

Larkmead School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	123255
Local Authority	Oxfordshire
Inspection number	314554
Inspection dates	14–15 May 2008
Reporting inspector	Emma Ing 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	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	775
6th form	70
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Dr James Tweed
Headteacher	Mr Chris Harris
Date of previous school inspection	14 March 2005
School address	Faringdon Road Abingdon OX14 1RF
Telephone number	01235 520141
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Age group	11-18
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Introduction

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

Description of the school

Larkmead School students travel into school both from the local town and from the surrounding rural area. Nearly all students come from White British backgrounds but there are a few students from other white backgrounds and a few from Black British and Asian backgrounds. The school has a specialist unit for up to ten hearing impaired students and also takes students with physical difficulties. The school works in partnership with two local schools and the local college to provide sixth form courses.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

Larkmead School is a satisfactory and improving school. The headteacher leads the school well and increasingly there is a shared understanding throughout the school of what needs to be done to ensure that students do really well. There is widespread agreement that students' behaviour has improved significantly and is good because staff have worked with students to establish expectations and consequences. Students' take pride in their school and are courteous, well behaved and supportive of each other. Changes to the curriculum at Key Stage 4 mean that all students are now able to undertake successfully courses that are appropriate, relevant and interesting to them. Students feel safe and enjoy school and, as a result of a recent focus, attendance is now in line with national averages.

A high proportion of parents responded to our questionnaire and of these, the vast majority are happy with the school. They agree with the student who explained to us that 'This school has a really good spirit.' Certainly, many students participate in the wide range of extra curricular and enrichment activities that are on offer and derive great enjoyment from their experiences. The school's provision has helped them understand how to live healthily and safely and most are, in different ways, making a positive contribution to the school and wider community. The school's specialist status in visual and performing arts has been used well to enrich the lives of students. Art, music, dance and drama provide a strong cultural element to the school. Sixth formers play an important role in supporting the learning and social development of younger students and value the base that the school gives them even as they access courses at different institutions across the 16-19 Abingdon partnership.

Students make outstanding progress in their first three years in the school. This momentum is not maintained however, and, when they reach Year 11, their progress is satisfactory. They arrive with levels of attainment that are below average, and the standards reached in Year 11 are also below average.

Those that stay on in the sixth form also make satisfactory progress and at A Level achieve in line with national averages. The school admits a small number of students with hearing impairment and also several who have physical disabilities. These students, together with those who have learning difficulties, make satisfactory progress as the support they receive is satisfactory but this too is improving. The provision of ramps means that much of the school is wheelchair accessible; however, throughout the school there are doors that cannot be opened from a chair.

Lessons run smoothly because the behaviour of students is good and because they are carefully planned with clear learning objectives. However, teachers are not yet good at making sure that all the students in every class have work that is matched to their ability and that the level of challenge is appropriate for each student. Although books are marked teachers' comments do not give clear directions to students about what level they are working at and what they have to do to improve their work. Teaching is sound but senior leaders have recognised that it could be more exciting and have won a bid to introduce new and creative methods of teaching into the school from September. This is likely to support teachers in ensuring that all students make good progress in lessons and develop good independent learning and teamwork skills.

A good deal of work has been undertaken by leaders throughout the school to ensure that the conditions for good learning are in place and improvements have been made since the last inspection. Systems for ensuring that leaders evaluate the progress of their area towards the

school's development goals have been introduced but the school has not yet developed smart ways for monitoring the impact of its work and plans do not focus sharply enough on outcomes for students. The school is rightly switching to setting more challenging attainment targets for students from September. Leaders are aware that they need to set up systems to track the progress made by individuals and groups of students and make sure that teachers use this information to ensure that all students maintain good progress.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

AS and A-level courses in the sixth form are offered as part of a consortium. Standards are average and progress is broadly satisfactory at A-level. At AS level, standards have been low for students in some subjects. Positive action has been taken to address the issues and although outcomes of these changes are not fully evident yet, progress for the current Year 12 students is showing improvement. Individual monitoring of students' performance against their targets is thorough. However, the school relies too much on data from the consortium and does not track and monitor the progress of its own cohort of students sufficiently.

