

The Downs School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	110102
Local Authority	West Berkshire
Inspection number	310208
Inspection dates	21–22 November 2007
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	11–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	973
6th form	169
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Debbie Browne
Headteacher	Mrs Valerie Houldey
Date of previous school inspection	24 February 2004
School address	Manor Crescent Compton Newbury RG20 6NU
Telephone number	01635 270000
Fax number	01635 579084

Age group	11-19
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Introduction

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

Description of the school

The Downs School is an average sized comprehensive school in the rural community of Compton, West Berkshire. The school gained specialist language status in 2003 and runs some extended services to support families in a sparsely populated rural area. The proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds or who speak English as an additional language is lower than average. The proportion of students with learning difficulties or disabilities is lower than the average. The number of children eligible for free school meals is low.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

The Downs School is a good school with outstanding features. The majority of students enjoy school and make good progress academically. Their personal development is outstanding. The promotion of equal opportunities and respect for each individual is at the heart of the school ethos. Parents are very supportive of the school, which has a high reputation in the local area and is oversubscribed.

Academic standards are above average. The results in national tests in English, mathematics and science in Year 9 were very high in 2007 and have been above average for each of the last few years. The proportion of students who achieve 5 or more passes at A*-C is above average. In 2007 the proportion achieving 5 or more passes at A*-C including English and mathematics increased further and was well above average. The school has identified a few areas where students with lower than average prior attainment are not making as much progress as they could in Years 10 and 11, and are closely monitoring achievements at student and department levels. Sixth form students make good progress and pass rates in most AS and A-level subjects are high. The proportion achieving A and B grades in Year 13 is well above average.

The school has a strong focus on developing the whole individual and students' personal development and emotional well-being are outstanding. They take pride in their school and show mutual respect and consideration for others. They are courteous, very well behaved and attendance is good. Many students make a positive contribution to the school and wider community, for example through peer mentoring programmes, prefect roles and involvement in local community events. The school's modern language specialism strengthens their understanding of different cultures and many students participate in trips abroad.

Students respond well to the good teaching in the school and most participate enthusiastically in lessons. This contributes to the good progress made by most. However, not all teachers make effective use of assessment information to plan work which meets the needs of all students. The curriculum meets the needs of the majority of students well, and students are well-motivated by interesting topics and assignments. The school now offers a very wide choice of modern languages in addition to the main curriculum in French, German and Spanish. For example, Russian, Japanese, Mandarin and Arabic are offered in response to students' requests. Sixth form students can choose from a good range of AS and A-level subjects and a small, but growing, range of vocational courses.

Care, guidance and support are outstanding. The majority of students and parents speak highly of the individual support provided, and the way in which the school strives to meet the needs of all students. Many parents have said how effectively the school helps Year 7 students to settle into school quickly. There is good additional learning support, and highly effective intervention strategies to improve reading skills. This helped some students with statements of special educational needs to make exceptional progress last year. Career education and guidance provides very good support for students to move into further or higher education and employment and progression rates in Year 11 and 13 are very good.

The leadership team have a very clear focus on improving standards and raising achievement, and their vision for the school is well supported by governors and shared by staff throughout the school. Managers make excellent use of available data to identify any areas of underperformance and to target effective actions to secure improvement. The intervention work at Key Stage 3 has been very effective in further improving test results and this work is

now being extended to Key Stage 4, where managers have identified some small pockets of underperformance. The self-evaluation of the school's performance is rigorous and self critical and very accurate in its judgements. Areas for further improvement are clearly identified and clear priorities set. This contributes to the good capacity for further improvement.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The quality of provision in the sixth form is good. Care, guidance and support are outstanding and this contributes to the students' outstanding personal development. There are many opportunities for students to take leadership roles and make a very positive contribution to the school and wider community. This helps develop confidence and prepares them well for moving on to higher education or employment. They develop excellent personal and social skills and achieve well academically. Students speak very positively about their experiences in the sixth form and being treated as adults.

Good teaching and support from teachers help students to become independent learners and achieve well. Pass rates in most AS and A-level subjects are high, and many students achieve higher grade passes. In 2007 pass rates in AS critical thinking and psychology were low. The school has identified that some teaching did not fully meet course requirements and is taking appropriate action to secure improvement.

The curriculum offers a good range of AS and A-level subjects, and the school has extended this range in response to students' interests and requests. There is a small, but growing, provision for vocational courses at level 2, designed to meet the needs of those students not yet ready for advanced level study. Students on these programmes achieve well, including gaining useful additional qualifications in literacy, numeracy and managing money. The school recognises the need to develop the vocational provision further to enable more students in Year 11 to progress to the school sixth form.

Leadership and management are good. Recent changes have strengthened individual roles and accountabilities and each year head has responsibility for monitoring progress and student achievement.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise achievement at Key Stage 4, particularly for students with lower prior attainment.
- Ensure teachers make better use of assessment information to plan work to meet individual students' needs.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Students join the school with prior attainment which is a little above average and make good progress throughout the school. They achieve particularly well in Key Stage 3, with the results in national tests in Year 9 being consistently above average.

In 2005/06 students' progress in Years 10 and 11 was satisfactory. Progress in English was less than expected. School data for 2006/07 show some improvement in levels of progress, particularly in English. The school's tracking of current Year 11 students indicates that standards

are rising and students are making better progress than the previous year group. Most are now making good progress.

The school has identified that some boys in Year 11 with average or below average prior attainment did not make sufficient progress and this is a key priority for improvement. Teachers and managers are monitoring progress towards targets closely and supporting any students at risk of underachieving.

