

Reading Girls' School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	110096
Local Authority	Reading
Inspection number	310206
Inspection dates	8–9 October 2008
Reporting inspector	Janet Mercer HMI

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

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Girls
Number on roll	
School (total)	693
Sixth form	63
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Peter Kayes
Headteacher	Mrs Viv Angus (Acting)
Date of previous school inspection	27 June 2006
School address	Northumberland Avenue Reading RG2 7PY
Telephone number	0118 986 1336
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Introduction

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

Description of the school

Reading Girls' School is a smaller than average comprehensive school, serving an area in south Reading where levels of social and economic deprivation are higher than average. Over half the girls come from minority ethnic backgrounds. The largest ethnic groups, after White British, are Pakistani and Black African. Whilst a quarter of the students have English as an additional language, only a few girls are at the early stages of learning English.

The proportion identified with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is below average, whilst the proportion of those with statements of special educational needs is around average. The school caters for students with specific and moderate learning difficulties as well as those who have emotional and behavioural difficulties. There are partnership arrangements with Kendrick Girls' Grammar school, which is a 'soft federation', and with Thames Valley University. The school was awarded specialist status in business and enterprise in September 2007.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

Reading Girls' school provides a satisfactory standard of education for its students. The school has experienced a period of considerable change in the past 18 months, with changes in leadership, and some difficulties in recruiting and retaining teaching staff in key posts and core subjects. Despite these difficulties, the acting headteacher and the management team have been successful in improving the school's GCSE results in 2008. The school achieved its best results ever, with the proportion of students achieving five or more A* to C grades including English and mathematics in line with the national average. This shows that student achievement is now satisfactory in Year 11.

Up to 2007, students made good progress in Years 7 to 9. However, results in national tests in Year 9 declined and the school did not achieve its targets last year. Managers acknowledge that, while focusing strongly on student performance in Key Stage 4, they 'took their eye off the ball' at Key Stage 3. Staff shortages hampered the school's ability to provide additional classes and targeted support for Year 9 students last year. The school is taking appropriate steps to improve results in Key Stage 3 and to maintain the improved performance in Key Stage 4.

Teaching and learning are satisfactory overall. The school has placed a lot of importance on improving the consistency of teaching and was able to demonstrate improvements over the last year. However, the significant numbers of new staff joining the school each year means that it is difficult to maintain and build on these improvements. It has proved particularly difficult to recruit and retain teachers in some core subjects, such as English, mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT). Students and parents have expressed concerns about the variability of the quality of teaching, and inspectors observed both very good and some unsatisfactory teaching.

The majority of students enjoy their work and other activities that the school offers. The increasing range of vocational courses is effective in meeting students' different needs, interests and abilities. The school makes good use of its partnership arrangements to broaden the choice available at Key stage 4 and in the sixth form. The recently awarded specialist status is beginning to increase the range of enterprise activities and teachers are increasingly incorporating aspects of the specialism into their lessons.

Pastoral care is good and students feel well supported and cared for. Good use is made of external agencies to support and mentor students. Vulnerable students and those with learning difficulties receive good support. Whilst there are procedures for setting students targets and monitoring their progress, they are not consistently applied across all subjects. As a result, students often know their targets but not what they need to do to improve.

Managers are very clearly focused on, and committed to, securing further improvements. They are open and frank about the school's strengths and areas requiring further improvement. There are appropriate systems in place for monitoring and evaluating the quality of provision, although these have not always been sufficiently well targeted to bring about improvements. The analysis of the findings of monitoring and evaluation has not been detailed or precise enough to identify the specific actions needed to drive improvement. However, the improvements in Key Stage 4 last year demonstrate that the school's ability to implement effective improvement strategies and that there is capacity to achieve further improvement.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

The quality of provision in the sixth form is satisfactory. Students' prior attainment when they join the sixth form is lower than that seen nationally and they make satisfactory progress. Pass rates in A-level examinations are generally good but, although AS-level pass rates improved in 2008, they remained below national average. Students who take level 2 vocational courses achieved good results, especially in childcare and travel and tourism, where a high proportion of students gained distinction grades.

The small number of students in the sixth form restricts the range of subjects the school can offer, but it makes good use of partnership arrangements with local schools and colleges to extend the range of courses students can choose. There are well-developed plans to develop the vocational offer further through collaboration with a local further education provider. Building work for a new vocational centre on the school site has just begun.

