

The Amersham School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	110509
Local Authority	Buckinghamshire
Inspection number	310340
Inspection dates	28–29 November 2007
Reporting inspector	Emma Ing HMI

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

Type of school	Modern (non-selective)
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	781
6th form	149
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Mike Woodward
Headteacher	Mrs Sharon Jarrett
Date of previous school inspection	29 March 2004
School address	Stanley Hill Amersham HP7 9HH
Telephone number	01494 726562
Fax number	01494 434181

Age group	11–18
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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 Amersham School is situated in a relatively affluent part of the country on the outskirts of London. Because it is non selective in an area served also by grammar schools there are relatively few very able students but equally, in most year groups, there are few whose prior attainment is very much below average. Most students are from White British and other White families. A very small but growing proportion are from Asian backgrounds and a very few students from are Black British and other heritages.

The school attained specialist status in Business and Enterprise in September 2005, one year before the current headteacher started in post.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

Whilst currently offering a satisfactory education the rapidly improving Amersham School is on track to become good. This is because the inspirational headteacher and strong senior leadership team have a clear understanding of what needs to be done. In the last year they have introduced strategies appropriately designed to bring about improvement. Most of these are already making some difference but the full impact is yet to be felt across the school. The headteacher has made some important appointments at different levels in the school and these people together with many established staff are now poised to drive further improvements. The school's capacity for improvement is therefore good. However, as senior leaders recognise, the quality of self-evaluation and leadership at middle and lower levels in the school is not consistent.

Students and their parents agree that the school is improving and many comment that this is a result of the new headteacher and her team. One area that students feel is particularly improved is that of behaviour. They explain that the new behaviour policy works very effectively when consistently applied by staff but some expressed disquiet because their learning is interrupted by misbehaviour in a small minority of lessons.

Around the school students are courteous to adults with whom they converse confidently and articulately. However there are a few instances of silly and unkind behaviour that are not always dealt with well. Students are involved in sport, music, drama and outdoor activities and many value these opportunities. There are also examples of students taking leadership roles in the school, but these are better developed in the sixth form than in the main school.

National tests at Year 9 indicate that the progress that students make at Key Stage 3 is good and standards at this level are above average. There has been a downward drift in results at GCSE for the last two years and progress has been below the national average. However, the evidence of the inspection supports the school's view that this trend has been reversed and progress at this level is now satisfactory. Sixth formers make satisfactory progress and achieve in line with national expectations.

The school's specialist status as a Business and Enterprise college has not yet led to good enough improvements in the standards achieved in some specialist areas such as information and communication technology, business studies and mathematics. However there is now a wider range of courses on offer in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form and there is an emerging enterprise culture within the school. This is particularly well supported by 'enterprise days' on which students are given business related challenges and supported to develop good problem solving skills, teamwork and initiative. Such development of skills is evident in too few lessons across the curriculum. The school is addressing this through the humanities programme in Year 7, which is delivering a skills based curriculum that, if successful, they plan to extend.

Teaching in the school is satisfactory, but senior staff are aware that it is important that it improves and strategies are being put in place to enhance learning through the development of more active student engagement in lessons. Assessment data are not yet being used to ensure a good match of teaching to individual students' needs in lessons and students are not consistently given clear guidance as to what they need to do next in order to improve their work.

There are many helpful structures in place to support the welfare of learners who value the support given to them both by teachers and learning mentors.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

Students make steady progress in the sixth form and their results are in line with national averages. They play an important role in the leadership of the school through their work as prefects and by setting up and running events for the school. Some are involved in peer mentoring and supporting younger students. Many achieve Sports Leader qualifications. Teaching in the sixth form is satisfactory. The best teachers are good at meeting the different needs of all the learners in their classes and at helping the students develop good independent learning skills. Students in the sixth form feel well cared for by the school. They appreciate the way they are encouraged to take more responsibility for their work whilst being supported to achieve. The school is good at tracking their progress and making sure that they maintain steady progress.

