

John Mason School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	123256
Local Authority	Oxfordshire
Inspection number	314555
Inspection dates	22–23 January 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	948
6th form	121
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Dr A DeVere
Headteacher	Miss D Mashiter
Date of previous school inspection	15 September 2003
School address	Wootton Road Abingdon OX14 1JB
Telephone number	01235 524664
Fax number	01235 520711

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

John Mason School is an average sized specialist Visual and Performing Arts School in a small market town just south of Oxford. Few students are eligible for free school meals although a few come from areas of social deprivation. The proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is small but there are a number of students who are learning English as an additional language. The proportion of students who have statements of special educational need is slightly below average. The inspection took place two weeks after a new head teacher had taken office.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 4

John Mason School provides an acceptable standard of education with strengths in the sixth form, which provides well for students. The school has been through an unsettled period in leadership that has been handled sufficiently well to avoid major slippage but has left the school behind most other schools in terms of their development and improvement. As a result leaders have had too little impact on raising standards. Although the new headteacher has a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school, others do not share this. There has not been time for her to put in place the steps that need to be taken in order to achieve her vision of excellence for the school. There is good practice in various aspects of the work of the school but it is not shared or consistent across the school. The governance of the school is inadequate as it has not provided sufficient challenge to the school and because the statutory requirements to adopt, implement and monitor the impact of a race equality policy, to hold a daily act of collective worship and to report to parents on progress in citizenship have not been met.

In accordance with legislation, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires significant improvement, because it is performing significantly less well in all the circumstances that it could reasonably be expected to perform. The school is therefore given a Notice to Improve. Significant improvement is required in relation to leadership, management and governance.

One parent shared their opinion that the school has low expectations and that 'Average is acceptable'. Although this is not the vision of the new headteacher, inspectors recognised elements of this in much of the rest of the school. Although generally satisfactory, lessons, for example, rarely challenge all the students some of whom reported that they can choose whether to do hard, middling, or easy tasks according to how they feel. Too many lessons are pedestrian. Much of the marking of students' work does not clearly identify for them what it is that they need to do to improve their work. The targets that are set are insufficiently challenging. As a result standards reached in the school are average, and the progress made by students between Year 7 and Year 11 is a little below that made by students nationally. In last year's Year 11, no students made exceptionally good progress. In the sixth form however, students make good progress and achieve above expectations. They are supported well by the school in most areas.

There are pockets of very good practice particularly in art, and in mathematics and English. Students make better than average progress in these subjects. Those students who become involved in the arts benefit a good deal from the rich experiences on offer whilst those who are school councillors demonstrate both strong commitment to the school and well organised support of its improvement through identification of issues and action plans for improvement. Sixth-form students support the work of the school by being peer mentors and counsellors.

Students are generally pleasant around the school. Although the school is by no means disorderly or unsafe, parents express concern about the low-level disruption in lessons and about bullying. A recently introduced behaviour policy has gone some way to improving behaviour in the school and in the last term the number of exclusions and detentions reduced significantly. Students observe that behaviour remains an issue in a few lessons where staff are inconsistent in following the behaviour policy.

The curriculum at Key Stage 3 has broadened in response to the individual learning needs of students. Key Stage 4 provides a range of options to meet the different interests and abilities

of students. Curricular opportunities for students aged 16 and over are good. There are some good extra-curricular opportunities in physical education and in arts subjects that are much appreciated by students. The school's base in Wales provides many valuable opportunities for students to enrich their understanding of different subjects, to learn beyond the classroom and also to have good fun together.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The school is a member of the Abingdon 14-19 partnership in conjunction with Abingdon and Witney College and two other local secondary schools. As a result, students at the school have an excellent range of courses that they can choose from at different levels and in a wide range of subjects. Those that choose predominantly vocational courses tend to switch to the college, but others stay at John Mason School and may attend courses at partnership institutions. The school is aware of and working on the difficulties they face in quality assuring the experiences that their students have at the different institutions of the partnership.

The standards reached by students in the sixth form are in line with national averages. This represents good progress for most students who achieve above expectations based on their GCSE results. Progress is particularly good in the sciences and in English, geography, art and mathematics. Most sixth formers go on to university, a few to leading universities.

