

Ashton-on-Mersey School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	106374
Local Authority	Trafford
Inspection number	324386
Inspection dates	2–3 December 2008
Reporting inspector	Janet Palmer HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1283
Sixth form	76
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Brian Rigby MBE
Headteacher	Mr Tarun Kapur
Date of previous school inspection	19 January 2006
School address	Cecil Avenue Sale Cheshire M33 5BP
Telephone number	0161 9731179
Fax number	0161 9694954

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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

Ashton-on-Mersey is a larger than average secondary modern school. In September 2008 the school opened a new sixth form with purpose-built facilities. The school's population is largely of White British heritage with a small percentage from minority ethnic backgrounds. A lower than average proportion of students is eligible for free school meals. The number of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is above the national average. The school is part of the West Trafford Learning Partnership and was federated with Broadoak School in 2006. The school shares an executive headteacher, director of finance and governing body; some courses and facilities are open to students in both schools. Ashton-on-Mersey became a specialist sports college in 1998, was awarded high performing specialist school status in 2005 and gained a second specialism in applied learning in 2006. It has held designated Training School status since 2003. The school holds Healthy School, Sportsmark, Artsmark Gold and Investors in People awards.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Ashton-on-Mersey is an outstanding school. Students make exceptional progress due to the excellent teaching, the outstanding curriculum and the high quality of support, care and guidance. Outstanding leadership and management have enabled the school to go from strength to strength in developing the services it provides for students. The collaborative partnership that makes up the school's leadership, with unstinting support from governors, has given the school a clear direction for continuous improvement. Leaders and managers know the school extremely well because the very effective monitoring and evaluation of all aspects of the school's performance leaves no room for complacency.

Students say very clearly that they are proud of their school, make good friends and enjoy their lessons. They have very positive attitudes to learning and their behaviour and attendance are outstanding. This is because teachers have very high expectations of what students can achieve and lessons are often challenging, adventurous and fun. Lessons are well planned with excellent support materials.

Classrooms are well resourced and teachers use information and communication technology (ICT) very well to add pace and interest to learning. In lessons, students are encouraged to become independent and creative learners. Achievement is actively celebrated and students work very hard to secure their merits and awards; the 'Star of the Week' commendation is particularly valued. Regular, helpful feedback ensures that students know exactly what they need to do in each subject in order to improve. Progress is monitored frequently and with rigour, so both teaching and support staff are quick to identify and assist students with their learning needs. A programme of close mentoring of individual students has been very effective in raising self-esteem, improving achievement and raising standards.

The outstanding curriculum is innovative and inclusive. The provision is designed to match the students' needs and includes a very wide range of academic and vocational award-bearing courses. Large numbers of students participate in the extensive range of extra-curricular activities available, particularly the many sports and subject clubs. Further to this, students are given many opportunities to develop leadership skills, social understanding and initiative by taking an active part in school life. Through their roles as council members, prefects, peer mentors and subject leaders, they make a vital contribution to the excellence of the school. School leaders have succeeded in sharing their vision of inclusiveness and high expectations with the entire school. A powerful ethos of collegiality pervades, with all members of the school community sharing a strong sense of ownership of the school; consequently they work hard in its interest. Since the last inspection, full advantage has been taken of the school's specialisms and range of partnerships to manage improvements in resources, teaching and in the curriculum, demonstrating an excellent capacity for further improvement.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The sixth form is in its infancy, but the progress achieved in a small space of time is excellent. Students in the sixth form are positive, mature and articulate. Their attitude to their studies is exemplary and they enjoy continuing their studies in a school that already knows them well. Although there are no historical data, inspection evidence indicates that achievement and standards are good. Detailed monitoring records kept by the school show that students are

making good progress in meeting their challenging targets. The quality of teaching and learning is good. Lessons usually run at a good pace and students are appropriately challenged. The best lessons employ exciting approaches and provide a good balance between direct teaching and students' involvement in their learning. However on occasion, students spend much of their time taking notes rather than actively engaging with their learning. The sixth form offers a flexible curriculum that has been very well matched to the needs and aspirations of students who work alongside school staff to ensure that appropriate and meaningful options are on offer. Students report that they are given excellent guidance; their work is closely monitored on a weekly basis to ensure that they remain on track and meet their learning goals. Leadership and management of the sixth form are outstanding. The new head of sixth form is enthusiastic and has a very clear vision of how this new 'state of the art' provision will further develop in the future.

