

Aston Comprehensive A Specialist School in Mathematics and Computing

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	106957
Local Authority	Rotherham
Inspection number	309273
Inspection dates	28–29 November 2007
Reporting inspector	Philip Jarrett HMI

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	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1730
6th form	229
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr John Barton
Headteacher	Mrs Eunice Newton
Date of previous school inspection	1 November 2004
School address	Aughton Road Swallownest Sheffield South Yorkshire S26 4SF
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Age group	11-18
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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

Aston Comprehensive School is a very large school for students aged 11 to 18. It has specialist status in mathematics and computing. The number of students eligible for free school meals is below average while the proportion of students identified as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities is average. Most students are of White British origin. The school serves a diverse community with variations in levels of deprivation and prosperity. Attainment on entry to the school is broadly average. The school is designated as a Training School and provides a range of programmes in partnership with higher education colleges for entry into teaching. The school has received a number of awards including a Healthy Schools Award and one for excellence in Enterprise Education.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

The school's view is that its overall effectiveness is currently satisfactory. This inspection confirms that judgement. However, many aspects of the school's provision are good and this reflects good leadership and some effective recent action. The challenge for the school is to continue to improve outcomes for learners. It takes time to implement significant changes in a very large school like this but there is evidence that students' achievement is improving. The school's capacity for further improvement is good.

The school acknowledges that standards should be higher and it is strongly focused on this objective. Standards at present are broadly average and this reflects achievement that is satisfactory overall. Girls do significantly better than boys, especially in English, and the 2007 results show that some sixth form students did not do as well as expected. However, results have risen at the end of Key Stage 3 and 4 over recent years and the 2007 GCSE results were substantially higher than before and above national average. The progress of students during lessons observed by inspectors was good and this confirms that standards are improving.

Leadership and management are good. The school's leaders are receiving full support from members of staff in their efforts to raise standards. Senior leaders have consulted teachers about the principles of effective teaching and learning and the resulting formal agreement is having a positive impact on the quality of teaching, which is currently good. Students are mostly keen to learn. They form good relationships and especially enjoy lessons where they are fully involved and active.

The quality of care provided by the school is outstanding. Students settle quickly into the school and most feel safe and secure. An innovative element of the school's provision is the effective work of pastoral managers who are available to support students at any time of the day. Support for vulnerable students is also excellent. These students are looked after well and their learning needs are met effectively. This is a very large school but as one student said, 'In this school every child matters because we are all treated like individuals.' This has a positive impact on students' personal development which is good. Students form good relationships within the generally orderly atmosphere. Behaviour is good and students take advantage of the wide range of extra-curricular activities available. Their knowledge of healthy life styles is good and students develop their understanding of how communities work through an effective school council and very good links with a school in Zanzibar.

The curriculum is good. Different pathways and specific strategies for personalising the curriculum ensure that the needs of students, including the most vulnerable, are met well and these are also having a positive effect on achievement. The school is a specialist school in mathematics and computing. This has led to improved resources in information and communication technology (ICT) and increased rigour in the tracking of student progress. Good community links include support for mathematics and physical education in other schools. Extra-curricular and enrichment activities in specialist subjects are well developed. There is variation in the degree to which targets in the specialist subjects have been met but there is evidence of a positive wider impact in the use of ICT to enhance learning in all subjects.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

The sixth form is satisfactory overall and improving. Standards are broadly average. Achievement in some subjects, including drama and art, was good in 2007, but overall it was below average across the range of courses. The school recognises this under-performance and has put in place effective measures to improve provision. Leadership and management of the sixth form are now good and clearly focussed on raising standards and achievement. This is being done through rigorous implementation of teaching and learning and effective monitoring and support for students' academic progress. Students recognise the impact of recent changes. The curriculum meets the needs of its current students well and the school is planning to widen the range of courses available. Sixth-form students receive good guidance and support and have many opportunities to extend their personal development by taking on roles of responsibility and participating in extra-curricular activities. Students enjoy their time in the sixth form and value highly the individual support they receive from their teachers. A high proportion of them progress into higher education.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve boys' achievement at the end of Key Stage 4.
- Improve the achievement of students in the sixth form.

A small proportion of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Standards are broadly average across the school but the trend is upwards. Unvalidated results in the Key Stage 3 tests for 2007 were broadly in line with the national average overall. Standards have improved most consistently in science. English results tend to have been weaker than the other subjects but improved in 2007. The GCSE results for 2007 showed a significant improvement on previous years and were above average overall. The school is more successful than most in ensuring that nearly all students leave school with some qualifications in GCSE and this reflects the strong emphasis on inclusion. In general, girls reach higher standards than boys and the gap between the two has increased over the past few years. Standards in 2007 in the sixth form were broadly in line with the national average.