The quality of lessons is variable but is satisfactory overall with a strong focus on revision and examination techniques at this time of year. Sixth form students benefit from the wide range of enrichment opportunities and contribute effectively to the life of the school. They organise, produce and promote a successful annual pantomime and act as successful peer mentors for Year 7 students. A group of sixth form students have influential leadership roles in the school.

Students have access to a wide range of AS and A-level subjects through the consortium. Some of these are taught at other institutions, which give students an opportunity to experience the world beyond the school.

Care, guidance and support are good. Students have regular group and individual tutorials at the school regardless of where their teaching takes place in the consortium. They are well informed of choices after the sixth form and receive good support with their university applications.

What the school should do to improve further

- Develop school wide systems to monitor the impact of the work of the school in relation to outcomes for students.
- Embed universal challenging achievement targets for students and a rigorous tracking system to enable the school to follow students' progress against these and intervene to ensure that all make good progress.
- Ensure that the different learning needs of all students are met in each lesson and that students are given clear feedback on what they need to do to improve their work and gain their target grades/levels.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Students arrive at Larkmead having reached standards that are below the national average. They make exceptional progress during Key Stage 3 and reach average standards of attainment in English, mathematics and science. Their overall progress from Key Stage 2- Key Stage 4 however is satisfactory. Changes to the curriculum have now ensured that many of those

students who may have been disaffected are now engaged and making good progress on courses that meet their needs well. Although the proportion of students who achieve 5 A*-G has risen, standards at GCSE are below average overall, and the school is rightly working to ensure that a higher proportion of students is enabled to achieve 5 A*-C grades including English and mathematics. In some subjects, such as mathematics, religious education, food technology, and geography, students do very well with a high proportion reaching top grades. In the sixth form, students make satisfactory progress and achieve standards that are in line with national averages.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Students are courteous and well behaved. They take pride in their school and in the environment, several commenting that they work hard to keep it litter free. Students enjoy school. A high proportion is involved in supporting others through peer mentoring and 'buddying' systems, whilst others play an important part in contributing to the student voice or leading assemblies. Students feel safe and know how to find help should they need it.

Through the visual and performing arts faculty students are developing their cultural awareness and many are proud of the roles they have played in productions or exhibitions of work. They also participate well in activities beyond the school supporting the local community and beyond. Behaviour around the school is generally very good. Thus, the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of students is good. Because lessons generally lack opportunities for students to work independently, lead others and develop problem-solving skills students have not developed these attributes as strongly as others.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Lessons are well managed and organised. Relationships in classrooms are positive and behaviour is good. Teachers and learners alike are clear about the learning objectives and students are well supported in their learning through clear expositions and helpful opportunities to practise skills. Learning however is satisfactory rather than good, because teachers do not match the teaching closely enough to differing individual needs within the classroom. Teachers tend to dominate lessons with insufficient opportunities given for students to take responsibility for their own learning. This means that for some, there is insufficient challenge. Teaching assistants are not always fully used to promote progress. Teachers do assess students' work, but the comments they write do not focus with sufficient clarity on what level or grade the student is on track to meet and what precisely they need to do to improve their work.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Students value the opportunities that the school's specialism in visual and performing arts has created. Cross-curricular projects bring enrichment and through extra curricular activities and enhanced curricular time students are developing good skills in these areas. The specialism is also working well to develop links between Larkmead and local primary schools and the wider community. The impact of the specialist subjects in driving improvement across the curriculum and improving the quality of teaching and learning is beginning to be felt.

The school encourages students to become involved in a wide range of positive activities and students enjoy playing a part in sports, in raising money for charities, and contributing to the community.

