

Ashlyns School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117578
Local Authority	HERTFORDSHIRE LA
Inspection number	319482
Inspection dates	16–17 April 2008
Reporting inspector	Philip Mann 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	13–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	784
6th form	206
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Garrick Stevens
Headteacher	Mr Richard Dalziel
Date of previous school inspection	21 March 2007
School address	Chesham Road Berkhamsted Hertfordshire HP4 3AH
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and three Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

The school is smaller than average. Key Stage 3 provision is shared with two middle schools who teach Years 7 and 8; sixth form provision is part of the local consortium. The local community displays a number of social and economic advantages. The proportions of students eligible for free school meals, and of those from minority ethnic groups, are below average. The number of students with learning difficulties and disabilities is average, although the number with a statement of special educational need is low. Attainment on entry has been above average for several years. When Ashlyns School was inspected in March 2007, it was judged to require significant improvement.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

In accordance with section 13 (5) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) is of the opinion that the school no longer requires significant improvement. The school states, on the basis of its self-evaluation, that it is now working effectively in all areas. Inspectors agree and judge that it is demonstrating at least satisfactory levels of effectiveness. Furthermore, several strengths are beginning to emerge, especially in the personal development of students which is good and the support and guidance offered to them. Written comments from parents during the inspection and the many positive remarks made by students reflect this improvement. One parent wrote, 'My child is happy to go to school and comes home smiling.' Although some parental concerns remain, inspectors feel confident that the school is dealing with these issues effectively. This is because the senior leadership team has worked hard to establish a positive climate for learning throughout the school within which all students can now 'achieve and aspire.' Nevertheless, despite a trend of improvement, standards are still only average at the end of Key Stage 4 and achievement, while satisfactory overall, is uneven.

Behaviour is now good and many students thrive on the numerous opportunities available for them to develop their personal social skills through imaginative learning experiences. The atmosphere is calm and orderly as students move about the building. Behaviour is good in lessons, even when teaching is less effective. Improved behaviour management and greater engagement of students in their own learning have contributed to this improvement.

Effective monitoring by senior staff and middle managers of teaching and learning across the school is increasing the proportion of good and better teaching. The increased number of outstanding lessons observed, compared to those seen during the last HMI monitoring visit, confirms this improvement. However, teaching is still inconsistent in quality with a minority which is mundane or inadequate. Marking also is too variable in quality and does not draw consistently on models of best practice available within the school. Consequently, teaching is satisfactory overall but the improvements made are not reflected in higher standards at the end of Key Stage 4.

The curriculum is satisfactory. It is continually developing and provides an appropriate range of learning experiences and courses with some flexibility. The new diplomas are soon to be introduced and specialist language status ensures that all students study a modern foreign language.

The care, guidance and support of students are good. The collection of assessment information to support learning is now accurate and systematic. This means that teachers can plan work that matches the ability of students more closely. Furthermore, senior managers can monitor student progress more effectively and identify further areas for improvement.

Leadership and management remain satisfactory. However, senior leadership demonstrates good capacity for further improvement. Governors are developing a better understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses through greater involvement in the monitoring and review process. However, the absence of a long-term strategic plan limits the ability of the school to target resources effectively and raise standards further for the benefit of the whole community. Taking into account all factors, the school provides satisfactory value for money

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

Inspection findings confirm the school's view that the sixth form is satisfactory. Following a period of unstable leadership, the sixth form is improving under new arrangements. Students speak positively about their school life and appreciate the continuity of support and respect teachers show them as young adults. 'They are always there to help', said one student. Students enjoy being given more responsibility for their own learning. Achievement and standards are satisfactory overall, with many students progressing to higher education.

