

The Ashcombe School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	125264
Local Authority	Surrey
Inspection number	315216
Inspection date	13 February 2008
Reporting inspector	Anne Feltham 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	1502
6th form	252
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Ms J Housden
Headteacher	Mr D Blow
Date of previous school inspection	18 October 2004
School address	Ashcombe Road Dorking RH4 1LY
Telephone number	01306 886312
Fax number	01306 742537

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one Additional Inspector. Inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues: achievement and standards; students' personal development, including their behaviour and attitudes; and aspects of provision as well as the quality of leadership and management. Evidence was gathered from: the school's self-evaluation form (SEF); national published assessment data and the school's own assessment records; curriculum, planning and monitoring documents; observation of parts of some lessons; discussions with staff, students, the chair of governors and two external partners; full analysis of parental questionnaires and telephone messages; and scrutiny of samples of students' work. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail; however, inspectors found no evidence to suggest that the school's own evaluation was not justified, and these other aspects have been included where appropriate in the report.

Description of the school

The Ashcombe School is a larger than average secondary school, with a large sixth form. It has been a specialist language college for some years, and has won a number of awards: Investors in People, SportsMark, Healthy Schools and most recently, Sustainable Schools. The great majority of students are of white British heritage and a small number come from a range of black and Asian backgrounds. The school has lower numbers than is usual of students whose English is at an early stage of development, who have learning difficulties and disabilities or who are entitled to free school meals. The school population is stable. It is situated in an area of social and economic advantage, although students come from a wide range of backgrounds. The school was led at the time of the last inspection by the acting headteacher, who has now been the substantive head for three years.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

The Ashcombe School is a good school, with many outstanding features. One parent wrote, reflecting the views of many, 'We are fortunate to have such a good school, which provides a good education'. Students are proud of their school and have developed much improved attitudes to learning since the time of the previous inspection. Excellent leadership and management by the headteacher and his talented senior team have enabled the school to improve in many ways, and it has the clear potential to become outstanding in all areas.

Students enter the school with standards that are above average. They make rapid progress in Years 7 to 9 and standards at the end of Year 9 are well above average. Although students generally make good progress as they move through the school, this slows down slightly in a few curriculum areas in Years 10 and 11. Nevertheless, students still attain well above average results overall, and standards in mathematics and English are very high by the end of Year 11. Boys' achievement was an area of concern at the time of the last inspection, and the school has worked hard to bring about improvement in this area. In most subjects boys achieve as well as girls, and gaps have narrowed in subjects such as English, where traditionally boys have not always reached their full potential. Students with learning difficulties and disabilities make excellent progress. The school offers personalised provision which enables students who need extra support to catch up, and those who have problems with low self-esteem or anger management to make very good progress. The school's monitoring systems for tracking students' progress are excellent: this ensures that students who are under-achieving are identified quickly and given the support they need. Students have a good understanding of how well they are doing and what they are aiming for. Most parents feel they receive useful information on their child's progress, although some would like more frequent communication with the school.

Students develop well as they grow through the school. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is strong. They feel safe, know how to remain healthy and prepare well for their future lives. They enjoy taking responsibility in school and are particularly enthusiastic about the school council which has, they say, become more effective in recent years. Parents and students are proud of how well the school celebrates diversity. Students in this predominantly white school develop a respect for differences and have a strong sense of justice. One teacher talked of her students' response to news of racist football chanting: 'that's bang out of order, Miss'. Students appreciate the range of opportunities to learn about other languages and cultures, with active partnerships in Romania, China and Tanzania.

The previous inspection report recommended that students' behaviour and attitudes should be improved. Behaviour seen during this inspection was always at least good, and all members of the school community feel that this has been an area of significant improvement in recent years. Parents and students report that there remains some low-level disruption in a small minority of lessons, where teaching is weaker. The school has recognised where intervention is needed and is also developing sanctions and rewards systems well. The use of the 'My Ashcombe' electronic system means that teachers and tutors have instantaneous access to information about their students' rewards and sanctions and this is resulting in very clear boundaries with regard to standards of behaviour. Older students benefit greatly from opportunities to work with younger ones, both within the school and in partnership with local primary schools. Students are confident, yet respectful, in their interactions with visitors and are great ambassadors for their school.

Most teaching in the school is of high quality and some is outstanding. Teachers have very good relationships with their students and this results in high levels of motivation and enjoyment. Teachers use the school's excellent facilities and accommodation to the full and this gives students a very motivating context for learning. Challenging targets are set for students, and teachers have a good understanding of what their students can achieve. They give helpful feedback to students, setting 'process targets' which explain the next steps in learning. The school has identified the areas where teaching and learning are of weaker quality and is intervening to ensure that all reach the level of the best. School governors say: 'we're definitely not complacent'.

