

Dorchester Middle School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	113860
Local Authority	Dorset
Inspection number	311410
Inspection dates	25–26 June 2008
Reporting inspector	Robert Pyner HMI

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

Type of school	Middle deemed secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	9–13
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	622
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Lindsay Holt
Headteacher	Gordon Redley
Date of previous school inspection	3 June 2003
School address	Queen's Avenue Dorchester DT1 2HS
Telephone number	01305 265651
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Age group	9-13
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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

Dorchester Middle is a large oversubscribed 9 to 13 school serving the western side of the town and villages beyond. It has a nine place speech and language resource base on site. The attainment of pupils on entry to the school is broadly average. The proportion of boys is higher than in most schools. The percentage of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including those with a statement of special educational needs, is above average. A few students come from minority ethnic groups and there is a very small number for whom English is an additional language.

The school is an accredited training school for student teachers working in partnership with the universities of Plymouth, Exeter and Bath. It has very strong partnerships with providers across the 4 to 19 age range through the Dorchester Area Schools Partnership (DASP). In 2007, the school gained specialist science and mathematics status in partnership with three local secondary schools. In addition, it has the following awards: Investor in People, Healthy School, SportsMark and ArtsMark Silver.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Dorchester Middle School is a good school. It has many outstanding features. Parents and pupils speak very positively about the care and support provided in all aspects of life at the school. The headteacher is rightly held in very high regard by parents and pupils. In a typical example of parental views, one parent wrote, 'Both of my children have enjoyed their years at DMS. They have matured, broadened their horizons and have been prepared for their transition to their next school in a consistent manner. Whilst looking forward to their move next year, they will both miss DMS where they themselves have felt valued, as well as valuing their teachers and indeed the whole school's input into their education.'

The headteacher has created a very strong leadership team with a clear focus on raising standards, achievement and care for all in the school community. Governors are highly effective with a very secure knowledge of the work of the school and areas for development. The commitment to continuous improvement is supported by effective structures for planning, management and monitoring. These strengths in leadership, together with the school's accurate self-evaluation, demonstrate excellent capacity for improvement. The value placed on all members of staff has created effective teamwork and, because of this, the school has a real sense of working as a community.

Standards are above average. Achievement is good overall and excellent in mathematics. The standards achieved at the end of Year 6 are above average with strong performance at the higher levels, but the school rightly recognises the need to continue to target groups at risk of underachievement. Pupils undertake a shortened Key Stage 3 curriculum in core subjects and take the statutory assessments at the end of their time at the school in Year 8, rather than Year 9. Results are good overall, but weaker in science in which progress is relatively slower and this is recognised by the school. From their average starting points when they enter the school, pupils make good progress overall and the school is aware of weaknesses in subjects. Overall, achievement and standards are good but fall short of being exemplary in some significant elements which would lead to a judgement of outstanding for this aspect.

Teaching is good overall but in some lessons pupils' progress is slowed by the lack of opportunities to develop and use independent learning skills which would take understanding further. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are supported outstandingly well and the commitment to inclusion is a cornerstone of the school's ethos. The speech and language base is very much part of the school. Parents greatly appreciate the care given to pupils who have special needs. One wrote, 'The school's commitment to inclusion and the supportive environment is exceptional.' Staff should be proud of their work with pupils who have special needs.

The school's highly effective care, guidance and support provide very well for pupils' personal development and well-being. Pupils are polite and thoughtful, and relationships are excellent. They feel safe in school and understand their rights and responsibilities in an environment that is fair and supportive. A highly effective curriculum provides excellent opportunities for pupils, with excellent links with partner schools. The school's specialism is developing the curriculum further and supporting improvements in science.

Effectiveness of the Foundation Stage

Grade: 9

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve pupils' progress and raise attainment in science by the end of Year 8.
- Embed strategies for the development of independent learning skills.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Standards are above average and achievement is good which is in line with the school's self-evaluation. Pupils start school with attainment and skills that are broadly average, make good progress in Years 5 and 6, and build on this to achieve well by the end of Year 8. Standards at Key Stage 2 have been above average for the three years to 2007, but the school recognises the challenge to increase the proportion of pupils achieving the expected level in English and mathematics. Effective procedures are in place to target groups at risk of underachievement. In the last national assessments pupils performed strongly at the higher levels in English and science.