Achievement at the end of Key Stage 3 in 2007 improved but remained below the school's expectations. Achievement was satisfactory overall at GCSE in 2007 and this reflected a significant improvement on the two previous years. Girls did better than boys. Achievement in the sixth form varied from subject to subject but was not as good as the school expected. Progress in lessons observed was good at all key stages, reflecting recent improvements to teaching and the curriculum. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good progress because of effective teaching and well planned support.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The school provides a welcoming and inclusive community in which students form positive relationships with others. Students' personal development, including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, is good. They have a good understanding of the cultural diversity within Britain today and an increasing appreciation of sustainable development and global issues, fostered very well by an innovative partnership with a school in Zanzibar. Students' awareness of moral issues is heightened by assemblies, enrichment activities and citizenship lessons.

Students enjoy school a lot. Most say that their lessons are interesting and that, 'Teachers are always there for us. they really care.' A small number of parents expressed concern about behaviour in school. Evidence during the inspection was that behaviour around school and, for the most part, in lessons, was good. Although there was some low level disruption in a few lessons, this tended to be where the learning did not engage the students sufficiently. Attendance is satisfactory and improving, although the school finds it hard to convince a significant minority of parents not to take holidays during term time.

Most students are polite and friendly to others. They are proud of their school and speak highly of each other's achievements. Students say that they feel safe and secure. They are particularly appreciative of the work of pastoral managers and academic mentors who show real concern for them. They all feel that they have someone to turn to if problems arise.

Students eat healthy lunches and enjoy the many opportunities to take exercise. Many play an active role in school life and the wider community. They participate regularly in a range of art, music, drama and sport activities and feel that their views are appreciated. The year student councils are effective in providing opportunities for students to take decisions and to make valued contributions to school life. These opportunities instil confidence and give students a sense that they matter. Students have a good awareness of the needs of others and show this care by regularly raising funds to help them. Enterprise activities and improving literacy, numeracy and ICT skills help to prepare them well for their future lives.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Teaching and Learning is good overall. The school has a Learning and Teaching Agreement and this is central to the school's strategy for improving standards. The agreement has had a positive impact on the consistency of teaching across subjects. Teachers benefit from a wide range of continuous support as well as the dissemination of good practice. The sixth form tutor forum is another initiative which brings learners and teachers together in order to drive up standards.

There are good relationships between teachers and students. Teachers work hard to promote positive attitudes to learning and many students say they value this support. This serves to develop self-confidence and a positive learning climate. As one Year 7 student said, 'When you put your hands up to answer a question, no one laughs at you if you get the answer wrong.'

Lessons observed were well planned and structured. Teachers and students were very clear about the learning outcomes. In the best lessons, teaching was pacy and interesting, with opportunity for extended activities for the most able. Learners in turn responded positively and made good progress. Good quality teaching was noted in subjects including humanities and modern foreign languages. In a minority of lessons, teachers dominated and learning became more passive. The needs of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are met well as a result of good quality teaching. Assessment information is used well to plan lessons for students. Students are set challenging targets and know what they need to do to improve. The best marking is of high quality and helps students to understand their strengths and weaknesses even better.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The school judged its curriculum to be satisfactory. The inspection team believes that it is good. The school provides a broad curriculum with distinct pathways for all students at Key Stage 4. This has increased levels of engagement, improved behaviour and raised attainment. There are good links with external providers and the wide choice of ICT courses ensures that the curriculum makes a good contribution to the future economic well-being of learners. All curriculum innovation is rigorously monitored and evaluated to inform future planning.

The curriculum for the most vulnerable students has been sensitively and carefully personalised to ensure good achievement and effective personal development. The alternative provision is delivered by a highly effective team with well resourced facilities to maximise learning. However, this effective personalisation means that the curriculum for a very small number of students does not meet statutory requirements.

The school has good strategies in place to meet the needs of higher attaining students. This includes early entry for GCSE ICT to allow for the studying of a second language in Year 11 and increasing numbers of students taking both core and additional science courses at GCSE and modern foreign language courses. Changes to the curriculum have tried to address the issue of boys' achievement and attainment for this group of students is increasing, although not as fast as it is for girls.

There is a good uptake of education and training post-16 and for students moving into higher education. As a result the number of students who are not in education, employment or training post-16 is below local and national averages. Enrichment activities, including off-site and residential visits, are wide ranging and make a positive contribution to the personal development of many learners. There is a good level of involvement by students in extra-curricular sporting activities and the wide range of lunch-time and after school clubs on offer.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The school provides outstanding care and support for its students, including those with complex and challenging needs. The work of the pastoral managers is of a particularly high quality and ensures that all students have someone to turn to, at any time during the school day. Child

protection procedures are thorough and safeguarding arrangements meet the government's requirements.