Almost all students take at least one GCSE in a foreign language, which is a much higher than proportion than seen in most secondary schools. Achievement overall in modern languages is satisfactory. The more able language students who took GCSE French at the end of Year 9 achieved well.

Students with learning difficulties or disabilities make good progress overall and those with statements of special educational needs made outstanding progress in 2006/07.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Students work very well together and with adults. Social, moral, spiritual and cultural development are outstanding. The vast majority make healthy choices for eating and take regular exercise. The student council has developed an exemplary anti-bullying policy; as a result, students feel safe from bullying and harassment. All know an adult whom they can consult if they need to. They adopt safe procedures in workshops and laboratories and outdoors.

Many take responsibility as peer mentors, prefects and leaders of house activities and competitions including sports, music and drama. Through these, younger students learn very well from older ones. Some students have initiated charity fundraising events. They develop workplace skills very well through effective work experience, good literacy and numeracy skills. Large numbers of students participate in links with other countries and local businesses.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Relationships between teachers and students are overwhelmingly positive and almost all students are well motivated. As a result, they make good progress in their learning.

Teachers use their very good subject knowledge effectively. They often use challenging questioning to focus students' thinking and to help them deepen their understanding. A range of strategies is used well to involve students in their learning. For example, collaborative work in a history lesson enabled students of different prior attainment to share ideas and challenge each other's thinking. As a result, they made outstanding progress. In a few cases, however, there is an over-reliance on teacher talk and insufficient use is made of strategies such as questioning, discussion, role play and group work.

Lessons are well planned and, in the best cases, teachers identify very clearly what students are intended to learn. In some instances learning outcomes are either not precise enough or they identify what students will do rather than learn. The quality of marking is often good but

is inconsistent. Written feedback does not always help students to know what they need to do to improve.

Assessment systems are secure and good information is collected about students' achievements. Not all teachers use this information well to match work carefully to the needs of different students.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The curriculum is broad and meets students' needs well. There are good opportunities to stretch gifted and talented pupils, as well as targeted provision for those who need additional support. In Year 10 and 11, the curriculum is enhanced by a good range of options. The school has begun to introduce vocational and applied subjects that provide very worthwhile opportunities and recognises the need to broaden this further.

Many students participate in the wide range of extra-curricular activities, day and residential visits. The school uses its language specialism to support language development in the local community, for example, by organising conferences involving other secondary schools, supporting language teaching in partner primary schools and running courses for adults and local businesses.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The support provided for students with social and emotional needs through the learning support centre is outstanding. The school works in excellent partnership with other agencies to keep all students included in education and achieving well. The school has very good systems for tracking each student's progress towards their targets. Students with learning difficulties and disabilities are well supported and make very good progress. Changes in staffing have caused some recent difficulties in organisation and communication with parents. The school is appointing an additional manager and administrative support to improve these.

Family support, provided through the school's extended services, is excellent, with a very informative website and very good work with local primary schools. Procedures for safeguarding students and assessing risks for all activities are comprehensive and robust. Students are well informed about career choices and the possibilities for higher education and employment.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The leadership and management of the school is good with some outstanding aspects. The leadership team has introduced a rigorous monitoring and evaluation process, which is clearly focused on improving standards and raising achievement. Areas of weakness have been clearly identified and the necessary steps taken to bring about improvements. Some of these have yet

to be fully reflected in the school's results but there are strong indications that performance, especially at Key stage 4, will improve further.

Good communications coupled with focused staff development has increased managers' understanding of their role and given them the skills to evaluate and monitor their departments. Middle managers feel valued and confident. They fully embrace the changes that have been introduced. Data is increasingly being used well to set challenging targets for students' achievement.

Specialist and extended school status have been used effectively to provide additional opportunities specific to the needs of students and the local community. The school has established good community links although a small number of parents have expressed concern about the effectiveness of communications. The school has identified this as a priority for further development.

Governors have a very good understanding of the school and play an active part in school life. They are well informed about school and student performance, have established close links with subject areas and regularly conduct policy reviews. Financial management is good and resources effectively allocated. In the context of students' achievement the school provides good value for money.

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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?	2	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?	1	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2	2
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	2
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?	1	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	2
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1	1
How well learners enjoy their education	1	1
The attendance of learners	2	2
The behaviour of learners	2	1
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1	1
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2	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?	1	1

¹ Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average to below average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	1	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1	1
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

3 December 2007

Dear Students

Inspection of The Downs School, Newbury, RG20 6NU

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 spoke very positively about the school. We have considered these views in arriving at our judgement that your school is good with some outstanding features and that the majority of you are making good progress.

You achieve very high results in Years 7 to 9. While GCSE pass rates are good overall some students do not make as much progress as they could during Years 10 and 11. This is beginning to improve and we have asked the school to ensure that all groups make as much progress as they should.

We were impressed by the way you get along with each other and value and show respect and consideration for others. The development of personal and social skills is outstanding. Your behaviour around the school and in lessons is very good and attendance is good. Most of you participate enthusiastically in lessons and enjoy your work. We have asked the school to make sure that all teachers make the best use of assessment information to set work which matches the needs of all students, and to ensure that marking and written feedback helps you to improve.

You have a good range of subjects and courses, with some interesting choices for Years 10 and 11. In response to your requests, the school has offered a wider range of modern languages. Many of you join in extra curricular activities and take part enthusiastically in school and community events.

Many of you told us about the excellent support you get from teachers and support staff, who work hard to make sure you do your very best.

Your headteacher and senior managers have high aspirations for the school's future. Your teachers are committed to improving the school further to give you all the best opportunities possible to do well. We have confidence that the school will continue to improve and that you will all do your bit to make it a success.

With best wishes for the future

Janet Mercer HMI