Students' personal development and well-being are good. They attend regularly and are well motivated to succeed. Inspectors noted many examples of students helping each other to learn in an enjoyable and purposeful atmosphere. The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory overall. Knowledgeable, specialist teaching, close monitoring and strong pastoral support ensure that most students make satisfactory progress. However, the performance across subjects is variable. In the better lessons, teaching is well-paced and work is well-matched to the needs of individuals. Students learn enthusiastically and assessment of their work shows them how to improve. Where learning was less successful, the pace was too slow and the lesson too teacher-led.

The curriculum provides an appropriate range of choice that attracts and retains students. Links with a neighbouring school extend these opportunities. Some vocational and non-A level courses are offered, with plans to develop collaboration and provide more within the local consortium next year.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise achievement so that all groups of students achieve well.
- Strengthen further the quality of teaching and learning so that it is consistently good across all key stages.
- Improve marking by building on models of best practice, to provide good feedback to students enabling them to understand clearly how to improve their work.
- Publish and implement a long-term strategic plan to raise standards further.

A small proportion of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next inspection.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Achievement and standards are satisfactory overall. Results from the 2007 national tests confirm that standards at Key Stage 3 are generally above average in English and science and broadly average for mathematics. Achievement in English and science at this stage was significantly better than that nationally.

The latest results for Key Stage 4 indicate that standards have generally improved from the below average levels at the previous inspection. Standards are now average overall and best in English where achievement is significantly better than that nationally. All students gained a GCSE in 2007. The achievement of girls overall is at least satisfactory and significantly better than that of boys who have not performed as well as boys nationally. The achievement of the

few students of minority ethnic background is broadly satisfactory. Current monitoring information indicates an upward trend of improvement for GCSE results and a likelihood of the school reaching its target of 71% 5+ A*-C for 2008. Furthermore, a range of strategies is starting to narrow the gap between the achievement of boys and girls at Key Stage 4. In both key stages, the achievement of students who need extra help is good because support is carefully matched to their need and progress is closely monitored.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The personal development and well-being of students have improved considerably since the last inspection; the focus on raising expectations as well as improving the quality of teaching and learning have been catalysts for this. Behaviour in lessons and around the school is good and this allows learning to be more enjoyable. Fewer parents expressed concerns about behaviour than at the previous inspection. Many students enjoy coming to school. Attendance rates have risen and are now broadly average.

Students feel safe and secure and they do not see bullying as a problem. They say that there is always a member of staff, including members of the senior leadership team, to turn to if they need help. Healthy eating is important in the school and the students are aware of this. They appreciate the good quality of food available and enjoy the extensive range of sporting activities on offer.

Students' social, moral, spiritual and cultural development is good; assemblies and displays in classrooms and around the school support this. However, opportunities are missed during assemblies to give students time to reflect individually about the issues raised.

Community involvement is good. Students respond well to the many opportunities to broaden their experiences and understanding of other cultures through participation in sports, clubs, special events and charity fund-raising activities. Their economic well-being is fostered effectively by the work experience and citizenship programmes. Students are responding well to the opportunities that the Learning Leaders programme gives them to play in the school's strategy for improving teaching and learning. As a result, relationships between staff and students are increasingly more positive.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Teaching and learning are satisfactory with some strengths emerging. This is because there is a stronger focus on learning and effective monitoring of students' progress. In the best lessons, there is a positive atmosphere and relationships between teachers and students are relaxed and harmonious. As a result, students ask questions confidently and openly express their views and ideas. Teachers know their subjects well and many use challenging questions and interesting activities to help students to achieve. In all lessons observed students behaved well and had good attitudes to learning. In mathematics and an art lesson several students commented how much they loved the subjects and enjoyed being in the lessons. In more mundane lessons,

teaching often lacked pace and challenge and there were not enough opportunities for students to work collaboratively or independently.