What the school should do to improve further

- Build on the effective strategies used in the main school to bring greater coherence to teaching in the sixth form.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Students enter the school with standards which are broadly in line with the national average. By the time they leave, they attain standards well above the national average. This represents outstanding progress overall. The challenge and the expectations of students' achievement are very high. Since 2006, students have been entered for national tests in Year 8, rather than the more usual Year 9. Initially, this resulted in a decline in overall results. However, unvalidated data for the 2008 tests shows that improvements have been made in all core subjects. Reliable school assessments and the good achievement seen by inspectors indicate that the additional progress made by students in Year 9 is good. In addition to this, high numbers of students at Key Stage 3 are entered for and achieve good grades in award-bearing courses such as Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) sports and GCSE French. During Years 10 and 11, students improve even further and achieve outstanding results. GCSE results have risen year-on-year, widening the gap by which the school outperforms the national average. Unvalidated 2008 GCSE results show over 79% of students gained five or more A* to C grades which is 15% above the national average and a record for the school. No groups of students significantly underachieve and boys' achievement has improved in recent years to above national averages. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities also make excellent progress due to the outstanding support they receive from learning support staff.

Robust tracking of students' progress, together with observations of lessons, informs the judgment that standards and achievement in the sixth form are good.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Students' personal development and well-being are outstanding. They have highly developed spiritual, moral and social awareness. This is evidenced by their excellent behaviour, their responsible attitude and high personal aspirations. Within school students feel safe, secure and valued. There is a calm atmosphere; students are considerate and polite, they have excellent relationships with staff and feel included. Through assemblies and in lessons on personal, social, health and economic education (PSHEE) and religious education, students are encouraged to

be thoughtful, empathetic and caring. Multi-cultural themed lessons and festival celebrations, together with sporting tours, for example to Holland, Austria and the United States, contribute effectively to students' understanding of other cultures.

Students are encouraged to adopt healthy lifestyles and as a result of the school's specialisms, they are involved in a broad range of sports and extra-curricular activities. Students also participate in a wide range of charity fundraising and community work. Among the school's extensive links with the local community are opportunities to help senior citizens and young pupils in primary schools. College placements, collaborative enterprise projects and work experience effectively promote independence. The students' outstanding progress in mathematics, English and ICT and a comprehensive programme of work-related activities help them to develop excellent economic skills, self-esteem and self-confidence, preparing them very well for the future.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 1

Typical lessons are very well-planned to meet students' individual needs and to extend their knowledge, skills and understanding while giving them confidence in themselves. Teachers and teaching assistants provide a high level of support, particularly for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, through sensitive, well-timed interventions. All staff manage this in a way that promotes students' independence as learners. Progress in the great majority of lessons is rapid because teachers are skilful at engaging students in tasks that appeal to them, so that they enjoy learning. Teachers have high expectations of work and behaviour to which students respond very positively. Strong relationships and mutual respect effectively underpin teaching and learning across the school and in the sixth form so that lesson time is used very effectively. Teachers have excellent subject knowledge, enabling them to explain clearly what students are expected to learn. In practical subjects, such as physical education and art, this is often accompanied by expert demonstrations so that students understand exactly what to do and how to do it.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The many curricular pathways ensure that all students receive a broad, balanced and relevant curriculum appropriate to their abilities, so that the most able and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make equally outstanding progress. In Years 9 to 11, a wide range of GCSE and vocational courses fulfils the diverse needs, interests and aspirations of students. Students have the opportunity to be entered early for GCSEs and then follow additional courses, whilst others can follow off-site work-based training. The school's specialist subjects especially enrich the curriculum by offering students, not only a large range of courses, but also different types of accreditation to suit their individual preferences. An outstanding feature of the provision is the school's virtual learning facility. This tremendous tool for learning allows pupils to collect and return homework, contact teachers to get immediate feedback on their learning and understand what they must do to improve; they can also revise using interactive resources. An extensive range of options in an innovative extra-curricular programme is very much appreciated by students who participate in large numbers.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

