

Stratton Upper School and Community College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	109645
Local Authority	BEDFORDSHIRE
Inspection number	310053
Inspection dates	26–27 April 2007
Reporting inspector	Kenneth Thomas

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	13–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	879
6th form	300
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs M Russell
Headteacher	Mr N Bramwell
Date of previous school inspection	25 April 2005
School address	Eagle Farm Road Biggleswade Bedfordshire SG18 8JB
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by five Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Stratton Upper School and Community College is an average size comprehensive school. Although a lower percentage of students claims free school meals than nationally, some students come from areas of economic hardship in the locality. The percentage of students with learning difficulties and disabilities is above the national average. Very few students come from minority ethnic backgrounds or have English as an additional language. The school is a specialist training school for teachers and in September 2007 will become a school with specialist mathematics and computing status. In common with other schools in the area, it has encountered difficulties in the recruitment of teachers in some subjects.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Inspectors agree with the school's self-evaluation that Stratton Upper School is a good school with outstanding features. The headteacher provides the school with excellent leadership and a clear sense of direction. He receives very strong support from the school leadership team, staff and governors. In this school every student matters. This is seen in the excellent care, guidance, and support that are provided for students, including strong support for students with learning and other difficulties or disabilities. Because students are educated in an environment based upon mutual respect, they feel safe, secure and valued. The vast majority of students respond positively to this environment. They enjoy their education and appreciate their classroom lessons and extra-curricular activities in equal measure.

Standards of students' work are above average and achievement is good. From broadly average standards on entry in Year 9, students make good progress to achieve generally above average test and examination results at the end of Years 9 and 11. Difficulties in staffing have had a significant adverse effect on achievement in English over recent years. Because of firm management action, these difficulties have been resolved and inspection evidence indicates that students are now making much better progress. Nevertheless, raising students' achievement in English remains a school priority.

Teaching and learning are good with some examples of outstanding practice. The school has built a strong reputation as a training school, evolving and sharing good practice by educating new teachers and existing members of staff through in-house professional development programmes. This has helped a good number of teachers to progress in their careers and contributed to school improvement. Students' progress towards their challenging targets is carefully monitored and parents and students are involved in the process. This is, in particular, helping to raise standards in English. In many subjects, teachers' marking provides students with clear guidance on what they need to do in order to improve the quality of their work, but this practice is not consistently good across the school.

The school provides an interesting and stimulating curriculum which is enriched by a good range of extra-curricular activities. Because the curriculum is carefully planned to meet the needs of all students, it successfully provides for a wide range of students' interests. It both promotes achievement and ensures that potentially disaffected students are maintained in full-time education. Students are consulted widely about the school's work and make an excellent contribution to the school and wider community through the many additional activities and events provided. Relationships are very good and students develop a good understanding of how to live healthy and safe lives. As a result, their personal development, including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, is good and they are well prepared for the next stage of their lives.

Because of well focused management by a strong leadership team and very effective support from governors, the school has made good improvement since the last inspection. The key issues identified in the last inspection report have been tackled successfully and the school has now achieved specialist status. The school gives good value for money.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 3

The school has a satisfactory sixth form. It is inclusive and provides a good curriculum that includes a broad range of academic and vocational options and hence meets students' needs well. The sixth form has a very positive ethos in which students enjoy their studies and other activities. Their personal development is good. Students make a particularly good contribution to the school and wider community, including supporting younger students.

Students' achievement is satisfactory and their examination results are broadly average. This is due to satisfactory teaching and learning. There is much good, lively teaching, but there are variations in quality and some teaching does not involve students actively enough. Care, guidance and support are good. Students appreciate the outstanding pastoral care provided by the head and deputy heads of sixth form, but the role of the tutors in providing academic guidance is underdeveloped, partly due to timetabling difficulties.