Students speak positively about their experiences in the sixth form and the opportunities they have to be involved in the wider school community, for example by supporting and mentoring younger students. They also organise events in the local community and raise funds for charity. They feel well supported by their teachers, who know them well and help them to improve their work. In the best lessons, students are encouraged to think for themselves and work independently, but in some subjects, smaller class sizes restrict opportunities for group work and discussion. Students receive appropriate support and guidance to help them progress to further or higher education or employment.

Managers have a clear understanding of strengths and areas for further development in the sixth form and have already brought about improvements to the curriculum and assessment and tracking of student progress.

What the school should do to improve further

- Review strategies for the recruitment and retention of teachers to ensure greater continuity of staffing.
- Ensure all teachers implement consistently the agreed procedures for assessing students' performance, so that they know how to improve.
- Ensure that the findings of the school's monitoring and evaluation of performance are used effectively to drive improvement.

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

The school's intake varies widely in ability. Many girls have below average attainment when they join the school, but the school also has a selective stream of higher ability girls. Students usually make good progress in Years 7 to 9 and their attainment at the start of Key Stage 4 is in line with the national average. The school recognised that students had been making less progress than they should during Years 10 and 11. In 2007/08 managers implemented an effective improvement strategy, which raised achievement and standards at GCSE in 2008. Girls in the top sets achieved very good results in GCSE English and mathematics.

The achievement of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is generally better than that of White British students. Managers have identified areas where White British students are doing less well than they should and are implementing strategies for improvement that have already proved successful in Key Stage 4 last year.

Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those with statements of special educational needs make satisfactory progress. The recently appointed inclusion manager has a good understanding of their individual needs and is ensuring that they receive appropriate support. Students who speak English as an additional language often achieve better results than others in the school.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 3

Personal development is satisfactory. Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is satisfactory. The personal development programme and a range of themed assemblies ensure that students have an understanding of social and moral issues. For example, they develop effective strategies to help them cope with personal relationships and issues such as drug and alcohol abuse.

Students understand the contribution that other faiths and cultures make to society. This contributes to what students describe as a generally supportive atmosphere in the school where students get on well together and help each other. They understand the importance of health and environmental issues and how to be safe in school and the wider environment.

Inspectors found behaviour in lessons and around the school to be good and students were generally polite and courteous. Occasionally, behaviour in lessons disrupts learning, where students are not engaged or behavioural issues are not well managed.

Although there is a student council, students said they would like more opportunities to express their views. There are some good examples of students working well within the wider community for example by fundraising for the school and a range of charities. Work experience and school placements help to ensure that they are confident and prepared for the post-16 education, training or employment.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Good relationships between staff and students ensure that most girls feel confident and enthusiastic about their learning. Most lessons are well planned and subject knowledge is secure. The focus for each session is shared with the students, ensuring that learning intentions are clear. In the best lessons, the pace of learning is good and there is a calm and purposeful atmosphere. Work is planned to meet the needs of all the students and questioning is used well to engage them fully in their learning. This was evident in a good textiles lesson where the teacher explained exactly what the girls had to do to achieve a particular part of their GCSE and what they would be learning as a result of completing the task.

Good use is made of teaching assistants to support those students who find learning more challenging. When teachers take too long over explanations, students do not learn as well as they could because the pace is too slow. In weaker lessons, behaviour management is not always

effective. There are missed learning opportunities when questioning techniques are not used effectively to draw out students' knowledge and understanding. Students commented on inconsistencies in assessment and feedback. This was not always sufficiently detailed to help students improve their work.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

The curriculum meets the needs and interests of the vast majority of students. In Years 7 to 9, it is broad and balanced and fulfils all statutory requirements. Provision is made to stretch the most able students and, in Years 10 and 11, there is an increasing range of vocational and work-related provision. The school has successfully introduced a range of BTEC vocational courses and creative timetabling has ensured that students who attend college do not miss out on those subjects studied back in school.

Although at an early stage of development, the school's specialist status is beginning to widen choice successfully. A new diploma in business, administration and finance is planned and a variety of enterprise activities takes place throughout the curriculum.