Sixth form students report that they feel well cared for and that they are well supported in their work. Their progress is monitored and they are clear about their target grades and the extent to which they are on track to meet them. The school is good at encouraging students to take responsibility for their progress and to reflect on how they can improve. In lessons, however they are often rather passive learners. Around the school the sixth formers are a positive influence; their personal development is good. Some are involved in supporting younger learners through 'buddying' and mentoring schemes whilst others are engaged in sports leadership or offer arts based workshops to younger students.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that the school meets statutory requirements and improve the quality of governance.
- Empower staff at all levels to lead and to develop good practice across the school.
- Raise expectations of what pupils can achieve and set challenging targets for all.
- Engage pupils in their learning and make sure that they know what they need to do to improve their work.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

The standards that students reach at the end of Year 9 and Year 11 are in line with the national average. The number of good GCSE passes attained by students has fluctuated over the past three years, improving last year after a significant fall, but the average attainment has remained static and in line with national averages. For the students of this school this represents slightly below average progress from Year 7 to Year 11. Students do particularly well in mathematics, English, art, business studies and physical education. In these subjects, the proportion that attains top grades is also good. Because English and mathematics are strong subjects at this school a higher proportion than average achieve 5 A*-C grades including English and

mathematics at GCSE. However, the performance of students in some modern foreign languages and in design and technology, information and communication technology and in drama is weak.

In the sixth form, standards are in line with national averages but because attainment on entry is lower than average this represents good progress.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

The atmosphere in the school is cheerful and positive. Around the school and in lessons behaviour is generally satisfactory and often good. Although students say that they feel safe, they acknowledge that there is still an uncomfortable level of bullying and that there are one or two areas of the school that some avoid. The school council represents the student body effectively. Members have prepared some excellent development plans for the school based on their recognition of things that need to be improved. They recently led an anti-bullying campaign, which they feel has improved matters. These students, together with those who are involved in the arts, show good initiative and skills of independence and teamwork. 'Reading buddies' in Year 10 work very effectively to support younger readers. Throughout the school as a whole however, such skills are less well developed. The moral and social development of students is therefore satisfactory overall.

Those students who take advantage of the wide range of activities offered by the Art department and Performing Arts Faculty and others who are involved in school trips, are able to develop good cultural awareness, but few students are familiar with minority cultures so that overall this element is unsatisfactory. Partly as a result of the failure of the school to provide a daily act of collective worship, spiritual development is also weak.

Students have a good knowledge of how to live a healthy lifestyle but there is evidence around the school that some do not follow one. Nevertheless students very much value the range of sporting activities and many are involved in these both in and out of school. On leaving school, a small, but worrying, number of students do not go on to further education or training.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

Teachers' subject knowledge is sound. Lessons are securely planned around learning outcomes to ensure that students make steady progress in most. Explanations are clear and the tasks and activities that students are given build well upon these. In some lessons, good use is made of demonstration and in others the activities are fun and challenging and thus engage the students well. Students are encouraged to collaborate and support each other which enables the less confident to achieve well.

Collaboration between teachers and teaching assistants is often underdeveloped although there is generally good differentiation to help those with learning difficulties and disabilities to participate and make progress in lessons. There is however too little challenge for students in some lessons and too few opportunities for them to develop independent learning skills in

many. Expectations are generally low and teachers' marking often fails to identify what the student needs to do next in order to improve their work.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

The school's specialist status has been well managed within the Art Department and Performing Arts Faculty and has resulted in an expanded curriculum and resources that genuinely excite and enthuse a good proportion of students. Results in many arts subjects are well above the school's average. The strong leadership and good practice that takes place within the faculty have not yet been used to drive improvements in the school as a whole.

