

The Charles Dickens School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	118910
Local Authority	Kent
Inspection number	313145
Inspection dates	11–12 June 2008
Reporting inspector	Robert Ellis 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	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1056
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Ron Hutton
Headteacher	Andrew Olsson
Date of previous school inspection	6 December 2004
School address	Broadstairs Road Broadstairs CT10 2RL
Telephone number	01843 862988
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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 Charles Dickens School is an average-sized school that has a special unit for visually impaired students. Students are mostly White British and the majority come from Broadstairs, although a small number of visually impaired students come from a wider area. Entry to the school is after selection procedures where approximately one third of students from primary schools go elsewhere to local selective schools. The percentage of students eligible for free school meals is broadly average. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is above average, many of whom have moderate learning difficulties or behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. The school has specialisms in mathematics and computing. It has gained the Artsmark and Sportsmark awards, has Investor in People accreditation, foundation level of International School status and is working towards full designation as a 'healthy school'.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

The Charles Dickens School is a good school. It has a number of strengths including an outstanding and innovative curriculum. Students' well-being and personal development are good in response to the good care and support they receive. Good teaching enables most students to make good progress and standards, although generally below average, are rising because students' progress is increasingly tracked rigorously and the intervention programmes for most students who are underperforming are effective, particularly those with low prior attainment. Students behave well, both in lessons and around the school. Good relationships are evident at all levels and students work well in teams and groups. A good range of clubs and enrichment activities, where students have the opportunity to work with different age groups, enrich the already diverse and imaginative curriculum. The school's specialisms of information and communication technology (ICT) and mathematics make a positive contribution to raising attainment and all students have good opportunities to develop a broad range of ICT skills.

There are outstanding partnerships with outside agencies to support learning. Consequently, most students in the school achieve well in relation to their starting points and capabilities. Accurate assessment information ensures that teachers are well informed about the progress that students make but this information is not always used effectively to plan tasks and activities to meet the precise needs of some students. The quality of marking is variable and students do not always receive the advice they need to improve or develop their work.

Most students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities are supported very effectively and students who have visual impairment receive particularly good support. They are helped to participate fully in the life of the school, except for limitations imposed by transport arrangements which prevent some students from taking part independently in after-school clubs.

Students' personal skills are good and most students are polite and considerate and take care of each other and their school. They make a positive contribution to the community and are engaged in a variety of charitable and other ventures, including music concerts for the residents of local rest homes. Students have opportunities to take responsibility and have a say in how their school can be improved, and they take their roles as school councillors and prefects seriously. Attendance is satisfactory and the low level of exclusions and the high proportion of students who go on to further study when they leave the school demonstrate positive attitudes to school. Despite relatively low levels of literacy and numeracy, students are well prepared for work or further study through a good range of high quality work-related and enterprise activities.

Parents are supportive of the school and particularly value the work of the staff. As one parent commented, 'My child had difficulties at his junior school. Since joining Charles Dickens in September, he is a changed child, his head of college and form tutor have been extremely supportive and we are very grateful.'

The senior leadership team focus on developing high standards in both work and personal development. They work effectively together and monitoring of the school's work is good. The governing body is extremely well informed and holds the school closely to account for the standards it attains. As a result, the school has made good progress since the last inspection in improving students' aspirations and the quality of education it provides. The governors play an active and effective role in challenging students who do not reach the school's expected

standards of behaviour. Good capacity for further improvement is demonstrated by the positive impact of actions taken already to raise standards.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that teachers use assessment information consistently well to plan effectively to meet the different needs of groups of students.
- Improve marking so that students are well informed about their achievements and how they can improve or develop their work.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

The attainment of students joining the school is generally well below the national average. In the 2007 national tests at the end of Year 9, standards were below average but results have generally followed the national trend over the last five years. This represents good progress in relation to the students' starting points. At the end of Key Stage 4, improvement in the GCSE examination results was good. The proportion of students achieving five or more subjects at grade A* to C rose from 45% in 2006 to 54% in 2007. However, the proportion of students who attained grade C or above in both mathematics and English was significantly below the average for schools nationally. Most students make at least good progress from Year 7 to Year 11 and achieve well. No groups underachieve. In some groups, for example students following vocational courses at Key Stage 4, their achievement is outstanding. The school's current assessment information is accurate and shows that most students are on track to achieve challenging targets.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Students say that they especially enjoy the varied types of lessons and the good facilities. They feel safe and know that if they have problems there are trusted adults to whom they can turn. Consequently, students are confident and have positive attitudes to learning so that attendance is satisfactory. Well over 80% of students go on to further study when they leave the school. Students have an excellent understanding of the need to adopt healthy lifestyles and many participate in the good range of sporting activities. The take-up of healthy school meals has increased.

