

# Cotham School

## Inspection report

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<b>Unique Reference Number</b>	109289
<b>Local Authority</b>	Bristol, City of
<b>Inspection number</b>	324938
<b>Inspection dates</b>	21–22 May 2008
<b>Reporting inspector</b>	Janet Simms

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

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<b>Type of school</b>	Comprehensive
<b>School category</b>	Community
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	11–19
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Number on roll</b>	
School	898
6th form	386
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	The governing body
<b>Chair</b>	Nancy Coplestone
<b>Headteacher</b>	Malcolm Willis
<b>Date of previous school inspection</b>	5 October 2005
<b>School address</b>	Cotham Lawn Road Cotham Bristol BS6 6DT
<b>Telephone number</b>	0117 9082200
<b>Fax number</b>	0117 9198141

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## Introduction

The inspection was carried out by five Additional Inspectors.

## Description of the school

The school is a specialist performing arts college and is larger than average. Post-16 provision is federated with Redland Green, a recently opened school nearby, and this federation forms part of the North Bristol Post-16 Centre. Reorganisation of local catchment areas to accommodate the 11 to 16 part of the new school two years ago changed the profile of this school's intake considerably. Across the school, there is a smaller percentage of students than usual with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, but this is higher in Years 7 and 8. A larger proportion of students than usual are from minority ethnic backgrounds, and a higher than average proportion come from families where home languages are other than English. At the time of the inspection, Years 10 and 11 were out of school. The school holds Arts Mark Gold, Sports Mark, Healthy Schools and Investor in People awards and is a Fairtrade School.

The inspection was co-ordinated with that of Redland Green 16-19 School.

## Key for inspection grades

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

## Overall effectiveness of the school

### Grade: 2

This is a good school. It is improving rapidly and already has some outstanding features. These include excellent, dynamic leadership by the senior management team and governing body, which demonstrates outstanding capacity to maintain the momentum of improvement already evident.

Achievement has improved considerably since the last inspection, rising from satisfactory to good in a relatively short time. Standards have been above average at all key stages recently. Current students' progress shows higher potential still, with better standards predicted for Years 9, 10 and 11, who were working at above average levels on entry. Years 7 and 8 entered with a more average range of standards and are making good progress because the school provides very effective academic and personal support to help lower attaining students. This forms part of excellent, inclusive pastoral provision for all.

Good teaching across a well tailored, flexible curriculum ensures that students enjoy learning and achieve well. A focus on 'learning to learn' has contributed to good behaviour and attitudes in lessons. Where teachers capitalise on these characteristics, learning is often excellent. In performing arts, for instance, students engage exceptionally well in active, lively group work and speak with enthusiastic appreciation of their enjoyment of these subjects. In other exemplary lessons, students work with highly focused concentration on independent tasks which are often very challenging. Not all teachers devolve this degree of responsibility for learning to students themselves, however, so sometimes students are more passive or restless, and learning is less enjoyable. Students know their targets, but are often unclear about what to do to achieve them because marking of their work does not always provide clear guidance.

Personal development is good, including students' understanding of social, moral, spiritual and cultural matters. The arts in particular contribute outstandingly well to the cultural and social dimensions of their lives, as does the diverse nature of the school's population. Students themselves speak appreciatively of both of these aspects of their education and are proud of their achievements in lessons and outside curriculum time. Participation in the outstanding range of extra-curricular and enrichment activities is very high, including those related to its specialist college status, promoting excellent, creative achievement and enjoyment. Its outstanding reputation for performing arts is one reason why the school is very popular and significantly oversubscribed.

Excellent self-evaluation is a key strength of senior leadership. The school knows itself well and sets very challenging targets for all areas of its operations. A strong professional development programme and well focused recruitment strategies have resulted in good middle management, but the school recognises that this area of leadership is still developing.

## Effectiveness of the sixth form

### Grade: 2

Post-16 standards are good, with improving examination results at all levels. Students progress well because teaching is good and because they themselves contribute very positive attitudes towards learning. High retention and course completion rates reflect students' own commitment. The success of the North Bristol Post-16 partnership has resulted in significant growth in numbers recently. Students can access a good range of academic and vocational courses at different levels, which staff evaluate constantly to ensure they match varying needs.