Students are appreciative of the wide range of extra-curricular activities on offer both before and after school, though they feel these are not always well organised. The school does not yet routinely monitor participation or attendance at these sessions. Monitoring of the impact of new curriculum developments remains under-developed.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

Whilst care and support for students are good, the consistency of academic guidance needs further improvement to raise students' achievement. Pastoral care is effective, although a relatively new team of leaders of learning are still developing their role within the school. Good arrangements for transition from primary school helped Year 7 students to settle in well this year. Attendance has improved because of the increasing rigour of the school's systems for monitoring absence. Parents are made very clear about the importance of regular attendance in promoting learning. In a few lessons observed, students did not always arrive punctually for the start of the lesson. Requirements for safeguarding students and ensuring their welfare are fully met.

Extra provision is made for students who need learning support and those whose needs cannot be met in lessons. The development of appropriate literacy skills for some students is still a priority for the school, and managers are developing strategies to improve this. Students receive good guidance when choosing subjects to study at Key Stage 4 and a good range of information about college courses and employment opportunities available to them after Year 11.

Procedures for academic guidance are sound and information about student performance and potential is readily available. The school has introduced half-termly progress checks, but the implementation of systems for setting targets and monitoring progress is not consistent across subjects and all teachers.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

The highly committed acting headteacher and her temporary leadership team are working tirelessly to ensure that the students achieve as well as they can. More rigorous use of data on student achievement has enabled the school to set appropriate targets and ensured that intervention has been well targeted to improve results. Priority has been rightly placed on the recruitment of suitably qualified staff to meet the demands of the curriculum, although this has remained a challenge for management.

School improvement planning focuses on bringing about change but the recently re-structured management team has not yet developed a fully co-ordinated approach. The accountability of middle leaders is at an early stage of development. Lesson observations provide a satisfactory indication of the quality of teaching. However, the information gained from monitoring the quality of provision has not yet been used fully to bring about improvements.

Governors take a keen interest in the school and ensure statutory requirements are met. They are knowledgeable about its day-to-day life and this enables them to act as effective critical friends. Finances and resources are managed prudently, particularly in relation to reducing the budget deficit.

Students say that the school creates a harmonious environment and they get on well and help each other. The curriculum provides opportunities for students to develop their understanding of issues facing communities across the world, but the school has not yet thoroughly evaluated how well it promotes community cohesion.

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	3	3

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/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	3	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	3	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	3	
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	3	
The attendance of learners	3	
The behaviour of learners	2	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	3	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	3
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	3

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	3	3
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	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	3	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	3	
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 Reading Girls' School, Reading, RG2 7PY

On behalf of the inspectors who visited your school recently, I would like to thank you for making us so welcome and helping us with the inspection. We enjoyed meeting and talking to you, in your lessons and around the school. Many of you and your parents/carers spoke positively about the school. We have taken these views into account in arriving at our judgement that the school is providing a satisfactory standard of education.

Last year the school was successful in raising achievement and standards in Key Stage 4, and had the best set of GCSE results ever in 2008. However, students did not do so well in their tests in year 9 last year. We have asked the school to make sure they monitor performance closely and use the findings to bring about improvements.

We were impressed by your good behaviour around the school, although there are still times when a few students misbehave in lessons and this can affect everyone's learning. You behave well when lessons are well taught and capture your interest. Attendance has improved, but in a few lessons observed, not all students were punctual and this can waste a lot of time.

The school has had difficulties recently in recruiting teachers for some subject areas, and some of you told us about variations in teaching and assessment. We have recommended that the school reviews its policies for recruiting staff to try to ensure greater continuity and consistency in the quality of teaching. Most of you are aware of your targets but are sometimes less clear about what you need to do to improve your work. We have asked the school to make sure all teachers use assessment information well to set targets and monitor your progress closely in all subjects.

The increasing range of vocational courses in Years 10 and 11 and the sixth form is helping to meet different students' interests and abilities. Many of you join in extra curricular activities after school or at lunchtimes, but you thought these could be better organised.

Managers have a good understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement and are committed to improving the school further to give you all the best opportunities possible to do well. You told us that you would welcome more opportunities to express your views and contribute to the school's development. I hope you will all be able to contribute to making your school a good school in the future.

Yours sincerely

Janet Mercer

Her Majesty's Inspector