The curriculum at Key Stage 3 has been modified to meet the needs of the full range of learners but, as the school is aware, is not yet able to meet individual learning needs really effectively. At Key Stage 4, guided choice provides for the range of students' abilities and interests but does not allow for much flexibility or a wide range of choices. Links with businesses are good and students have opportunities to develop their understanding of the world of work. There are some strong opportunities for enrichment both through visits to the school's base in Wales, which are evidently enjoyed by many, and through trips abroad. Many students appreciate the extra opportunities that are available to them in sport and the arts.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

Staff are very caring of individual students, particularly those experiencing difficulties. The safeguarding of students is secure. In the last term, the school has implemented a behaviour policy and has successfully reduced the number of pupils who are excluded or on detention. Action has been also been taken to reduce the students' absence rate which is now in line with national averages. Students who are new to the school are well supported, as are students who are at an early stage of learning English. The school reports clearly to parents in all subjects except citizenship and most students know at what level they are working and what they should be aiming for. The targets set however are not sufficiently challenging and there are weaknesses in the school's ability to track the progress of all students and intervene effectively at an early stage to ensure that all are on track. Some departments do this much more effectively than others.

Students with learning difficulties and disabilities are given the additional help they need to ensure that their progress is in line with the rest of the cohort. Recent improvements in practice have made individual education plans more effective. Although the programmes of work-related learning are strong, some students, in both main school and the sixth form report that they feel that the guidance given about future careers is weak. The school does not promote race equality and opportunities for students to develop awareness of different cultures are too few.

Leadership and management

Grade: 4

Grade for sixth form: 2

There are strong indications that things are set to improve rapidly under the new head teacher who has rightly gained the confidence of staff and set a vision of an excellent school before them. She is aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the school and has strategies for improvement. However, the impact of leadership and management until now has been insufficient to enable the school to make the progress that it should towards delivering a consistently good education for all its students. This is because leaders have not been able to set a clear direction based on a realistic understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school. Targets have lacked challenge.

Although there is some good practice in the school, there is too much inconsistency and middle leaders have not been empowered to lead effectively and to develop the expertise of others. The leadership of the sixth form has delivered good outcomes for students although the quality assurance of lessons that take place at sites other than the school is not effective.

The fabric of the school is run down and as a result does not engender respect from students; however, the resources on offer to them promote good learning in the arts, including a gallery which is used as a local community resource, and are satisfactory across the school.

The governance of the school is inadequate. Governors have failed to set high expectations. Despite the recommendations of previous Ofsted reports, statutory requirements are not met in relation to collective worship. In addition, the school does not meet the statutory requirement to adopt, implement and monitor a race equality policy or the requirement to report to parents on their children's progress in citizenship. The student welfare committee has not met for over a year and as a result important policies have not been adopted which has held up the progress of the school.

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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?	4	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	No	No
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	3	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	3	3

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3	2
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	3	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	3	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	3	
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	2	
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	2
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?	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?	4	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	4	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	4	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	4	2
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	4	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	4	
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?	Yes	

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

25 February 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of John Mason School, Abingdon, OX14 1JB

Thank you for welcoming my team and me when we came to inspect your school. We were very interested in watching you at work and particularly in talking to you about how you are finding your education. I was very impressed by your school council and the leading role that they are playing in securing improvement in the school.

We judged that the school is providing you with an acceptable education and that the sixth form is, as many of you told me, a good sixth form. There are some good things about the school and even more that are satisfactory. You are making average progress in your work at school between Years 7 and 11. However, we are concerned that you could be doing better than that if various small issues and inconsistencies were sorted out. Your new head teacher knows what needs to be done, but at the time of the inspection, had not had time to make a difference. For this reason, we have given the school a notice to improve and asked leaders to sort out four things:

- the school must meet statutory requirements in relation to collective worship, race equality and the reporting of your progress in citizenship.
- leaders of the school at all levels should evaluate accurately what needs to be done, and, like the school council, formulate robust plans to achieve improvement. There is much good practice in the school that should be shared and developed.
- everyone needs to have high expectations of themselves and of others, you included, and set demanding targets.
- some of your teachers should make your lessons more interesting and challenging.

Well done for your recent improvement in your behaviour - keep it up and work with your teachers to make your school as good as any in the country. I do hope that you feel it would be interesting to read the full report, which you can find on our website - www.ofsted.gov.uk.

With best wishes

Emma Ing HMI