

The Castle School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	109297
Local Authority	South Gloucestershire
Inspection number	324942
Inspection dates	14–15 January 2009
Reporting inspector	Nick Green 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 (total)	1718
Sixth form	359
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Ian Gross
Headteacher	Melanie Warnes
Date of previous school inspection	22 February 2006
School address	Park Road Thornbury Thornbury BS35 1HT
Telephone number	01454 862100
Fax number	01454 862101

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

The school is a larger than the average secondary school. The great majority of students are of White British heritage and come from varied, though predominantly advantaged, socio-economic backgrounds. The percentage of students eligible for free school meals is well below the national average, as is the number with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The percentage with a statement of special educational needs is average. Students' attainment on entry to the school varies between broadly average and slightly above average. The school has two sites, about half a mile apart. One site operates mainly, but not exclusively, as the sixth form centre. The school is a Visual Arts and Special Educational Needs (SEN) Specialist School and holds the Gold Arts Mark award. It was awarded the status of High Performing Specialist School last year and is a Leading Edge School. It holds many other awards, including the International School Award, the Basic Skills Quality Mark and the ECO Schools Green Flag award.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

The school's aim is to provide a 'quality education within a caring environment' and it achieves this aspiration very well. The quality of the education provided in both the whole school and the sixth form is outstanding. Underpinning the impressive rate at which the school has improved since the last inspection are outstanding leadership and management, driven by the clear vision and direction of the headteacher. These are focused firmly on raising achievement by improving the curriculum and teaching, and enabling students to thrive in a safe and caring environment. The school has very rigorous systems for reviewing its work and evaluates its performance comprehensively. This leads to the clear and precise identification of priorities for development. The recent improvements made in students' achievement, in their personal development and well-being, in the care, guidance and support they receive and in the strength of leadership and management show the school has outstanding capacity to improve further.

Standards at the end of Year 9 and Year 11 have been steadily rising over the last three years. In 2008, results were above average in the sixth form and in Year 9, and exceptionally high in Year 11. In relation to students' starting points when they enter the school or the sixth form, this represents good achievement at all stages. However, the school is not complacent and has introduced well-devised initiatives to help improve performance. Current assessments of students indicate they are making even better progress and many are heading for outstanding achievement this year. The highly effective systems used by the school for identifying and tackling underachievement and setting personalised aspirational targets for each student are key factors in this improving picture.

The school's strong values, outstanding promotion of community cohesion and highly inclusive nature have a tangible beneficial impact on students. Coupled with excellent care, guidance and support, this ensures that their personal development and well-being are outstanding. Students very much enjoy school, are well behaved and adopt very healthy lifestyles. They have a strong sense of belonging to the school, which makes them feel immensely safe. Most make significant contributions to the local and wider community and the school's specialist status has a very positive impact in this respect.

Teaching and learning are good across the school and outstanding in a significant minority of lessons. Teachers plan thoroughly, identify clear learning objectives, provide articulate explanations and use questioning highly effectively. Assessment is used very well to identify students' current performance and to inform them how to improve. Academic progress is monitored in an exemplary way and students are set challenging targets. However, this high quality assessment is not yet consistently applied in all teachers' routine marking and feedback. The curriculum is good in the whole school and outstanding in the sixth form, and includes excellent enrichment activities. There is high participation in the wealth of performance, sport and other subject-related extra-curricular activities provided by the school. These make a valuable contribution to students' enjoyment and achievement and enhance their personal development. However, the school is aware of the need to meet fully the statutory requirements for information and communication technology (ICT) in Years 10 and 11 and to extend further the use of teaching and learning styles associated with visual images and graphic techniques, used so effectively in art and design, across the curriculum.

Parents' support for the school is overwhelmingly positive. Many wrote to inspectors to say how delighted they were with the education and care provided for their children. Parents speak

of pride in the school and feel they are privileged that their children attend it. This high level of satisfaction is summed up by one parent's comment: 'We are extremely happy with the school and that our child is given the opportunity to grow and flourish both academically and socially'.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 1

The strength of the sixth form is in many respects due to the outstanding way it is led and managed, evident in the drive for continuing success in all areas. Standards have been above the national performance for the last three years and students make good progress, although there is some variation between subjects. Recruitment into the sixth form is strong and retention rates are very high. The inclusive curriculum is outstanding. It provides avenues for progression that meet the needs of all students, providing them with the opportunity to study a wide variety of academic and vocational subjects, which are complemented by an extensive range of extra-curricular opportunities.