The quality of the marking varies considerably across the school and subjects. Very good practice, including peer and self-assessment, was noted in art, mathematics and food technology. Several students commented on the helpfulness of this. A Year 11 student said, 'Our books are constantly marked and the teacher always gives helpful comments to help you know how to improve.' This high quality diagnostic marking provides good opportunities for students to enter into dialogue about their work. However, marking in many other subjects is only cursory, with very few comments that effectively guide students in what they need to do to improve. This limits the ability of teachers to move learning forward and to raise standards further.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

The curriculum is satisfactory overall with a number of improving features. It is becoming increasingly more flexible in meeting the needs of learners. This is especially so in Years 10 and 11, where an element of choice is now offered. For example, most choose from a range of GCSE courses but, for some, part of their curriculum is vocational and leads to other nationally recognised qualifications. More able students appreciate the opportunity to take GCSE French in Year 10 and then study an advanced-level language course in Year 11. The school will shortly be part of the new diploma initiative. The school's specialist language status ensures that all students study a modern foreign language at an appropriate level. In keeping with its language college status, the school has built strong links with the local schools where it supports the teaching of French and German. A good range of activities outside of lessons enables students to further develop their talents, for example, through participation in sports teams and musical performances.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

The school provides good levels of care, guidance and support for its students. Health and safety routines and risk assessments are all fully in place. Child protection procedures are clear and implemented quickly when required. Students who need extra help and those who are gifted and talented are supported well. Robust monitoring ensures that all students are offered good levels of pastoral care. Good procedures are now in place to track the progress of all students. As a result, senior staff and teachers are able to use accurate data to provide students with challenging targets and to monitor attendance.

Some parents expressed concerns about behaviour but these were not borne out by the inspection. In fact, many parents feel that behaviour has improved and students are supported well. The school's own surveys and discussions with students confirm that they feel safe and secure. Careers advice, Year 9 and Year 11 option choices and work experience are carefully organised and monitored.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Leadership and management are satisfactory. Teamwork is now a strong feature and purposeful work by the senior leadership team has helped to establish a positive climate for learning. The school continues to develop its specialist language status and standards at both GCSE and advanced level in modern foreign languages have improved. The partnership with parents is now much better but the headteacher and governing body accept there is still more to do. Nevertheless, parents highlight a number of improvements since the previous inspection. One parent wrote that, 'Communications have greatly improved,' and another commented that, 'Transition (from the middle school) was superbly managed.'

Monitoring and evaluation have improved. For example, the effective monitoring of lessons throughout the school by the senior leadership team and middle managers has led to much improvement in teaching and learning. Governors now monitor the school's work with a critical eye and demonstrate a good understanding of its strengths and weaknesses. Resource management is satisfactory. Short-term development planning is adequate but the absence of a long-term strategic plan is restricting any lasting improvement.

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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?	3	3
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	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	2	

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	
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	3	

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

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	2	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	3	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	3	
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

18 April 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Ashlyns School, Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire, HP4 3AH

We were very grateful for all the help you gave us when we visited the school. We found out a great deal by meeting with you in discussion groups, in classrooms and around the school. We were all pleased by what has been achieved since the previous inspection when I saw you last. What impressed us most was the improvement in behaviour and your attitudes to learning. As a result, the climate for learning is much better and many of you are making good progress in your studies.

Mr Dalziel and the senior staff are increasingly more visible around the school. They have worked hard to ensure that teachers provide lessons for you that are well taught and interesting. Considerable success in this area has been achieved and teachers are working hard to plan lessons that match the needs of you all. Staff provide good levels of support and guidance. Your progress is recorded carefully and the information is now helping teachers to set targets for you to aspire to. However, some lessons are still not good enough and the quality of teachers' marking is too variable. The staff are going to try to rectify these issues as soon as they can in order that you can all achieve the best standards possible.

Governors play an increasing role in the development of the school. They make regular monitoring visits to the school and work closely with senior staff to ensure that it continues to improve. There is now a good opportunity for the school to really move forwards. To do this, governors and senior staff, are going to ensure that there will soon be a long-term plan in place for the benefit of the whole community.

I thank you all for making us feel so welcome and wish you all the best for the future and your forthcoming exams.

Yours sincerely

Philip Mann Her Majesty's Inspector