

Blackfen School for Girls

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	101465
Local Authority	Bexley
Inspection number	323463
Inspection dates	29–30 April 2009
Reporting inspector	Asyia Kazmi 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	Community
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Girls
Number on roll	
School (total)	1331
Sixth form	281
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Stan Monger-Godfrey
Headteacher	Mr Matthew Brown
Date of previous school inspection	2 November 2005
School address	Blackfen Road Sidcup DA15 9NU
Telephone number	020 8303 1887
Fax number	020 8298 1656

Age group	11–18
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Introduction

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

Description of the school

Blackfen is a larger than average, oversubscribed, school. It has a mixed sixth form.

The majority of students are White British. A small number of students from a wide range of ethnicities make up the average proportion of minority ethnic students in the school. The proportion of students who speak English as an additional language is below average. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is well below average. A below-average proportion of students have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. However, the proportion of students with a statement of educational need is average; students' difficulties are in a wide range of areas, with dyslexia predominating.

The school achieved specialisms in mathematics and computing in 2004.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

Blackfen School provides a satisfactory quality of education. The headteacher, appointed in 2007, has a clear vision for the school, which staff and parents understand and share. Senior leaders have high expectations of students and staff and, as a parent reported, the headteacher 'has raised the bar even higher'.

Students join the school with average attainment on entry. They make satisfactory progress over their time in school and, by the end of Year 11, reach standards that are broadly average. Senior leaders have taken appropriate actions to redress the decline in standards in 2008 shown by the results of national assessments. In some key areas, standards are now rising, so results are set to improve in 2009.

Senior leaders have taken decisive action in developing the work of middle leaders. A coaching and mentoring programme has been implemented to target underperforming students, which they value. A robust system has been introduced to check the progress students are making against their targets. In addition to this, a helpful termly report is sent to parents, with specific targets to show how students can improve their learning. Given that the impact of the relatively recent actions - a more relevant curriculum and a systematic approach to checking the work of the school - has started to be realised in terms of improving standards, the capacity to improve further is good.

Over the past two years the school has experienced considerable staff changes. Although the school has taken some action to address this, it lacks a sufficiently strategic approach to deal with the issue. The leadership team has been newly structured and subject leaders in key departments such as English, mathematics and science, among others, are also new. This means that the systems instigated by senior leaders have yet to embed fully across the school. For example, middle leaders have been trained to use data about students' learning to raise standards, but the data have not yet been fully absorbed into teachers' planning. As a result, teachers do not always plan lessons that challenge students, particularly the higher-attaining students. In addition, some subjects have experienced a high staff turnover and, while behaviour across the school is good, in these lessons the standard of students' behaviour falls. Inspectors observed very good relationships between students, demonstrated in a caring and supportive attitude towards each other, and, where opportunities have been provided to students, good teamwork in lessons.

There is some good teaching in the school, with examples of outstanding lessons. This is demonstrated by high expectations from teachers and lessons that engage students through well-paced activities which demand student participation and challenge students of different abilities. However, teaching overall is satisfactory because, in too many lessons, teachers' planning does not ensure that students are sufficiently challenged or have opportunities to work independently. Those students who find learning difficult do not always have appropriate support to further their learning when an additional adult is not present. Senior leaders have taken action to eradicate weaker teaching, but a small proportion of inadequate teaching remains.

Specialist subjects are yet to have enough of an impact across the school, partly as a result of considerable staffing difficulties. Not all teachers are confident users of information and communication technology (ICT) and opportunities to expand students' learning using new technologies are sometimes missed. Currently, the impact of the specialist subjects is satisfactory.

'My daughter really enjoys school. She has made many friends and finds that her teachers are very helpful', a parent reported to inspectors. The majority of parents are similarly positive about the school and welcome some of the developments introduced by the new leadership team. This is also reflected in the students' views. They are proud of their school and feel that the school helps them to 'grow as individuals within the supportive school community'. They very much value the time teachers give them, particularly the older students, and are quick to praise the approachability of teachers as well as senior leaders. A small but significant minority of parents raised concerns about the effectiveness of communication between parents and the school and the inconsistency in quality, challenge and frequency of homework.

Senior leaders are, clearly, able to identify strengths and weaknesses in teaching when observing lessons. However, they sometimes accept judgements about the quality of teaching that are too generous. They recognise the lack of robustness in moderating judgements to ensure consistency across the school. In addition, a formal programme for sharing the very best teaching that exists in the school is not yet in place.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The popular mixed sixth form provides a good standard of education. Students start Year 12 with standards a little below average and make good progress. School tracking data, lesson observations and results already obtained by students show that standards are average and rising. Students' achievement in the vocational subjects is very good. Students are impressively mature and provide excellent role models for younger pupils. They enjoy their studies and, as a result, retention rates are high and many progress to higher education.

