

The Bulmershe School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	110062
Local Authority	Wokingham Borough Council
Inspection number	310193
Inspection dates	8–9 October 2008
Reporting inspector	Peter Gale 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	11–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1123
Sixth form	189
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs S Squires
Headteacher	Mr P Lewis
Date of previous school inspection	8 November 2004
School address	Chequers Way Woodley Reading RG5 3EL
Telephone number	01189 353353
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Age group	11–19
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

The Bulmershe School is a little larger than the average secondary school. The percentage of students eligible for free school meals is below that found nationally. The percentage of students identified by the school as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities is above the national average. The range includes those who have moderate learning difficulties, emotional and behavioural difficulties and specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia. There is a specialist unit for ten students with dyslexia. The majority of students are of white British ethnic origin. A third comes from a wide range of other ethnic groups and twice the national average have English as an additional language. The number of students transferring to and from the school other than at the planned time of admission in September is higher than the national average. The school works as a specialist Sports College and has gained the Healthy schools award, the Eco Schools Award, Sportsmark, Artsmark Silver and is a Creative Partnerships' Change School. Bulmershe has Investors in People accreditation.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

The Bulmershe School provides its students with a satisfactory standard of education. Senior leaders and managers have, through monitoring and evaluations gained a sound understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses and are now targeting the areas requiring improvement. There have been some recent successes. Effective targeting of attendance in recent years has seen it rise to just below the national average and a new points-based behaviour system has had a positive impact according to students. However, the leadership team recognise there is still much to do. An inclusive ethos and effective work with school partners has resulted in a harmonious community where students from different backgrounds report feeling well cared for.

Students' standards at the end of Key Stage 4 are close to the national average. They are below on measures like five or more A* to C grades and slightly above when English and mathematics are included. Standards vary from year to year because of significant variation in the ability of the intakes. Achievement by the last two Year 11 cohorts has been inadequate in Key Stage 4, after a period of stronger performance. This was due to the school not keeping pace with a changing profile of students entering the school and more students transferring to and from the school than is usual. Recruitment difficulties in some subject areas and the inconsistent quality of teaching across the school coupled with behaviour management difficulties meant that progress was uneven. The school has worked hard to improve behaviour and this is now good around the site although in less engaging lessons disruption of learning can take place. Inspection evidence including lesson observation, GCSE module examinations and school tracking data show that progress in Key Stage 4 is satisfactory for current students. Progress during Key Stage 3 has been, and continues to be, faster than in Key Stage 4. Progress for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is satisfactory overall. Those with specific learning difficulties make faster progress than those with emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Students feel they are well supported and speak of good relationships with their peers and teachers. However, the academic guidance they receive, while good in some areas, is inconsistent across the school with new target-setting procedures inconsistently embedded. As a result, some students are unclear about what they need to do to improve. Students know how to stay healthy and enjoy taking part in extra-curricular sport. They feel safe, are orderly around the school and report that there is little bullying. Enjoyment of school is linked closely to engagement in lessons with younger students more enthusiastic about their experience. Students are keen to contribute to the school community and help others by activities like mentoring younger peers. Preparation for future employment or further education is satisfactory.

Teaching and learning are satisfactory. However, lessons are generally too teacher directed. When this happens, too few opportunities for students to work independently occur and the pace of learning drops with work not matched to individual need. In good lessons, challenge for all students is higher and they make faster progress because tasks are better matched to their ability. From 2007 the Year 9 curriculum was modified to address different needs and rates of student progress and the curriculum has been further altered at Key Stage 4 following recent drops in students' rates of progress. It now provides three different pathways for students to follow based on their prior attainment. However, these changes and others developing learning skills in Key Stage 3 are too recent to have had a clear impact on students' achievements although there is evidence of faster progress. The school's specialist status has had a limited impact on raising the quality of teaching and students' achievement. However, it has been used

to enhance the curriculum, improve resources and increase the school's engagement with the local community.