Leadership and management are satisfactory. The head of sixth form is rightly respected by students and staff for the support provided to students and the popularity of the sixth form. However, management capacity is limited and the current management structure lacks the quality assurance procedures needed to ensure that teaching and guidance are consistently good.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise GCSE examination results in English by ensuring that the improvements seen in teaching and learning are fully embedded.
- Build on the very good practice seen in the school and ensure that teachers' marking provides students with clear guidance on how to improve the quality of their work in all subjects.
- Strengthen sixth form management in order to ensure that teaching and learning are consistently good.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

Achievement and standards are good in the main school and satisfactory in the sixth form.

Students' attainment on entry is broadly average. They make good progress in Year 9 and achieve test results that are usually above average, though not consistently so. English results dipped badly in 2005, but improved in 2006, when students made satisfactory progress. Progress in mathematics is good. Boys and girls make equally good progress and there are no particular groups that underachieve. Students with learning difficulties or disabilities make good progress.

Standards in Key Stage 4 are above average in most respects, but not for the proportion of students gaining five or more A* to C grades including English and mathematics. Students make good progress overall. However, progress has been low in English for several years and was exceptionally low in 2006. This was largely due to staffing difficulties. The school has this year made significant improvements in English provision and current students are on course to reach satisfactory results. During the inspection, the progress seen in English lessons was good. The school sets challenging targets and met them in 2006 in Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4.

In the sixth form, students' attainment on entry is broadly average, although the school has a policy of open access and provides for students with a wide range of needs and abilities. Students make satisfactory progress and achieve average standards in A-level and vocational subjects.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Students' personal development is good. They enjoy school and this is demonstrated by their regular attendance. Students' attitudes are very positive and they take part enthusiastically in the many enrichment activities available to them. They demonstrate their concern for others by engaging in many charitable activities. This results in a welcoming and safe community which helps students to develop the skills and attitudes appropriate for responsible citizenship. Students' social and moral development is good, as is the behaviour of the vast majority both inside and outside the school. The school works hard to maintain the small number of students who present challenging behaviour in full-time education and the number of exclusions has reduced. This is because of effective support and an adapted curriculum leading to fuller engagement in the classroom. Spiritual and cultural development is good, and students develop a good awareness of different beliefs and cultures. High participation rates in sporting activities help to develop a healthy lifestyle as does an understanding of healthy eating. Students' basic and work-related skills provide a good base for their future working lives. The contribution of students to the school and wider community is outstanding. Many older students help to run enrichment activities, support staff in classrooms or act as mentors to younger students.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

The quality of teaching and learning is good and contributes well to students' enjoyment and good progress. Typically, lessons are carefully planned to present students with interesting and challenging learning activities that stimulate their imagination. Learning objectives are made clear and questioning is used effectively to consolidate students' understanding and extend their thinking. These lessons proceed at a good pace and demand high levels of concentration. Because the vast majority of students appreciate the efforts of their teachers to make learning interesting and enjoyable, good behaviour and positive attitudes are features of most lessons. This is contributing, in particular, to the better progress students are now making in English. In a few lessons, progress is slowed because too much teacher led activity leads to a lack of variety and pace. Assessment is used very effectively to plan lessons and to identify and share learning targets. Through marking, many teachers ensure that students have a clear understanding of how to improve the quality of their work, but this is not consistent across all subjects. Good planning and effective support from teaching assistants ensure that students with learning difficulties and disabilities participate fully in lessons.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The curriculum is good both in the main school and in the sixth form. The curriculum allows students to follow increasingly flexible programmes of study that are well suited to their individual needs. This is helping to raise achievement and better prepare students for their future economic well-being, and is supported by a particularly good range of vocational courses. While the impact of these developments has yet to be fully seen in examination results, the positive impact is already seen in the fuller engagement of students for whom the more academic GCSE courses are not appropriate. The needs of students with learning difficulties and the very few from black and minority ethnic groups are very carefully considered. This has a positive impact on the progress that all groups of students make. A well constructed personal, social and health education course contributes successfully to students' understanding of responsible citizenship. This is an improvement from the last inspection. There is a good range of visits and visitors to school to extend learning and a very wide range of extra-curricular activities. This benefits students' social, physical and academic development enormously. The school plans to create additional opportunities and raise achievement further through its recently gained specialist status in mathematics and computing.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 2