Students undertake a range of community service which enriches their experience as well as develops their leadership skills. Some act as 'learning advocates', giving feedback to staff on their lessons, while others support younger students with literacy as well as helping students in local primary schools. The curriculum, which is regularly reviewed, offers a wide range of courses to meet the needs of the students. The quality of teaching and learning in the sixth form is good because the school has recruited specialist staff with appropriate knowledge and experience. Furthermore, the impact of the upheavals in staffing has not been as significant in the sixth form. The progress of students is monitored against target grades and those falling behind are quickly identified and brought back on track.

The management of the sixth form is good and students are very appreciative of the high-quality advice and guidance they receive. One student said: 'The school is good for teacher and student communication. They provide support when needed and encourage things like teamwork. They strive to ensure that students succeed.'

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise standards and accelerate the achievement of students, particularly in English, mathematics and science and for higher-attaining students.
- Develop consistency in the quality of teaching and learning so that data are used to plan lessons that challenge students of all abilities.
- Develop a strategic approach to reducing the impact of multiple changes in staffing.
- Ensure monitoring and evaluation systems are robust and consistent and effectively inform school improvement, particularly in relation to teaching and learning.

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 section 5 inspection.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Students join the school with average standards. By the end of Year 9 and Year 11, the standards they attain, including the proportion of students who achieve five good GCSE passes, including English and mathematics, are average. Results in English declined in 2008 to below the national average. Focused work with students, including targeted revision classes, and support for teachers are helping to redress this. The proportion of students who attain two good science passes, while it is rising, is lower than the national average. Some students do make good progress in the school but overall students' progress is satisfactory.

Standards in the specialist subjects of mathematics and ICT are average. Although staffing has stabilised, the impact of this turbulence can be seen in the standards students attained in the past. Curriculum changes in these two subjects mean that courses more suited to the needs of the students are now in place. The introduction of vocational courses since the last inspection has had a positive impact; standards on these courses are above average and achievement is good.

The number of students with learning difficulties is small and overall they make similar progress to their peers. Some groups of students with learning difficulties make good progress because data are used to inform intervention plans and support staff are adept at asking questions that further their learning.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Students enjoy school and this is reflected in the positive relationships that the majority have with each other and with their teachers. They speak of a strong sense of community and are friendly, polite and welcoming to visitors. Students' moral and social development is good and they have a clear understanding of the needs of others and are generally supportive of each other. The number of exclusions is low and students behave considerately and consistently well around school. Many take an active part in school life, including participating in the school council, sporting activities and charity fundraising events. Good numbers attend extra-curricular clubs and take part in school music and drama productions. Year 10 students help teach lessons in a local special school. Students are prepared well for some aspects of their future lives through, for example, the school's banking project. However, their achievement in key literacy and numeracy skills is at present satisfactory. As a result of a robust focus on attendance, this is now improving and is slightly higher than the national average.

The school provides a safe environment for students and they speak appreciatively of this. They value being able to talk to the 'Listening Ears', who are trained older students. They report that there are only a few incidents of bullying or racism and that these are dealt with effectively by staff.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Teaching and learning overall are satisfactory but there is good and outstanding teaching across the school, including in the sixth form. These better lessons are characterised by good planning and teaching which helps students to think independently, develop reasoning skills and give precise and extended explanations. In these lessons, teachers ask demanding questions, listen to what students say and then challenge them to extend and justify what they have said.

Teachers generally have secure subject knowledge but do not always make use of the full range of teaching methods in order to engage and motivate students. Where teaching is satisfactory, teachers' planning does not provide enough opportunities for students to participate orally, and when they do they are not always challenged to develop and clarify what they mean. In addition, students are not always given enough opportunities to develop independence in their learning. They sometimes become disengaged and the standard of their behaviour declines when lessons that challenge them have not been planned. The quality and frequency of marking, and guidance to students on how to improve their work, are variable.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

In Years 7 to 9 the school provides a broad and balanced curriculum, within which ICT and mathematics provide a condensed curriculum so that Year 9 students may start GCSE or equivalent courses early. ICT, in particular, is now benefiting from this approach, with improvements in students' attainment levels, particularly in the proportion who achieved the highest grades. The curriculum is enhanced by using online technology, which is beginning to change the way students and staff work; for example, in some subjects there is a paperless approach to submitting and marking work. The curriculum is reviewed regularly and this has enabled the introduction of a range of courses that meet the needs and interests of students well. The school is responsive to individuals' needs and students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities can follow a curriculum more tailored to their needs. The impact of this is evidenced by the fact that all students achieve at least one GCSE pass and the proportion that achieve five GCSE passes is above average.