The curriculum is undergoing radical change and will include a broad range of vocational courses from September 2009. It is already sufficiently flexible to meet learners' needs once they have joined the sixth form and almost all students complete their courses. There are many activities available to sixth formers to give them opportunities to learn in settings other than classrooms and good enrichment activities available for them. Three quarters of sixth formers go on to higher education and a further fifth gain employment when they finish.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that leaders at all levels judge their performance securely, plan effectively and are held to account for raising standards.
- Improve the quality of teaching and learning throughout the school by ensuring that lessons are well matched to individual students' needs and that students are actively engaged in their learning.
- Help students learn more effectively by giving guidance about what they need to do in order to improve their work and feedback about the level or grade at which they are achieving.

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

The standards attained by students at the end of the sixth form are in line with national averages and represent satisfactory progress on their part. At Key Stage 4 the standards have slipped over the past two years, particularly in foundation subjects such as physical education, humanities (excluding geography), art and design and technology. The proportion of students gaining five good GCSEs had dropped with too many students making below average progress and too few making better than average progress. In recent months the school has responded to this and introduced strategies to ensure that many more reach this important benchmark. As a result of targeted support, a clear emphasis on importance of coursework and examination preparation and a better use of data to ensure that students are given help when they start to under-perform, the rate of progress has now improved. Key, new subject leaders are also leading improvements. The school is aware that boys, especially those whose prior attainment is below average, have

been achieving less well than girls. The new curriculum now meets their needs more effectively. Students who are identified as having special educational needs make satisfactory progress.

Contextual value added data show that the progress students make at Key Stage 3 is good, but in mathematics middle ability boys are making less good progress than the rest of the cohort.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

Many students care a great deal for their school and are proud of the improvements that are currently being achieved. Through their school council and working groups they contribute to this process and are thoughtful and articulate when discussing what is working well and what could be improved. Most students are courteous, and there is some very good behaviour around the school. Although attendance is no better than at other schools generally, students do expect to work once at school and they are punctual to lessons. The opportunities that many take up to pursue drama, music and sport both in and out of lessons enrich their lives.

Through a daily pattern of assemblies, students' successes are celebrated whilst they are challenged to join in with different activities and are given the opportunity to engage in reflection. This, together with opportunities to develop moral insights through the humanities programme, contributes well to their good spiritual, social, moral and cultural development.

Students feel safe but there are some areas in school where silly or unintentionally intimidating behaviour takes place. Equally, although the new behaviour policy has resulted in huge improvements in behaviour in class, a few lessons are still disrupted by poor behaviour. Students demonstrate that they can take initiative and lead others both on 'enterprise days' and through various initiatives that take place in school, such as peer mentoring and running events. However, in lessons students tend to be passive, particularly in Key Stages 3 and 4.

Students are aware of the issues surrounding their health and their safety and confident that they have the information to make wise choices. The food on offer in the canteen is healthy and most engage in more than two hours physical activity a week.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Most of the teaching in school is satisfactory. Staff know their subject areas well and their planning ensures satisfactory progress. Students generally complete their work and their presentation skills are good. In some lessons, teachers use questioning and group activities very effectively to promote thinking and understanding. Lessons however tend to be very teacher centred. There are not enough opportunities for students to take initiatives, to lead and to engage in exciting learning activities. Teachers do not always articulate the lesson objectives very clearly and do not match these closely to students' different ability levels within the class. Almost all students know their target level or grade. However when students' work is marked, too little guidance is given about what next steps an individual needs to make in order to improve their work.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

One of the ways in which the school is seeking to drive improvements in the attainment of students is through the curriculum, which is currently satisfactory but improving. It has recently been modified at Key Stage 4 to allow students to follow appropriately different pathways so that each is able to pursue courses appropriate to their abilities, interests and aspirations. The option choices for vocational courses are still quite limited, and it is too early to see improvements in terms of standards of attainment, but parents and students are pleased with the changes and it is evident that the direction of travel is good. Similarly, at Key Stage 3 the school is trialling an accelerated curriculum that in time will enable at least some Year 7 students to complete their Key Stage 3 programmes of study in two years rather than three, enabling them to embark on a range of courses appropriate to their needs and maintain challenge in Year 9. Plans to offer a diploma are in place and if achieved this will further enhance the curriculum offer that the school makes for students aged 14–19.

