impact on students' creative talents. Their art work is permanently on display in school, in a local community centre and also appears in the children's ward in a nearby hospital.

Students behave well, treat their classmates with respect and most enjoy their time at school. They talk confidently about the importance of healthy living and are fully aware of what constitutes a balanced diet. Over half the student population regularly take part in sports activities and the girls' football team, for example, has an enviable reputation in school. The fitness suite is open at lunchtimes and after school and is invariably packed with students following a range of fitness regimes.

Attendance is broadly average but despite the best efforts of the school, including the appointment of a school-based education welfare officer, a significant minority of students do not attend as regularly as they should.

Students have a wide range of opportunities to take responsibility, for example through the Junior Sports Leader Award, membership of the school council and as student leaders in Years 10 and 11. Excellent achievement in academic work, comprehensive careers advice and the very high proportion of students who secure jobs or further education immediately after they leave, demonstrates that students are prepared outstandingly well for the future.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 1

Warm relationships, comprehensive support for students of all levels of ability and high expectations of what everyone can achieve are major features of teaching throughout the school. As students themselves say, 'Our teachers find out about our talents, encourage us to use them and help us to achieve.' Indeed, the quality of teaching and learning over time is outstanding and students make excellent progress in their academic work as a result. Students are clear about their next steps in learning, rise to the high levels of challenge expected by their teachers and work together willingly with their classmates to research new topics. For example, in an outstanding Year 7 biology lesson, students of lower ability surprised themselves at what they could do. They were delighted when one of their classmates used the word 'oestrogen' in an excellent answer to a difficult question. Similarly, students in an excellent Year 10 textiles session were able to make perceptive comments about how an already striking jewellery box could be improved even further. Teachers make very good use of the electronic whiteboard as a teaching and learning tool and students in turn use new technology with confidence to produce their assignments.

Ongoing assessment in class is a strength and teachers have a keen awareness of the performance and potential of students. Marking is regular, detailed and offers accurate advice on how students can improve their work.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The curriculum is always under review and is flexible enough to meet the needs and aspirations of students in the school. Arts college status demonstrates the commitment of the school to develop the creative talents of its students and ensures that most now study at least one arts-related subject at examination level. The links with authors and artists who exhibit their work in the school-based Community Arts Centre benefit students, local residents and also visitors from further afield. The mathematics and computing specialism involves sessions led by tutors from a local university and is beginning to have a strong effect on raising students' confidence and self-esteem.

An increasing range of applied, vocational and academic courses and also the development of early examination entry from Year 9 onwards ensure that students can follow their interests and ambitions. They are outstandingly well prepared for employment or their next stage in education by the excellent work-related programme and the opportunities many students have for one-day off-site placements. In addition, ongoing evaluation of the impact of the Key Stage 3 curriculum has led to an improved combination of teaching groups and three accelerated classes for the higher ability in Year 8.

Students speak positively about the wide range of enrichment and extra-curricular activities on offer. Sport looms large and the school is also very proud of its steel band, its orchestra and its choir, all of which take part in concerts in the local and wider community. A variety of residential visits promotes students' self-confidence, encourages them to take initiative and also does much to develop their skills as members of a team.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Comments from students such as 'People are generous and welcoming in our school,' are supported by the vast majority of parents. For example, one spoke for many with the statement, 'No-one is left behind or ignored here.' Indeed, the care, support and guidance provided for students of all heritages and of all levels of ability are outstanding. The school is rightly proud of its pastoral care and students feel safe and valued. Child protection procedures are in place and fully meet national guidelines.

The support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and for those identified as vulnerable is excellent. Learning support assistants, progress coordinators and the learning mentor monitor the progress of students closely and three trained counsellors work very effectively with students experiencing particular problems. In addition, the Aim Higher initiative identifies students who should have high aspirations and staff organise visits to prestigious universities to whet students' appetites for the future. Careers guidance is comprehensive, demonstrated by the school's Connexions Excellence award.

Academic guidance and the monitoring of students' progress towards challenging targets are of the highest order. For example, an academic mentoring session for all students takes place fortnightly and is delivered by virtually all staff, both teaching and non-teaching.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Inspirational leadership from the headteacher results in a clear direction for future development and impressive commitment from staff at all levels of experience and responsibility. Teachers speak highly of the senior leadership team which, they say, promotes educational debate and supports each individual in the quest to do the very best for students. As staff comment, 'There is authority and accountability here but there is no hierarchy.' The overriding concern of senior leaders, subject and pastoral leaders and of governors is to raise the aspirations of their students. Leaders are, therefore, up to date with the latest educational thinking but make their decisions after detailed research, full consultation and in relation to the educational validity of new initiatives.

Plans for future development are very well founded because evaluation of all aspects of school life is extremely comprehensive and accurate. As a result, all the key issues from the previous inspection have been addressed very effectively and the decisions to apply for two subject specialisms met with immediate success. Furthermore, middle leaders have received extensive training in both data analysis and strategies to gauge the quality of teaching and learning. Focused lesson observations and the sharing of good practice are, therefore, the norm and newly-qualified teachers benefit from an outstanding induction programme. The governing body is very well informed, fully supportive of what the school tries to do, but is never afraid to challenge the leadership and hold it to account with the utmost rigour. Hence governance is also outstanding. Governors are actively involved in the work of subject and pastoral departments and have an accurate and perceptive view of the school's strengths and of its areas for development.

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Annex A

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	3
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?	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1
How well learners enjoy their education	2
The attendance of learners	3
The behaviour of learners	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	1

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	1
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	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, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1
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

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

Thank you for the warm welcome you gave to the members of the inspection team when we visited your school recently. You were most friendly and polite and we enjoyed talking to you and watching you learn. We would now like to tell you what we think about your school.

Altrincham College of Arts gives you an outstanding education and you are right to be proud to attend it. Your teachers, learning support assistants and all the other adults who work with you give you excellent support; they care very much for how you achieve in both your academic work and personal development. The teaching you receive is excellent and you make outstanding progress as a result. Very few students leave your school without a job to go to or a place on a course of further education. Many of you in Year 11 already have high grades in some of your GCSEs and your teachers are now considering entering students early for an increasing number of subjects. You have so many options to choose from at the end of Year 9 and even more are planned.

You behave well in lessons and around school and get on very well with your classmates and your teachers. You know why it is important to live a healthy lifestyle and over half of you regularly take part in the wide range of sporting activities open to you at lunchtime and at the end of the day. Art is an important part of school life and much of your work has been displayed in local galleries, community centres and a nearby hospital. Indeed, some of your paintings have gone on show as far away as Leipzig in Germany.

Your headteacher and all the other staff are totally committed to making sure that you get the best education possible, and they know just how to make your school even better. We know that most of you attend well but we have asked your teachers to do all they can to raise attendance further. We are asking you also to play your part in this. If you don't attend as often as you can, you won't reach the standards of which you are capable.