The shortened curriculum in English, mathematics, science and information and communication technology (ICT) in Key Stage 3 has meant that the pupils have undertaken the statutory assessments early at the end of Year 8, rather than Year 9, for the last three years. Results in 2007 show that attainment at the expected levels in English, mathematics and science is above average. Attainment at the higher levels in mathematics is well above average, but pupils did less well at these levels in English and particularly science. Overall, attainment in science has been declining over the last three years. Progress is better in mathematics and English than science. The school is taking action to raise achievement in science at Years 7 and 8 and this is linked well to the school's specialist status programme.

Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make excellent progress, particularly those at school action because of the effective early identification of their needs and introduction of support programmes. Very effective support from the speech and language base enables pupils to achieve their potential and play a full part in the life of the school.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Personal development and well-being are outstanding. There is a sense of pride and involvement from all pupils in the school and they demonstrate a mature attitude and approach to others. Pupils' understanding of spiritual, moral, social and cultural issues is well developed through lessons, outside speakers and activities, support for local and national charities, and through vibrant displays of pupils' work. One of the school's strengths is the caring ethos and pupils respond very positively to this.

Both the school council and the extended DASP council play a significant part in the improvement of school life. For instance, pupils have succeeded in getting the school to set up a recycling scheme, in improving conditions in the toilets, and have played a part in developing the rewards system. Pupils feel safe and secure in school and the school is highly inclusive. Year 7 pupils play a very effective part through the buddy system in helping younger

pupils to settle into school life. Pupils feel that teachers support them well. One pupil said, 'Teachers are as good as they can be.'

Pupils develop healthy lifestyles and demonstrate that they know the benefits of regular exercise. There is a high involvement in sports and physical activities. Behaviour in classrooms and around the school site is excellent with pupils demonstrating concern and respect for others. Attendance is good, with steps in place to ensure that absence continues to fall.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Most lessons seen were good with a minority of satisfactory lessons. A small number of outstanding lessons were observed and no lessons were unsatisfactory. The school has a rigorous system for monitoring the quality of lessons and the school's judgements on teaching are broadly in agreement with those made by the inspection team.

In all lessons there are good relationships fostered by the care and skill of the teachers. In the best lessons teachers use incisive questioning to develop pupils' higher thinking skills and the onus is put on the pupils to take responsibility for their learning. The teachers set a good pace and provide a variety of interesting learning activities, well matched to the needs of the pupils. Pupils engage readily with these tasks, are well motivated, and well behaved. As a result of these strengths in the most effective lessons, pupils' progress is good and sometimes outstanding.

However, in a significant proportion of lessons there is excessive teacher direction with the result that pupils are not given the opportunity to develop their independent learning skills. In some less successful lessons, the time is not used productively and tasks do not stretch pupils sufficiently. In most lessons, ICT is used effectively to improve the learning experience for pupils. Assessment of pupils is through formal tests and informal in-class activities. In some lessons pupils assess themselves or their peers so as to have a clearer idea of what they need to do to improve their work. Teaching assistants are used very effectively to increase pupils' progress by enabling pupils to stay engaged and to understand activities.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The school provides a vibrant curriculum that engages pupils and meets their individual learning needs. Enhanced funding as a result of specialist status has been used wisely. Extra teachers, for example in mathematics, have led to smaller classes contributing to impressive results for older pupils. Links with partner schools are outstanding, ensuring continuity in the curriculum as pupils move through the schools. This is a highly inclusive school that embraces pupils of all abilities and adapts the curriculum accordingly. Gifted and talented pupils meet with similar pupils from other schools. Those with learning difficulties are supported in class, taught in small groups, or use the excellent resources in the speech and language base. Pupils with physical disabilities or who are not yet fluent in English are enabled full access to the curriculum.