There is a sound range of extra-curricular activities on offer and students are encouraged to participate in sport, music and drama and to go on trips.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Students generally feel very well supported by their teachers and the school has good mechanisms for ensuring that they are helped to overcome any problems that they encounter. Students are, for example, encouraged to give up smoking and can talk to the school counsellor if they wish. The recently introduced behaviour management policy is already making a significant difference. Arrangements for safeguarding learners are rigorous and the school works very well with outside agencies to ensure effective referrals are made and all students get the support they need. The provision made for students with learning difficulties is sound and enables them to make satisfactory progress. Learning mentors work well with individuals to support them overcome difficulties and the school's peer mentoring system supports the personal development of both the mentors and those mentored.

A new system has been set up to ensure that students' academic progress is closely monitored. It is early days but the directors of learning are using it well to ensure that they intervene both to support individuals who are floundering and to work with teachers where groups of students are experiencing difficulties. Students are set targets but these are not consistently of sufficient challenge to support good progress. Communications with parents are improving through academic review days but a tiny minority expressed a view that not enough was being done to help them support their children's learning. Happily, the pastoral support team already has plans in place to address this issue.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

The new headteacher brings inspirational and effective leadership to the school. Together with her strong senior leadership team she has articulated a vision for the school and has introduced many new strategies and procedures in order to raise standards. Senior leaders know their school exceptionally well. They are aware that leadership at middle and lower levels of the school is inconsistent and that many individuals need structures and support to enable them to form a similarly clear picture of their work and develop, implement and review appropriate plans for improvement.

The governing body has managed the finances of the school very well and is both well organised and supportive but has not developed the confidence to support the school through robust and well-meaning challenge.

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	3	

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	3	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	3	
The attendance of learners	3	
The behaviour of learners	3	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	3	
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 the learners' needs?	3	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	3	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?	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	2	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	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	

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

10 December 2007

Dear Students

Inspection of The Amersham School, Amersham, HP7 9HH

Thank you for welcoming my colleagues and me to your school when we visited to make an inspection at the end of November. Many of you took the time to talk to us and show us around and we were delighted to hear your views and watch you at work. We found you to be confident and articulate when talking about your school. All of you were keen to stress how much the school has improved in recent years and many of you shared with us your confidence in your headteacher and in the senior management team. One of you explained that 'they get things done' and that 'when they say something will happen, it does'. We agree with you that your headteacher is inspirational and that together with her senior leaders provides very strong leadership for the school. We agree too that yours is a rapidly improving school but note that many of the improvements implemented have not yet had time to make Amersham a good school.

One area that has improved is your behaviour but as you are aware, there is still some disruption to a few lessons and some boisterous and unkind behaviour around school. You need to work with your teachers to make this a thing of the past. The behaviour policy is working well where it is used consistently and the reflection room is a useful resource. Those of you that fall behind with your work for one reason or another receive good support. Most of you make good progress in Key Stage 3, but until recently, progress in Key Stage 4 has been below average. This has changed as a result of a number of different initiatives taken by the school, but you must play your part in this and make sure that you attend lessons and really knuckle down with coursework and revision. As the school is aware, some of you could do with more challenging targets and although the teaching is satisfactory, there needs now to be a focus on making sure that you all make good progress in every lesson. One thing that could help this is if teachers gave you much clearer feedback about what you are doing well and guidance about what precisely you need to do to improve. I have asked the school to work on this.

As a result of our judgements, I have recommended the school to focus on increasing the proportion of good lessons taught. I have also asked the staff to ensure that leaders at all levels in the school understand what needs to be done to raise standards and make things better, and that they are supported to ensure that this happens.

Please thank your parents for completing the questionnaire and sharing their views with us. They gave us a very helpful insight into the strengths of the school and the areas for development.

Yours faithfully,

Emma Ing HMI