Leadership and management are satisfactory. Key priorities are shared through the school development plan. However, inconsistencies in departmental planning and an influx of new leaders mean that there is not a clear consensus on the most efficient way to achieve them. Self-evaluation of areas of the school's work, such as the quality of teaching and learning, has been accurate overall. However, they are based on student outcomes rather than a forensic analysis of the effectiveness of provision. Governors provide thoughtful support and they and the school leadership have been effective in building a cohesive school community. This, coupled with improvements since the last inspection and the stabilisation of the rate of progress in Key Stage 4, demonstrates satisfactory capacity for further improvement.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Individual subject and vocational areas achieved good results in 2007 and 2008 and overall standards in the sixth form are at the national average. Students achieve well from below average starting points. The school has an open access policy and welcomes students from a wide range of backgrounds and potential. Students are well guided and supported by the tutor system. Most students stay on into Year 13 and more are choosing to continue their education at university. Students contribute well to their own and the wider community and have a strong sense of ownership. They say that they love their sixth form but relaxed attitudes to attendance and punctuality by a minority of students reveal that personal development is satisfactory overall. Teaching and learning are good. Individual teachers are very knowledgeable in their subject areas, provide good feedback to students on their progress and encourage them to learn independently. However, in a few lessons, there is little opportunity for individual or group work and teaching does not provide sufficient challenge for all students. Students value the individual support provided in small teaching groups. The curriculum is satisfactory and enhanced by an enrichment programme in Year 12. A good range of academic and vocational courses is available and students can progress from vocational business studies courses in Year 11. The school offers other vocational courses but these have not been successful in attracting students. The director of the sixth form and his deputy provide effective leadership and ensure that provision is reviewed regularly. They are aware of the need to expand provision to meet the needs of a changing profile of students and to improve 14-19 pathways.

What the school should do to improve further

- Thoroughly evaluate the impact of new initiatives on student progress to develop a common understanding among leaders at all levels of the most efficient ways for the school to target underachievement.
- Match work in lessons more appropriately to individual need and ensure that students consistently make good progress.
- Ensure that target setting and academic guidance through student tracking and intervention, are effective in boosting achievement, particularly in Key Stage 4.

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

Students enter Bulmershe with standards that are below average. They make satisfactory progress overall in Key Stage 3, with progress faster in English than in mathematics or science. Progress in Key Stage 4 was inadequate for the students who took their GCSE examinations in 2007 and school data demonstrates that this has remained the case for those completing Year 11 in 2008. This has been due to the school being slow to react to a changing student profile and failing to change teaching methods and intervention strategies to target underachievement effectively. Following the 2007 results more effective tracking and intervention was put in place and this coupled with improved learning in lessons means that for current students progress in Key Stage 4 is currently satisfactory. Standards in the specialist subject of physical education (PE) are high but, as yet, not impacting on other curriculum areas. Standards as measured by student GCSE results and levels at the end of Key Stage 3 are close to the national average.

Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, when taken as a whole, make satisfactory progress during their time in the school. Those with specific learning difficulties and attending the dyslexia unit make good progress due to the good specialist support they receive. Those with emotional and behavioural difficulties make relatively slower progress. Increasingly effective specialist support for the growing number of students with English as an additional language means that these students are making satisfactory but accelerating rates of progress.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 3

Students have a low tolerance of bullying and racism and have a respectful attitude to people of other cultures. Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. They are able to take an active part in assemblies and are able, for example, to reflect on how people have used poetry to transcend suffering. Students' enjoyment of school is satisfactory. Most enjoy their education and are engaged in those lessons where they are actively involved and challenged. The school has put a great deal of effort into improving behaviour and attendance and both are improving. Some students, who are not engaged in lessons, still interfere with the learning of others. Absence rates have reduced over the last three years but remain slightly below national averages. Students move around the building sensibly and use the school's resources safely. Many students take advantage of the many extra-curricular opportunities, particularly in sports, and the participation rates are high. The school has gained Healthy School accreditation and students support the move to healthy eating in the school canteen. Students' views are taken seriously. Opportunities to contribute to the school community through the school council and house system are accepted enthusiastically by some students. Older students mentor vulnerable or troubled youngsters. Beyond the school community, students work in the local special school and in primaries as, for example, sports coaches. There is an effective citizenship programme and forty students enter the subject for GCSE. The school recognises that development of work-related learning is required in Key Stage 3 and overall preparation for future economic wellbeing is satisfactory.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

The school has recognised that some poor behaviour in lessons was restricting the learning of students. The school has introduced a new behaviour system, which has resulted in lessons being calmer and most students focusing on their work. However, the number of good lessons is still too low to improve the achievement of all learners. Students respond to well-paced and challenging tasks and activities, which involve them in their learning. For example, an inspector observed a teacher making good use of students' oral responses, through peer evaluation, to develop their literacy skills and help them to have a better understanding of how to improve. Students say they enjoy lessons where they are actively involved. The impact of specialist sports status can be seen through improved resources including the increased availability of computers and smart boards across the curriculum. Staff training has improved their use in developing learning and hence faster progress. There are too many lessons where students engage in work less readily because there has not been a matching of activities to their individual needs. This generally results in some progress for all students but the challenge and pace of learning is too low. Many parents are aware that the quality of teaching and learning is variable across the school and they link good progress to stable staffing. The quality of marking and verbal feedback is inconsistent and does not always enable students to know how well they are doing or how to improve their work.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

