

Presdales School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117506
Local Authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	312639
Inspection date	21 May 2008
Reporting inspector	Alan Alder 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	11–18
Gender of pupils	Girls
Number on roll	
School	1079
6th form	248
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr K Woollgar
Headteacher	Mrs J M Robinson
Date of previous school inspection	22 November 2004
School address	Hoe Lane Ware Hertfordshire SG12 9NX
Telephone number	01920 462210
Fax number	01920 461187

Age group	11–18
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Introduction

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

The inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following: achievement and standards, the quality of teaching and learning, students' personal development and the school's care, guidance and support for them, the impact of the school's specialism, and why the school is successful. Evidence was gathered from observations of lessons, scrutiny of pupils' work, analysis of pupils' performance data, and interviews with pupils, the school's leaders and managers and the chair of governors.

Description of the school

The school serves a relatively affluent community. The proportion of pupils who are eligible for a free school meal is much lower than the national average. Most pupils are from White British backgrounds and there is a small number who are from minority ethnic groups. The proportion of pupils who have learning difficulties is very low. A higher than average proportion of pupils stays in the school for the full length of their compulsory education and a higher than average number stays on into the sixth form.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Presdales School provides an outstanding education for its pupils. When they join the school in Year 7, pupils' educational standards are already well above average. Pupils go on to make outstanding progress. High expectations for its pupils, evident through the outstanding teaching, challenging curriculum and the support provided to help pupils do well, are the reasons for its success. A large majority of pupils stay on into the sixth form and the school's support for them enables them to continue to progress from their already high standards. The headteacher provides the school with a clear direction and the drive to continue to improve. Actions taken to improve the school are very well-judged and enable it to serve its pupils very well. About one quarter of pupils' parents responded to the questionnaire. A very high proportion were positive about the school, in excess of ninety percent for most questions. One parent wrote 'we are very privileged to have our child at your school. Everything is exceptional'. There were other similar comments. Parents are not praising of all aspects of the school, however. A large minority of those that responded to the questionnaires, feels that the school does not take sufficient account of parents' and pupils' views and there were a number of comments about communication not being good enough.

The results of the 2007 end of Year 9 national tests, the GCSE results as well as those from sixth form courses showed that pupils reach exceptionally high standards. Pupils make good progress in Years 7 to 9, as they do in the 6th form. The GCSE results in 2007 showed that progress in Years 10 and 11 had lagged behind that in other years and was satisfactory. However, current data provided by the school shows progress has now improved so that pupils' progress through the school is outstanding overall. Changes to the curriculum have introduced considerably more challenge and pupils are prospering as a result. For example, two groups of Year 11 pupils are currently studying a first year sixth form course in French and have been entered for the Advanced Subsidiary (AS) level examination. The school's monitoring of these groups' progress indicates that the standard of the pupils' work is very high. A similar approach is being followed by two groups of Year 10 pupils in English. In addition, in Year 10, one third of pupils are studying both GCSE mathematics and GCSE statistics in the time usually allocated to one subject. The work they are doing is intensive and is of high quality. Nevertheless, the school's leaders recognise that curricular provision of this nature does not cater for the needs of all pupils. Those pupils who prefer a less academic, more practical approach are well served by vocational courses. These have been chosen following an analysis of pupils' career aspirations and applications to higher education. In addition, the 6th form curriculum is well designed so that pupils can progress to a more advanced level of the subjects they study in Years 10 and 11. Pupils with learning difficulties are served well by support assistants. They make good progress. The curriculum conforms to all statutory requirements and is outstanding. There is a wide range of both academic and extra-curricular provision.

Pupils contribute to the school community very well. There are good opportunities for supporting each other. The 'Big Sister' initiative in which sixth formers support younger pupils is well received. The school and year councils are effective in bringing about improvements, for example the provision of a covered bus shelter. In addition, pupils are involved in extensive fund raising activities and raise large sums of money for charities. Pupils respond well to the good opportunities for development of healthy lifestyles through sporting events and the school's emphasis on healthy eating. Pupils say that the school is a very safe place to be in, and parents agree. Pupils' behaviour is outstandingly good and shows responsible attitudes not just for

themselves but for those around them – and also towards their learning. In many lessons there is evident enjoyment. When a group of younger pupils were asked why they enjoyed school, it was various subjects they talked about first, before the pleasures of being amongst friends. They say that bullying is very rare, and that there are adults in the school to whom they can speak if they have a problem. Attendance is good, and there are no unauthorised absences. Pupils work together well. This, as well as the high standards they reach in literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT), and the work experience for both Year 10 and Year 12 pupils (some of which is abroad) means that pupils are outstandingly well-prepared for their future economic well-being.