The college and school councils have been very effective. For example, they have influenced the school's choice of rewards. Relationships are good and students get on well with each other. They value the new college structure where students are divided into four colleges and are in mixed-age tutor groups. The recent rapid and successful implementation of the colleges has had a profound impact on the school's ethos and students' well-being. It fosters good relations between age groups. For example, a Year 9 student said how valuable the advice of an older friend was when it came to choosing subject options. As a result, behaviour is generally good in lessons and around school. Students' social, moral, spiritual and cultural development is good. In particular, they understand the importance of a considerate, collaborative and tolerant community in which all are equally valued. The early support for those experiencing difficulties or requiring tailor-made pathways through the curriculum has helped to reduce the level of detentions and temporary exclusions, and to eliminate permanent exclusions.

Students make a positive contribution to the local and wider community. For example, they put on many musical performances around the area. The elected school and college councils and prefects organise charitable fundraising activities. These activities develop confidence and self-esteem as well as helping students to understand their growing responsibilities as young citizens. All students are well prepared for their future economic well-being. This is because of the relevance of the courses they study and the breadth of extra experiences they receive, such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme, enterprise days, and links with partner agencies such as the Thanet Skills Studio..

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teaching and learning are generally good. However, the quality of teaching is inconsistent and there remains scope to improve still further the proportion of lessons that are good and outstanding. In around two thirds of the lessons, learning objectives are clear and shared with the students so that they understand the purpose of the activities. These objectives are referred to throughout the lessons to help students reflect on their progress. Learning is best in classrooms where relationships are strong because of mutual respect and students well motivated through the range of stimulating and well matched activities that meet their different learning needs well. Questioning is used well by teachers to challenge students and extend their understanding. In many good lessons, students benefit from opportunities to work in groups, engage in assessing each other's work, share learning and discuss responses to questions. Where teaching is less effective, activities are not matched to the needs and interests of different groups of students or the tasks lack challenge, and the slow pace means that some students lose interest. In these lessons, the link between activities and the stated intentions of the lessons is not clear and students are not encouraged to evaluate their own progress. The quality of marking and the use of assessment vary. Excellent examples are found in some subjects, such as English and history, where students know their targets and are shown how to improve. This good practice is not consistent throughout the school or even within departments. The school's systems for tracking students' progress and identifying those who would benefit from extra support are improving rapidly. However, a minority of teachers do not use assessment information effectively to build on prior learning, or to plan tasks and activities that achieve the right balance of challenge and support to meet the needs of all students. The school recognises that this is an area for development and has recently appointed a coordinator to help teachers meet the needs of the range of different groups more effectively.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The curriculum has been developed very well to meet the needs of students at this school. At Key Stage 4, there is an excellent mix of academic and vocational courses, with all students following a vocational course in ICT and about half pursuing a further vocational option. Overall, students make outstanding progress on these courses, with examples of individual students reaching two or three grades higher than those initially predicted for them.

The school has excellent ICT facilities. Students recognise this, appreciate the opportunities that this brings to work, and learn with a greater degree of independence. Enterprise skills,

linked with the world of business, are promoted well, and the use of mixed-age groups means that students become involved in this approach to learning from Year 7 onwards.

Approximately 50 students in Key Stage 4 and a smaller group of students in Key Stage 3 follow a variety of practical skills-based courses at the Thanet Skills studio, working towards GCSE equivalent qualifications. Strong links between the school and the studio help to ensure that success rates are very high. This is an outstanding opportunity for students, most of whom have learning difficulties, helping them to make good progress towards the next stage in their education or training.

At Key Stage 3, students with learning difficulties are supported well through the 'golden curriculum' where they are taught together for a number of subjects, working with the same staff team. This gives greater continuity to learning and helps students make good progress, especially in improving their reading ages. At Key Stage 4, similar opportunities are provided by the ASDAN course that offers a flexible activity-based programmes for students. In a Year 10 lesson, students were effectively motivated, worked independently using laptop computers well and showed good note-taking skills.