A good range of enrichment activities are provided by the school. Many and varied after-school clubs are enjoyed by the students. These include a gardening club and a cheerleading club. Study trips are organised to extend subject appreciation, for example, an art study trip to New York and an enrichment trip to Rochester Cathedral. However, students would welcome further opportunities to learn outside the classroom.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

The quality of care, guidance and support is good, with particular strengths in the pastoral care and support for students. The staff are strongly committed to promoting students' health and safety and a very effective programme of identifying and supporting vulnerable learners is in place. The Inclusion Room provides a very safe environment for those students who need additional support. A well-developed and effective range of activities address the various needs of students, including the Dyslexia Club and the Circle of Friends group. The Oasis social skills

club provides students with ways of improving their communication skills and relations with others. Staff are trained in child protection and there is a clear policy in place to protect students. The arrangements for safeguarding learners are secure and meet government guidelines. Senior leaders liaise effectively with outside agencies in targeting appropriate support.

The school has recently introduced a rigorous system for tracking and monitoring students' progress. This is providing a clearer picture of students' individual strengths and weaknesses and is beginning to have an impact on students' achievement. The tracking system has allowed the school to work more closely with parents in supporting their children. Parents and carers now receive helpful termly updates on their children's attainment, progress and targets and there are workshops for parents in some subject areas.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

The headteacher demonstrates a strong commitment to driving up standards and raising expectations of learning from both staff and students. He has given strong direction to the leadership team which is creating a shared sense of purpose and is beginning to improve standards and achievement. Senior leaders recognise that students' rates of progress are not good enough. The school's self-evaluation, undertaken by senior and middle leaders, is broadly accurate but judgements made by middle leaders are sometimes inconsistent and there is a lack of rigorous moderation by senior leaders. They set appropriately challenging targets for the school's overall performance against which progress is regularly evaluated. They have also been more robust in holding middle leaders to account for standards in their areas.

The good personal development of students is a result of strong pastoral leadership and a real commitment to valuing every student. Governors know the school well and are closely involved in many aspects of school life. They are determined to secure further improvement and are now providing an effective balance of support and challenge to the headteacher and senior leaders.

The school is active in supporting the local primary schools and is open to the local community. Senior leaders are keen to address barriers to achievement and many middle leaders are very good role models for students, raising aspirations particularly in mathematics and science. Senior leaders want students to have a good understanding of the many communities that make up the school population but, at present, a comprehensive strategic plan to drive this is not in place. Consequently, the school's contribution to community cohesion is satisfactory.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaints about school inspection', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

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	2
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	2	2

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/or disabilities make progress	3	

¹Grade 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.

Personal development and well-being

How good are 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	
The extent to which 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 learners' needs?	3	2
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?	2	2

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	3	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	3	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	3	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	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	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	

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

14 May 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Blackfen School for Girls, Sidcup, DA15 9NU

On behalf of the inspectors and myself who visited your school recently, I would like to thank you very much for the welcome you gave us. We valued the discussions we had with you and I would like to take this opportunity to share our findings.

Your school provides you with a satisfactory quality of education. By the end of Year 11, the standards you reach are average and this represents satisfactory progress. We know that much of the teaching you experience is good and better but we found that this was variable and that sometimes it does not challenge you enough or ensure that you make rapid progress. We also found that some of you have experienced too many changes in teachers and this has, in the past, hindered your progress.

Many of you told us how proud you were of your school community, the care and support your teachers and other staff give you and the wide variety of extra-curricular activities in which you are engaged. We were impressed by your behaviour but we also found that this is not always consistently good. It is important that the good standard of behaviour we observed is maintained. We found that the effectiveness of the sixth form is good. Your senior leaders have high expectations of the school and are taking the right actions to help the school to improve. We have asked them to work on the following:

- raise standards and accelerate achievement, particularly in the core subjects and for higher-attaining students
- develop consistency in the quality of teaching and learning so that lessons challenge students of all abilities and reduce the impact of staffing changes
- ensure that systems to check the work of the school are robust and consistent and that they effectively inform school improvement, particularly in relation to teaching and learning.

You can help by ensuring that you use the opportunities available to give feedback to senior leaders about where effective improvements are being made and where further work is needed.

Yours faithfully

Asyia Kazmi

Her Majesty's Inspector