The specialist language college status has brought significant benefits to the school and its community. The curriculum is enriched by a wide range of language courses, including Russian and Italian. The teaching of languages is enhanced by the use of a language laboratory. Standards are high. There is also a good range of language exchange opportunities or visits which allow pupils the chance to practise languages in the country of use. Such trips increase pupils' awareness of social and cultural aspects of other countries as well as developing their linguistic skills. Language weeks in the school add further to the linguistic experience of pupils. The school's contribution to the community includes providing language lessons for a large number of primary schools in the area.

The recently acquired music with English specialism has created opportunities for pupils to develop their musical ability, for example, through the increased provision of musical instruments and the availability of electronic equipment. Pupils have good opportunities to perform through choirs, talent competitions, productions and regularly through the year in school assemblies. The school has formed strong musical links with a large number of local primary schools. In English, there are curriculum developments where accelerated reading is being piloted and students 'fast-track' to GCSE and AS Level. The school is forming links with local partner schools and with the local authority and is aiming to become a centre for gifted and talented provision in the county.

Teaching is outstanding and the school judges it accurately. There is no inadequate teaching, the great majority being good or outstanding. Teachers' knowledge of their subject, the challenge they provide in lessons, the well planned, high paced work underpinned by good relationships with pupils leads to outstanding learning. The marking of pupils' work is usually thorough with helpful suggestions on how it could be improved. Pupils' knowledge of their examination targets is good, and their awareness of what they should do to improve is impressive. In some lessons, however, questions are not used to assess levels of understanding or to identify any misconceptions that pupils may have so that the teaching can be modified.

Those who have responsibility for the oversight of pastoral care and of pupils' academic progress know the pupils well. The school database is used regularly to monitor pupils' academic progress and identify underachievement. The monitoring of progress within subject departments is also used to identify any pupils in need of support and guidance and this is provided. A large number of staff in the school, including its senior leaders, act as mentors for any pupils who are at risk of underachieving. Pupils say that the transition from Year 6 to Year 7 is managed well with visits by teachers to meet them in their primary schools and induction days for pupils. 'Big Sisters' from the sixth form help the new pupils as they settle into the school. Pupils also feel they are guided well in their selection of GCSE courses and when making choices to enter the sixth form.

The school is strongly led by the headteacher. There is a purposeful drive to develop the school so that pupils of all abilities benefit. This leads, for example, to a well considered approach to the design of the curriculum so that it reflects well the school's intake. Targets are used effectively to raise standards, for example by ensuring that pupils' progress is regularly monitored and any falling behind are properly supported. There is some variation in the quality of self-evaluation in different parts of the school, however. At the whole school level it is very effective, but some departmental evaluations are less so; they do not analyse sufficiently the strengths and weaknesses in pupils' learning and explore the reasons for them so that good practice can be more widely adopted. The school's capacity to improve is therefore good. Governors support the school well and are thoroughly involved in the evaluation of the progress the school is making.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 1

Students make outstanding progress and achieve exceptional standards in their work. They speak very highly of the school, including the careers guidance and the support they receive in making applications to university. Their enjoyment is strong. Teaching is of an outstanding quality, as is the way the school cares for students and ensures that they flourish. As a result, their personal development is outstanding. Retention rates are exceptionally high.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that the monitoring of all departments' work is rigorous and leads to still higher standards.
- Improve communications with parents and seek to take more account of their views and those of pupils.

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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?	1	1
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?	1	1
The standards ¹ reached by learners	1	1
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	1	1
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	1
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1	
How well learners enjoy their education	1	1
The attendance of learners	2	
The behaviour of learners	1	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	1	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	1	1
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1	1
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?	1	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	1	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	2
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	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

22 May 2008

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Presdales School, Ware, SG12 9NX

Thank you for being so helpful when we inspected your school. We spoke to quite a number of you, in lessons, around the school and in meetings. We were impressed by your confidence and maturity, your commitment to your school and to your work.

We found that your school is outstanding. The standards of work and the progress you make are exceptional. This is because of the quality of teaching and learning you receive; the curriculum, which is well suited to different pupils' interests and ambitions. There are considerable opportunities for you in modern foreign languages, music and English. You are well looked after at school and teachers make sure you are doing as well as you should be. You and your parents told us how much most of you enjoy school and that you feel safe in it.

Your school is successful because it is very well led. Changes, such as to the curriculum, are very carefully considered. It is successful also because of your attitudes. You learn a lot because you have such good attitudes to work. You attend regularly and you are punctual to lessons.

Despite your school's success, we are making two recommendations so that it can develop further still. The first is to make sure that all subject departments review very carefully how well you are learning and build in improvements if there are any areas which are not as successful as the rest. The second is to take careful note of your and your parents' views about school. You can help in this. You can think carefully about how well you are learning in different subjects and why that is. You might be able to suggest one or two ways in which you can improve your work and how your school can help you with this.

Best wishes for your future

Alan Alder

Her Majesty's Inspector