As at the time of the last inspection, the care, guidance and support provided for students is an outstanding strength of the school. Because there is a genuine concern for the needs of individuals, students feel that they are respected and valued. This makes a significant contribution to their good progress. Staff know students well and provide them with excellent personal support. As a result, students trust adults and feel very secure in school. Good links with the middle schools ensure students' transfer is, as one parent wrote, 'a smooth and easy transition'. The school makes all the required checks to ensure the safety and protection of students. Support and guidance for students' academic development are very effective. Their progress towards their targets is monitored carefully to identify and act on potential underachievement. This is, for example, contributing to the better progress students are now making in English. Students say that they receive good guidance on the options available to them in Year 10 and in the sixth form. Students with learning difficulties and disabilities, vulnerable students and the gifted and talented are very well supported. This underpins the good and sometimes very good progress these students are making. The school works closely with parents, carers and a range of external agencies to maximise students' learning at school.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

The leadership and management of the school are good with some very strong features. The outstanding leadership of the headteacher, with very effective support from other members of the senior leadership team, ensures that this is an inclusive school and one with a clear sense

of direction. The willingness to be innovative, as seen in the recent achievement of mathematics and computing specialist status, for example, is an indication of the school's ambitions for future improvement and determination to raise standards further. Systematic reviews of performance, together with rigorous evaluation procedures, provide an accurate view of the school's effectiveness. These have underpinned the improvement in the school's performance, and in particular the improvement in students' progress seen in English.

Middle management is good, with examples of highly effective management in some areas. Professional development is valued and used effectively to sustain the drive for improvement. In this, the school's activities as a training school are making a significant contribution to the development of teaching and learning. School governance is very strong. Governors are capably fulfilling their strategic role in guiding the school's work and providing challenge for further improvement. Financial management is good and resources are managed well. Provision is enhanced by the school's good links with other schools, colleges, businesses and the community.

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Annex A

Inspection judgements

<i>Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate</i>	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?	2	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	3
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	3
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	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 behaviour of learners	2	
The attendance of learners	2	
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	1	
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	3
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?	1	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	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	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	

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

30 April 2007

Dear Students

Inspection of Stratton Upper School and Community College, Biggleswade, SG18 8JB

Following our visit to inspect your school, I am now writing to tell you what we found out. Before I do, I would like to say thank you for making us feel so welcome. We have told your teachers how you were all helpful, and, through our discussions with you, it was good to hear how much you enjoy school and the many after-school clubs and other activities that are available for you.

Our main finding is that this is a good school and one that is helping you to do well. You told us how you generally find your lessons challenging, but enjoyable, and how this helps those of you in the main school to make good progress, and sixth form students to achieve their potential. The care and support the school provides are excellent and this is particularly true for those of you who may be experiencing difficulties. There is a really friendly and positive atmosphere in the school and relationships between yourselves and the staff are very good. The vast majority of you behave well in lessons and this is a considerable help to your teachers because it enables them to concentrate on helping you to learn.

The staff and governors are united in their commitment to improve the school's work still further and we have suggested three ways in which this can be helped. Much has been done to raise the GCSE examination results in English and we have asked the school to make sure that this continues. We have asked that the good guidance you receive through the marking of your work in some subjects can be extended across the school. This will also mean you taking even more notice of the advice that teachers give you! We have also asked the school to provide additional management support in the sixth form.

Thank you very much once again for the important part that you played in this inspection, and the very best of luck with your future studies and career plans.

Yours sincerely

Dr Kenneth C Thomas Lead Inspector