The inspection confirms the school's view that its curriculum is outstanding: wide opportunities, supported by excellent facilities and resources, for example, for the performing arts, information and communications technology and design and technology. Students and parents are delighted with the opportunities offered, both within the curriculum and beyond the school. Students make a range of visits, both within the locality and country, and abroad. Those who have been on visits share their experiences with their peers on their return to school, for example, in assemblies, and this ensures that all students derive benefit from these extra-curricular opportunities. Specialist language college status has had a strong impact on students' education, in particular, in widening their horizons and deepening their understanding of the world beyond the classroom. This work is further supported by students' powerful experiences in personal, social and health education, religious studies and citizenship.

This is an inclusive school, which provides excellent care, support and guidance for its students. One parent wrote, 'the school has given my child many opportunities; he feels able to talk to the staff and always comes home with lots to say about the day.' Students who have experienced illness, bereavement and other disadvantageous circumstances talk with great warmth about the way the school has supported them.

The school is exceptionally well led and managed. All management structures are clear, understood by all and embedded in the day-to-day running of the school. Self-evaluation is accurate and honest, enabling the school to act decisively on areas for development, such as behaviour and attendance. The strong challenge and support for middle managers, which are provided by the leadership team, enable them to develop professionally and fulfil their roles very effectively. The school has worked with the wider community to develop languages, particularly within the primary sector, and provided fine leadership through its specialist school status. Training opportunities led by Ashcombe have enabled primary teachers, who are becoming languages specialists, to gain in confidence and competence. The chair of the local development group talked of teachers coming away from their training sessions highly motivated: 'there's a really great buzz!'. Specialist status has been used very well not only to develop languages in the area, but also international awareness, with local teachers benefiting from organised trips to support their own professional development. The governing body fulfils its functions in an exemplary manner and holds the school to account very effectively. This is a school which already has many outstanding features and the clear capacity for further improvement.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 1

The sixth form is extremely effective and successful. Students' standards and achievement in the sixth form are outstanding, and the high number of students who choose to stay on in the school for their post-16 education reflects these successes. They benefit from the school's excellent sixth form provision, and seize with relish the wide range of curriculum and

extra-curricular opportunities offered them. They take part in a wide and varied number of charitable undertakings, supporting home-based charities such as the Royal Marsden Hospital, and a number of international charities. They visit, and undertake work projects in, countries such as Romania and Tanzania; a highlight is the biennial visit of a group of Tanzanian students, who stay with students' families and come into school to talk to younger students, enriching their education. Sixth-formers also work with younger students and primary school pupils in a wide range of coaching contexts, which develops their own confidence and their sense of personal responsibility. Leadership of the sixth form is outstanding, and students particularly appreciate the way their views are taken into account in order to bring about continuous improvement. As one sixth-former said, speaking of the head of sixth form, 'he's part of the sixth-form, his door is always open'.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that all students achieve to their full potential in all subject areas.
- Ensure that behaviour in all classes matches that in the best classrooms.

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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?	2	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	1	1

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	1
The standards ¹ reached by learners	1	1
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	1
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?	2	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	2	
The attendance of learners	3	
The behaviour of learners	2	
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	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	1	1
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	1	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1	
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

03 March 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of The Ashcombe School, Dorking, RH4 1LY

Following our recent inspection of your school, I am writing to let you know about our findings. Thank you for talking to us. We greatly enjoyed the confident way in which you told us your views and talked about the range of opportunities that the schools offers you.

Yours is a good school, with many outstanding features. Your headteacher and his senior colleagues lead it extremely well. Your teachers are very caring and provide you with excellent support and guidance as you move through the years. The school knows exactly how well you are doing, so that you can achieve your best. Your parents told us that they are generally very pleased with how the school educates you, although they would like to make sure that you behave really well at all times, and in all lessons.

We were particularly impressed by the pride you take in your school and the way you relish the opportunities it offers to learn about the wider world. You learn how to become 'citizens of the world' through the school's very active links with schools and countries across continents. Many of you talked with enthusiasm about the visits you receive, for example, from students from Tanzania. You respect, and are interested in, people's differences and have a strong sense of justice and fairness.

We think your school has made a great deal of progress since it was last inspected. In order to improve even further, the school agrees with us that they need to: make sure you all achieve your full potential in every subject, particularly in Years 10 and 11; and ensure that teaching and learning is consistently strong across all classes.

We wish you all the very best in your future lives, and hope that, with the help of the school, you realise your ambitions.

Yours sincerely,

Anne Feltham HMI

Lead Inspector