Post-16 leaders' clear vision demonstrates strong commitment to continuous improvement. Students greatly value the high quality of care, guidance and support provided. This includes good advice about entry to suitable courses and detailed preparation for the next phase of their lives. Students are keen to take on a wide range of responsibilities, thus extending their personal development significantly. All Year 12 students, for instance, are encouraged to participate in community service for which they can gain a Millennium Volunteer Award, and many mentor and support younger students. They are excellent ambassadors for the school and leave with a great sense of pride.

### **What the school should do to improve further**

- Provide more opportunities in lessons for students to develop independent learning skills.
- Ensure that teachers' marking and other guidance consistently provide clear information about how students can help themselves to meet their targets.

## **Achievement and standards**

### **Grade: 2**

#### **Grade for sixth form: 2**

Standards are above average at Years 9, 11 and Post 16, as they have been for several years. In 2005, achievement was satisfactory and is now good in all year groups. Current Years 10 and 11 students are on track to reach very challenging targets this year in all subjects, including English and mathematics. Year 9 standards are high and achievement is good. From a lower baseline, Years 7 and 8 are making equally good progress. Vulnerable students, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities or those using English as an additional language, achieve as well as others because needs are identified swiftly and accurately and staff across the school work well together to provide effective support.

Successful measures taken to improve achievement in subjects where it was weaker have resulted in much better progress in areas such as the visual arts. Progress in performing arts, in which students often start from scratch, is excellent, contributing very significantly to their self-assurance and personal development.

## **Personal development and well-being**

### **Grade: 2**

#### **Grade for sixth form: 2**

Students comment confidently about their safe, happy school environment and understand very clearly how to stay fit and healthy. Behaviour and attitudes are good because students now know how to learn better, although a few parental comments rightly identify the small incidence of less positive conduct, mostly in younger year groups. Attendance is good and reduced exclusion rates reflect the increased enjoyment which is a key factor in students' good achievement. They speak enthusiastically about sporting and outdoor adventure activities which support active lifestyles. Their lively enthusiasm for performing arts is infectious. Students take very good advantage of the range of healthy food choices available and welcome the focus on health issues. Large numbers participate in many activities within and beyond the school community and their concern for the wider world is reflected in successful charity collections.

Students relish responsibilities such as peer mentoring or being student council representatives and offer opinions readily on issues such as new buildings, school uniform and meal options.

Good basic skills, work experience and improved enterprise learning prepare students well for their future economic well-being.

## **Quality of provision**

### **Teaching and learning**

**Grade: 2**

**Grade for sixth form: 2**

There is a real sense of enjoyment in lessons because the whole-school commitment to quality teaching has created a positive learning climate. Continuous monitoring and evaluation identify staff training needs effectively and an extensive programme of professional development has improved teaching and learning well.

Learning objectives are clear and most lessons engage, inspire and challenge students, including sixth formers. Typically, an emphasis on active learning captures and sustains everyone's interest. Students enjoy these lessons, taking pride in their work, cooperating confidently or concentrating well on individual activities. They learn less well when teachers provide little opportunity for students to take responsibility for their own learning. This can lead to too much teacher direction and a limited range of learning activities.

Relationships are good so students are confident to seek advice from teachers, and peer or self-evaluation of work is developing well. However, because the quality of marking is inconsistent, some students are uncertain about what they need to do to improve.

### **Curriculum and other activities**

**Grade: 2**

**Grade for sixth form: 2**

The curriculum is adapted regularly to meet changing needs, such as those presented by Years 7 and 8. Planning for this is innovative and systematic, with successful emphasis on 'learning to learn'. Additional vocational pathways in Years 10 and 11 now provide an inclusive curriculum with clear progression routes for all. A stronger work-related dimension has also improved students' experience. The school is aware of some parental concerns about the heavy workload of up to 14 subjects for GCSE and is working to allay these. Post-16 arrangements work well to ensure a balanced, flexible, wide ranging offer. Managers carefully monitor different groups' responses to the curriculum. The results of this evaluation have led to a range of successful initiatives to raise aspirations, particularly those of minority ethnic learners, which are leading to better achievement.

### **Care, guidance and support**

**Grade: 2**

**Grade for sixth form: 2**

Care, guidance and support are good overall and include excellent, individually tailored pastoral support. Safeguarding arrangements are effective and any students at risk are quickly identified and supported well. Parents and students appreciate the excellent arrangements for successful transition from primary schools. Very good advice about academic and/or vocational course options and careers leads to a good match between aspirations and provision for pupils aged 14 to 19.