Exciting and imaginative enrichment activities, such as trips to France or Tudor theme weeks, enthuse pupils and contribute positively to their personal development. Wide ranging extra-curricular activities, including sport, are very well attended. Parents appreciate these opportunities for their children. The contribution of visitors, such as the school nurse and police

officers, helps pupils explore relationships and gain understanding of how to keep themselves safe. The school is now rightly planning for new local and national initiatives in the curriculum.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

The care, guidance and support that the school provides for all its pupils is exemplary. Staff know the pupils in the school very well and are adept at offering their support in both personal and academic areas. Pupils say that staff always have time to give them and trust staff when dealing with any concerns. Staff liaise closely with parents or carers and outside agencies to ensure that all pupils' needs are met. Consequently, pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities often make excellent progress.

The school has developed robust systems to monitor the progress of all groups of pupils and to ensure that intervention is aimed at those who most need support. The use of teaching assistants in supporting those with additional needs is often outstanding, with skilled use of questioning and support leading to pupils increasing their self esteem and motivation. Pupils understand the level at which they are working and what they need to do to make progress in lessons.

Child protection and safeguarding procedures are well established and reflect much best practice. Health and safety matters and risk assessments are well organised and regularly reviewed, especially for vulnerable groups. The school has excellent links with both its feeder and upper schools, providing seamless transition for pupils.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

The outstanding leadership of the headteacher is complemented by a very strong senior management team which has been expanded and restructured recently. The members work together cohesively to secure quality in all aspects of the school's work but with a clear focus on raising academic standards as well as ensuring the provision of a high quality of care. A robust and comprehensive system for monitoring pupils' attainment has been established which enables underperformance to be identified and appropriate action taken. The role of middle managers is clearly defined and managers are held accountable for pupils' progress in their subjects. Overall, they have a good grasp of the strengths and areas for development in their subjects and are well supported by the senior team and other middle managers. There is a culture of self-evaluation in the school and all staff contribute to this process. Accurate self-evaluation leads to actions which are monitored for impact, although in some areas this impact is yet to be seen fully.

The governing body is highly effective, providing a good balance of challenge and support for the school. The chair of governors is energetic and knows the school well and the various committees are proactive and effective. Specialist school status is beginning to have a significant impact in raising standards in mathematics and science.

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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
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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
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	1
The effectiveness of the Foundation Stage	NA
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1

Achievement and standards

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

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1
How well learners enjoy their education	1
The attendance of learners	2
The behaviour of learners	1
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	1

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	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?	1
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
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	1
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	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

27 June 2008

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Dorchester Middle School, Dorchester DT1 2HS

Thank you for making us so welcome when we inspected your school recently. Special thanks go to the pupil guides who helped the inspectors find their way around. We enjoyed talking with all the pupils we met and found what you had to say very informative and relevant. We found it very interesting to be in the school during the induction day for pupils starting in September, and hearing from their Year 7 'buddies' about how they were helping them to find out about the school.

This letter is to tell you about our findings. Our judgement is that Dorchester Middle School is a good school. It has many outstanding features. You work hard, behave excellently, and make good progress in school.

These are some of the positive aspects that we found.

- The standards you reach in your work are above average and well above in mathematics.
- The good progress in your learning that you make in lessons.
- The good quality of the teaching in your lessons.
- The excellent relationships that you have with other pupils and staff. Everyone in the school really looks after each other.
- Your infectious enjoyment of the opportunities that you have in the curriculum and in out of school activities.
- The excellent care, guidance and support that you receive from all staff to help you and your families. Your headteacher, in particular, really cares about you as individuals.
- The outstanding quality of the leadership of your headteacher, senior teachers and governors.

All of the staff are working hard to make further improvements to the school. To aid this process, we have asked them to do the following two things.

- Improve your progress and raise your attainment in science by the end of Year 8.
- Embed strategies for the development of independent learning skills.

You have an important part to play in this by continuing to work hard and making the most of the wide range of opportunities you have at DMS. I am sure that you will do so and wish you well for the future.

Robert Pyner Her Majesty's Inspector