The school recognises that it needs to develop further opportunities for higher attaining students and has appropriate plans in place for September 2008. This will allow some students to progress through Key Stage 3 more rapidly, opening the way for a wider range of options at Key Stage 4, including studying three separate sciences. The school offers a good range of extra-curricular activities including sports and performing arts and a good choice of homework and revision clubs.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Surveys of parents show they are positive about the standards of care and support the school provides. Good systems are in place to support students with difficulties and/or disabilities, vulnerable students and those at risk of disaffection. Access to external agencies, for example county social services, helps the school to give rapid assistance to students and their families. The visual impairment unit provides good one-to-one dedicated support, mostly within class.

The transfer of students from primary schools is well managed by staff who visit the schools and prepare for newcomers. Students say that they settled quickly into their new surroundings. The 'golden curriculum' in the lower part of the school provides the focused literacy and numeracy input that some students require. The guidance programme ensures that students receive good support and information when making their subject choices in Year 9. Those students who might need advice and encouragement to go on to further education receive individual help from a specialist mentor and from visiting sixth formers. This raises their aspiration and self-esteem.

Staff have access to data which tracks students' progress and pastoral information. Increasingly, college heads and support officers are able to identify students who are not doing as well as expected and draw attention to their needs. Despite this, individual lesson plans do not always take full account of the wide range of aptitudes and needs in many classes. Students all know their levels that they are working at and their personal targets. They discuss these at regular one-to-one meetings with tutors. However, day-to-day advice on how they might make progress through teachers' marking, or self- and peer-assessment, is inconsistent.

Staff working with students are vetted thoroughly for suitability and robust and effective child protection procedures are in place. Risk assessments are carried out appropriately for the school premises and for off-site activities.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The leadership of the school is good. The headteacher has a clear vision for the future of the school and provides strong leadership during a period of considerable change and development. Staff responsible for leading and managing are sharply focused on ensuring good personal and academic development for all students, regardless of their background or capability. Their good record of accomplishment in raising attainment and identifying and remedying weaknesses demonstrates good capacity for improvement. Planning for improvement is based on a rigorous analysis of students' progress and students are frequently invited to contribute to the evaluation of actions taken. Self-evaluation is accurate and managers have a clear understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Systems to monitor the work of the school are in place and recently developed access to accurate assessment information ensures that teachers are well informed about students' standards and achievement. However, this information is not always used effectively to plan students' next steps for learning.

The partnership between the senior leaders and middle leaders is effective. Whilst growing in expertise, because the school is in a period of rapid change and development, some leaders are developing their new roles and responsibilities and, as a result, are not yet fully effective.

Outstanding links have been forged with outside agencies to support learning. Parents are supportive and particularly value the opportunities that school life offers their children. Governors provide an excellent balance of support and challenge, they are very well informed about the progress that the school is making and are not complacent. They are extremely well placed to hold the school to account and drive improvement.

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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
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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 capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3
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	2

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2
How well learners enjoy their education	2
The attendance of learners	3
The behaviour of learners	2
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2

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?	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?	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2
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	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

Dear Students

Inspection of Charles Dickens School, Broadstairs, CT10 2RL

Thank you for contributing to the inspection of your school and a particular thank you to all of you who took time to speak to us and tell us your views. This letter provides a brief summary of our findings but I hope you will take time to read our full report.

- The school provides a good standard of education and it is continuing to improve.
- Examination results are improving because of the positive attitudes you are developing to learning and the good quality of teaching and care you receive.
- You have good opportunities to develop as considerate and responsible young people. You told us that you feel safe and get on well with other students and the adults who work with you.
- You have an outstanding choice of subjects to study and the school has worked hard to enable most of you to choose subjects that match your skills and interests.
- Many of you participate in the good range of clubs and activities that are available and you have an excellent understanding of the need to keep healthy.
- You have good opportunities to prepare for work or further study but you need to make sure that you do as well as you can in all the subjects you study, particularly mathematics and English.
- The school is well led and those responsible for leading and managing the school are always looking for ways to make it better. The school is going through a period of rapid change and trying many new things that should help you to learn better.

Most of you are supported well in your lessons, but we have asked the school to make sure that when teachers plan your work, they make sure that the different groups in your classes get the right level of challenge and support, so that all of you learn as well as you can. We have also asked teachers to make sure that the comments in your books and the feedback that they give you in lessons help you understand how well you are doing and what you need to do to improve or develop your work.

I am sure that you will want to continue to work hard and play your part in making your school even more successful.

Yours sincerely

Robert Ellis Her Majesty's Inspector