The excellent work of the inclusion group, student and family support, learning mentors, counsellors and others ensures that vulnerable students achieve and enjoy learning as much as others do. Students have ambitious individual targets which encourage them to achieve well, but guidance does not always focus on exactly what they should do for themselves to meet these. The school is far from complacent and continues to work hard to improve its systems for such academic guidance.

## **Leadership and management**

**Grade: 2**

**Grade for sixth form: 2**

The excellent leadership of the headteacher, very ably supported by a strong senior leadership team, has resulted in considerable improvement across the school in a short period of time. A clear vision for the school as a 'true learning community' underpins the significant progress already made towards achieving this.

Senior leaders are relentless in their drive for improvement, focusing clearly on what needs to be better, and how this can be achieved most effectively. The pace of improvement has been good and is sustainable. Through a rigorous process of monitoring, self-evaluation and review, senior staff have an excellent grasp of the school's strengths and weaknesses and have prioritised key areas for development accurately. Senior leaders have successfully ensured that all staff are part of the improvement process. The well targeted, comprehensive programme of professional development has been instrumental in securing improvement, for instance in the quality of teaching and learning. The school works hard towards achieving the very challenging targets it has set for itself, and the use of aspirational targets for individual students has raised staff expectations effectively. This is reflected in improved achievement.

Middle leaders have a good understanding of their roles in school improvement. They understand targets for their areas of responsibility, but a minority are not always clearly focused on student outcomes as the main priority, or how priorities can be achieved most effectively. Middle leaders have a considerable number of action points to address and not all are equally adept at synthesising and prioritising these.

The school's established, well deserved reputation in the community for the quality of its performing arts has a very positive impact on its ethos. Specialist status has also helped to develop effective links with a wide range of local schools and other more distant organisations. The school takes good account of parents' views and questionnaire responses were overwhelmingly positive. Most of the few concerns noted, for instance about reports, are well understood and already being addressed.

The governing body provides rigorous challenge for managers, holding senior leaders fully to account for their actions. This is sensitively coupled with effective support. Governors have a very good understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses and a clear strategic view for future development across all facets of the school's work. Governors' work in the school is planned effectively to have maximum impact.

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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	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?	1	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1	1

### Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	2
The standards <sup>1</sup> reached by learners	2	2
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	2
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	1	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
How well learners enjoy their education	1	
The attendance of learners	2	
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	2	

### The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	2	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

<sup>1</sup> 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**

<b>How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?</b>	2	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	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	2	
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

09 June 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Cotham School, Bristol, BS6 6DT

Thank you for welcoming us into your school in May. We enjoyed being in lessons and talking to some of you formally and to more of you around the school. I am writing to tell you about the main things which are in our report.

Yours is a good school which has improved significantly in the last few years and continues to improve. Standards are above average and your progress is good. This is because of good teaching and because you as students have developed positive attitudes towards learning. Some aspects of the school are outstanding, for instance senior managers' work in organising things to make it improve so quickly. We were particularly impressed by your excellent standards, enjoyment and achievements in performing arts, both in lessons and as an extra-curricular activity. Your personal development is good partly because of the enthusiastic way you participate in these and other sporting and creative opportunities. You gain a great deal of self-confidence from them.

The range of academic and vocational subjects you can choose from Year 10 onwards is good. A few parents are a little concerned that some of you may be studying too many subjects, but we feel sure that there are good opportunities for you to talk to staff about this, as you do about other things, to make sure you get the balance right. The school has excellent provision for care and support to make certain you are safe and learning well.

Even in such a good school, there are things which can make it even better. We found that your learning is best where teachers give you more opportunity to take responsibility for your learning, to decide things for yourselves and to be independent, so we have asked them to do more lessons where that happens. We have also asked teachers to give you clearer written guidance in marking your work, to inform you exactly what to do to reach your targets. Most of you know your targets, but not all of you understand clearly enough how to help yourselves to achieve them.

We found the sixth form good, too. Students become mature, confident young people who take pride in representing the school as ambassadors in many situations.

Yours sincerely

Janet Simms Lead inspector

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