Induction procedures for new students into the school are highly effective and ensure that they settle quickly. This is especially the case for Year 7 students where the partnership with local primary schools is of a high quality, in particular the recently introduced summer school. The support that vulnerable students and those most at risk receive is outstanding. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, looked after children and those at an early stage of learning English, are very effectively supported. Key members of staff know the students well and are aware of their needs and how to meet them. Links with external agencies are excellent and, coupled with high quality resources and commitment from within the school, this ensures that these students achieve well. Support is readily accessible and highly valued by students and parents. The recently introduced Year 7 nurture group enables vulnerable young students to have their needs well catered for on entry into the school.

The recently reviewed isolation and exclusion units within the school provide very effective support for students at risk of exclusion. As one student said, 'They help you stay out of trouble and move you on.' They are beginning to have a significant impact in reducing undesirable behaviour in school and fixed-term exclusions have fallen rapidly.

Academic guidance and support are good. All students are set targets in their subjects. They receive increasingly effective support from subject teachers which helps them to understand how well they are doing in relation to their targets and what they have to do to improve. Year 9 and Year 11 students speak very highly of the help that they receive from academic mentors who keep a close track of the progress that they make and who are always at hand to help assess how well they are doing. Some opportunities are missed, however, in making the best use of registration time to guide and support students. Older students receive good advice when making choices regarding the subjects that they want to study in Years 10 and 11, then later in the sixth form. Students who leave school at the end of Year 11 also receive good quality advice about learning in other institutions and careers choices.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Leadership and management are good. The senior leaders have a very good understanding of what needs to be done, with a clear recognition that standards should be higher. Recent improvements such as better results in the 2007 tests and examinations, a reduction in fixed term exclusions and good academic monitoring are all the result of effective leadership. This is a fast improving school and the capacity for further improvement is good.

The headteacher provides a very strong sense of direction, explicitly focused on high expectations and the core issues of teaching and learning. Good use is made of challenging targets to raise aspirations and this is beginning to have an impact on standards. The headteacher leads the school well. She delegates effectively and has created a strong senior team that provides good leadership across all aspects of the school and works closely with middle managers and other teachers.

The school has a strong sense of purpose and a vision shared by all members of staff. Teachers speak well about recent changes and accept the need for high aspirations and better

achievement. Staff praise the consultative nature of the school's leadership because they feel involved with initiatives. The quality of middle leadership is good. Heads of faculties pursue the school's priorities vigorously and evaluate progress at subject levels well. The senior leadership team leads by example, for instance, in teaching many of the disaffected students.

Several of the inspection judgements are more generous than the school's self-evaluation. This does not reflect weaknesses in self-evaluation but rather their recognition that more needs to be done to raise standards and that their effectiveness will be judged on outcomes for learners. The school knows its strengths and weaknesses and what needs to be done. Examples of effective action include support for English leading to significantly improved standards in 2007 and the focus on teaching and learning, which is leading to consistently good practice across the school.

Procedures for monitoring progress are good. Very systematic tracking of students' progress and setting of targets enables the school to monitor progress and provide good quality support for students. Monitoring of departments is also thorough and effective. The school receives good support from a well led governing body. Governors know the school well and have a very good understanding of the issues. They have worked closely with the leadership team and share the same vision and priorities. They provide both support and challenge, as appropriate.

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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	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?	3	3
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2

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?	2	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	2	
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	2	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	2	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.

Annex A

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 leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	2	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	2	
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	

Annex B

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

Thank you for contributing to the recent inspection at your school. My colleagues and I were very pleased to meet you and enjoyed talking to you.

Most of you said that you like coming to school and form good relationships with teachers. Although a few of you were concerned about bullying, most students said that they felt safe and secure in school and that behaviour was mostly good. We agree with you. You also have a good understanding of how to lead a healthy life and many of you take advantage of the wide range of activities, including sport, that are available within the school.

We thought that teaching was good and this was also the opinion of many of the students we spoke with. The school has worked hard on making lessons as interesting as possible. This is helping many of you to make better progress. Standards in the school are broadly in line with the national average. However, results were better last year especially at GCSE. Girls tend to do better than boys. The school is aware of this and is trying to make sure that boys enjoy learning as much as the girls.

The school has a good curriculum and this enables most of you to follow the courses that you need. The quality of care provided by all staff is very good. As one student said to me, 'Every child matters because we are all treated as individuals.' You spoke very well of the support of the pastoral managers and the academic mentors. You all know who to turn to if problems arise. Teachers work hard to help you improve and keep a close eye on the progress you make. Most of you find the targets you are set helpful in knowing how to improve your work.

We think that many aspects of your school are already good. We have asked the school to do what it can to improve boys' achievement as well as helping students in the sixth form to do even better. We think that your school is well led by the headteacher and other staff and that they will be able to continue to improve the school over the next few years.