The revised Key Stage 4 timetable now means that the school is providing well for disaffected students throughout the school and that there are opportunities for students of differing ability levels to achieve success. Through the 'Gifted and Talented' initiative, some students are being encouraged to extend their thinking and the school also supports those who may not think of aspiring to go on to further education through mentoring and visits to such institutions. Governors too have become involved in mentoring students who the school identifies as being likely to benefit from such an arrangement. The school promotes healthy and safe lifestyles well with positive outcomes in these areas for students.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

Staff know their students well and are concerned to ensure that each takes full advantage of their talents and the opportunities available to them. Good partnerships have been formed with other agencies to further support students. Arrangements for ensuring the safety of students are good. A concerted effort by the school to improve attendance has meant that this is now in line with national averages.

Many parents commented that that the arrangements to support children in moving to the school from their primary schools are very helpful and ensure that the youngest students settle in well. Similarly, staff carefully tailor careers and options advice to individual needs and help students choose appropriate courses for themselves. The provision for students with learning difficulties is satisfactory and improving. The school has robust policies for managing behaviour, which, because staff apply them consistently, have been very effective in ensuring that lessons are not disrupted. Those that are not able to conform to the school's high standards of behaviour are given good opportunities to keep up with their work.

The school is beginning to ensure that challenging academic targets are set for all students. The current system for tracking the progress made by students is not based on sufficiently challenging targets and does not enable leaders to monitor students' performance with sufficient regularity or rigour. The school is therefore rightly planning to introduce new systems for the next academic year.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

The school is very well led by the headteacher who has ensured that the building blocks for improvement are in place. Together with his governors and senior leadership team, the headteacher has identified the most important next steps the school must take to enable pupils to make good progress. Leaders have begun to introduce a rigorous system to track students' progress against challenging targets but this is not yet sufficiently advanced to ensure appropriate intervention. Senior leaders and governors have considered how the school might best promote racial equality and are mindful of the importance of social inclusion. Work has begun to develop the leadership skills of middle managers, some of whom are now very successful in driving improvement. However, although the school engages in self-evaluation, judgements tend to be generous and systems to ensure that the work the school does is properly monitored and evaluated against hard targets are not yet fully implemented. Governors are taking an active role in leading this process. They are involved fully in strategic decisions about the school and also contribute to the life of the school in a variety of different ways.

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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?	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	3	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?	2	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	2	2
The attendance of learners	3	
The behaviour of learners	2	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2	2
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3	2

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?	2	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	3	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	3	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	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

27 May 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Larkmead School, Abingdon, OX14 1RF

You may remember that together with a small team of inspectors, I recently inspected your school. Many of you took time to show us round, talk to us, and shared with us your work. Thank you all very much for your contributions to the inspection. It is important to us to find out what you, the students, think about the school.

One thing we noted was that, as one of your parents said, 'the school has a nice feel'. Many of you told us that behaviour has improved. We were impressed at the standards of behaviour we saw and by your courtesy and your pride in your school and its achievements. Both you and your parents agreed that you enjoy school and the many enrichment activities that go on. It is clear to us that you make outstanding progress in Key Stage 3, but that higher up the school in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form progress is satisfactory, and your results in public exams are just a bit below average. We were pleased to see that your attendance has improved. This will make a difference. We were also pleased to hear about the changes to the curriculum in Key Stage 4 and to see how well some of you are doing on the new courses.

Some of you know your academic targets, and some of you shared with us that you think they are a bit easy. In many cases we agree, and so we have asked the school to set challenging targets, and to be very systematic in the way they track your progress towards these targets. This will mean that they can intervene if anyone starts to fall behind. The teaching in your school is well structured around clear learning objectives and because your behaviour is good, a steady pace is maintained. We have asked the school however to develop teaching in order to make sure that each of you is working at a level that meets your own need. In addition, to make sure that when your work is marked, teachers explain what level/grade you are achieving and what you need to do to make your work better. Finally, we have suggested that school leaders should implement systems to ensure that the work the school does is properly monitored and evaluated in terms of the difference that it makes to you, the students.

I hope that you will want to find out more of our judgements by finding the full report on the Ofsted website (www.ofsted.gov.uk). I look forward to following the progress of your school and wish you all the very best in the future.

Yours sincerely

Emma Ing

Her Majesty's Inspector