The quality of care, guidance and support is outstanding. There is a genuine commitment to raising the achievement and aspirations of all students. Pastoral support is sensitive, well coordinated and very effective in promoting students' well-being. The school makes strenuous efforts to meet individual needs through its excellent support systems, innovative Year 7 curriculum model and flexible alternative pathways. Students are routinely involved in evaluating their own work. They know how well they are doing and how to improve because the detailed tracking and monitoring systems guide their progress. Pupils new to Year 7 appreciate the empathetic support they receive from Year 10 mentors. For older students, comprehensive careers guidance and work-related experiences link effectively to the support from the 'connexions' service. The school provides a safe environment and the appropriate arrangements for safeguarding students are in place. Child protection and risk assessment procedures are sound and frequently reviewed.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Students' personal development and achievement are at the heart of improvement planning across the school. The school's use of challenging targets to raise expectations and improve results and attendance is outstanding. Leaders are particularly good at identifying and nurturing teachers' expertise and providing opportunities for their professional progress. The system of distributed leadership, accompanied by high levels of accountability, works exceptionally well in all aspects of the school's work. All innovations are carefully monitored for effectiveness and modified where necessary to ensure that they provide good value in raising the quality of provision for students. This includes making excellent use of the federation of the two schools to enhance provision and share expertise. The school discharges its wider community responsibilities as a specialist school exceptionally well, by contributing to the work of many partners in schools, higher education and business. The school also plays a strong role in promoting community cohesion as exemplified in students' excellent understanding of cultural diversity and their awareness of the needs of others. The governing body brings professional expertise to its work and provides outstanding support for the school. Governors are knowledgeable and well informed, enabling them to hold the school to account robustly for its performance.

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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?	1	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	NA
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?	1	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	1	2
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	1	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	1	

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?	1	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	
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	1	
The attendance of learners	1	
The behaviour of learners	1	
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 learners' needs?	1	2
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

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 eliminated	1	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	1	
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	

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

Inspection of Ashton-on-Mersey School, Sale, M33 5BP

As you know, your school was inspected recently. I would like to begin by thanking you for making the team of inspectors feel so welcome. Our discussions with you were particularly useful in helping us find out about the quality of education at Ashton-on-Mersey. Our overall judgements are that the education you receive is outstanding in the school and good in the sixth form.

These are the main things that we found during our visit.

- Leadership and management by the headteacher, executive headteacher, senior staff and governors are outstanding. Your personal development, achievement and well-being are at the heart of everything they do.
- You make excellent progress during your time at the school and good progress in the new 6th form. This year's GCSE results are the best in the school's history and well above the national average.
- Your teachers are innovative and knowledgeable. They encourage you to become creative and independent learners and support you when you need extra help. In turn, you show excellent attitudes to learning and your behaviour is exemplary.
- Some teaching in the 6th form is less engaging than in the main school. We have therefore recommended that your teachers build on the excellent teaching strategies used in the main school.
- You receive outstanding care, guidance and support. Staff know you as individuals and are always willing to put themselves out to provide extra help if you need it or organise the huge range of activities that are available for you outside of normal lessons.
- You told us that you enjoy school and feel safe and well cared for.
- The curriculum is extremely well matched to your needs through an outstanding range of academic and vocational options.
- You develop excellent leadership and social skills through the many ways in which you contribute to the life of the school and the local community.

You are rightly proud to be members of Ashton-on-Mersey school. Your teachers and the staff have worked hard to bring about improvements and they want to carry on doing this. You can help them by continuing to work hard and making the most of the opportunities the school provides.

I would like to wish you all the very best for a happy and successful future.