The school has recognised that the curriculum has not adequately taken account of the changing needs of its students over recent years. This means that some students are not achieving as well as they are capable. As a result, the school has developed its curriculum in Year 9 from 2007 and has planned changes to its option pathways in Years 10 and 11 from this year. Students in Year 10 are now on one of three pathways according to their prior learning and specific needs. This arrangement enables them to make option choices from a good range of subjects, both traditional GCSEs, vocational courses at the local college and in school vocational courses. In addition, all students have PE and religious studies lessons and an effective personal development programme, delivered by the physical education department. The school has also made changes in Years 7 to 9, which are intended to better prepare them for Years 10 and 11. It has introduced a cross-curriculum programme, which helps students to open their minds to learning by project work. This links subjects together and is beginning to improve students' learning skills. Citizenship has a good focus within the personal, social and health education programme and students value this work. A strength of the curriculum is the wide range of well attended enrichment activities that take place after school. Students with English as an additional language are given separate dedicated support within the curriculum in order to ensure that they are able to access their curriculum fully. Changes to the curriculum are only recent and, whilst there is evidence of improving achievement, the impact is yet to be evaluated.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

The school has an effective system of pastoral care in place. One older student commented, 'you do not go unnoticed'. One parent responded, 'Every child does matter' recognising the

school's very inclusive approach to education. Students have adults and older students they can approach, if they are having difficulties. A student with a history of relationship problems commented positively on the support he had received since transferring from primary school. The systems for tracking the progress of students are yet to be embedded fully. Most students know the level they are working at and the level they are targeting. The advice they receive from subject teachers remains variable. The mechanism for setting targets for individuals has changed recently and there remains some lack of clarity about the process. Procedures for safeguarding are satisfactory. Provision for vulnerable students and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is good and means they do at least as well as their peers and in many cases achieve beyond expectations. Transition arrangements from secondary to primary are good and the new Year 7 feel welcomed and well supported. The guidance for students transferring to the sixth form has been less effective with some students taking courses where they failed to gain accreditation. This is being addressed with a new GCSE points system for entry to the sixth form.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

The headteacher and senior team have focused well on developing a cohesive and inclusive community at Bulmershe school by valuing every student. Accurate analysis of student examination data has led to identification of some underachievement. Strategies have been put in place to attempt to address this over the last few years. Unfortunately, these have not always been successful. The senior team's vision of the development of the school, established through school planning, is the starting point for leadership at all levels. However, there is still some inconsistency in how the plans of different departments reflect this vision. This means not all leaders have a shared understanding of the most efficient ways to achieve desired improvements. The monitoring and assessment of the effectiveness of teaching and learning have been over generous due to too little focus on the quality of learning taking place. Challenging targets have been established for all students and these are beginning to have an impact on student progress. However, recent changes in target setting procedure mean the systems are not consistently embedded across the school. Governors are effectively supporting the school and increasingly involved in the monitoring of the work of departments. There is now more scope for them to challenge rates of student progress. The school has been effective in promoting equality of opportunity and eliminating discrimination as evidenced by its good relations with all parts of its increasingly diverse community.

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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	2
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	3	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	3	

¹Grade 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.

Personal development and well-being

How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	3	3
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	
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	3	
The attendance of learners	3	
The behaviour of learners	3	
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 learners' needs?	3	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	3	3
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	3	2

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	3	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	2	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	2	
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	3	
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**

22 October 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of The Bulmershe School, Reading, RG5 3EL

Thank you for the warm welcome you gave to the inspection team when we visited your school recently. We enjoyed being in your lessons, meeting with you and were impressed by the pride many of you take in your school.

These are the main findings of our inspection.

- The Bulmershe School provides you with a satisfactory standard of education.
- You are currently making satisfactory progress in your learning but this is inconsistent across the school.
- We agree with the school that the majority of lessons are satisfactory.
- The school makes use of Sports College status to develop your curriculum and provide lots of extra-curricular opportunities.
- The headteacher and the senior team have worked hard to develop a cohesive community by caring about you as individuals and tackling discrimination.
- There are good opportunities for you to be healthy and make a positive contribution to the community.
- The school works well with its partners to support your well-being.
- Those of you that enter the sixth form make good progress.

The inspection team and the headteacher agree that you could achieve higher standards and we have asked that:

- all school leaders develop a clear and shared understanding of the best ways for you to make faster progress
- teachers deliver more lessons that are matched to your needs and interests so that you make faster progress
- the way the school sets your targets and helps you to achieve them boosts your results at the end of Key Stage 4.

You can do your part to help by ensuring that you always come to school when you can and work hard when you are there. Some of you could make sure that you behave as well in lessons as you do around the site so as not to disrupt learning. The team joins me in sending you best wishes for your studies and the hope that you all do very well in the future.

Yours sincerely

Peter Gale

Her Majesty's Inspector