Students' personal development is outstanding. Sixth formers are encouraged to lead healthy lifestyles and to make a positive contribution to the health of others by, for example, leading and coaching sports groups. They feel exceptionally safe and secure, and speak enthusiastically about how much they enjoy their education. Students lead many school activities: for example, they participate in an extensive mentoring programme for younger students and have been exemplary in developing the student voice across the school. They serve the wider community admirably in such areas as charity work, assisting in a nearby special school and developing local arts provision. As a result, students develop impressive confidence and personal skills. Teaching and learning are good, and students particularly value the strong support they get from working closely with staff who know them well. A sophisticated and effective target setting system is in place. Students speak very highly of the outstanding guidance and support offered to them by the personal tutoring programme and the extensive advice on careers and higher education.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise students' achievement and standards by ensuring all teachers use consistently the high quality feedback and guidance already evident in the best lessons.
- Ensure that the curriculum fully complies with ICT requirements in Year 10 and 11 and the use of visual teaching and learning styles is developed more extensively across it.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

There has been an upward trend in Year 9 students' standards and achievement over the last three years; both have risen significantly since the last inspection. Students' attainment in national tests has been above average for the last two years and was exceptionally high in mathematics at the end of the last academic year. Current standards in Year 9 are similarly above average. Given the starting points of the students when they join the school, their progress and achievement are good. Standards in GCSE examinations have also risen over this period. Last academic year, they were exceptionally and consistently high and significant numbers of students gained A* or A grades in several subjects. In relation to students' starting points when they entered the school, their progress and achievement were good. In art and design, students' achievement was outstanding. In both Year 9 and 11, all groups of students performed well. Girls and higher ability students made the best progress. Students with learning

difficulties and/or disabilities made as good progress as most other groups of students. Year 11 students' current standards and levels of progress indicate they are on track to achieve even better results by the end of this academic year. These rising standards are due to improvements in teaching and the highly effective support and guidance students receive.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Students' enjoyment of school is outstanding: as one Year 8 boy commented, 'We love it'. This enjoyment is demonstrably reflected in students' extremely positive attitudes to learning, their outstanding levels of attendance, their good behaviour and the excellent relationships they have with staff. Students develop exceedingly well spiritually, morally, socially and culturally, as exhibited by their thoughtful responses in discussions and their considerate attitudes towards each other and adults. Racial intolerance and bullying are rare and students are confident that any incidents will be dealt with effectively. Students say they feel very safe in school and know to whom to turn if they need help or advice; they are very safety conscious in practical lessons and around the school

In every year group, students are involved in the school's development and they exhibit a strong sense of belonging to the school. Their views inform all aspects of school life from improvements in facilities to curriculum development and the appointment of new staff. Students develop a strong sense of responsibility and leadership through their membership of the school council, their work in local primary and special schools, their mentoring of younger students and involvement in the youth parliament. Their contribution to local community events and international activities is outstanding and enables them to develop a clear understanding of other people's backgrounds. Students' capability in literacy, numeracy and ICT and the skills they develop in team working, research and independent learning prepare them very well for their future working lives. They also have an excellent understanding of how to maintain a healthy lifestyle, demonstrated by their awareness of the need for an appropriate diet and their high participation in sports and physical exercise. Parents recognise the school's impact on students' personal development; one wrote that the school had made her three children 'well rounded and caring individuals' while another commented that 'on a near-daily basis, I want to thank and praise Castle School for making my son happy and confident'.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Most teaching is consistently good and a significant minority is outstanding, which enables all groups of students to make at least good progress. The positive relationships between staff and students create a mutually supportive atmosphere in lessons that is highly conducive to learning. Lessons are well planned and they contain a variety of teaching methods that engage most students in active and independent learning. Lesson objectives are shared effectively with students and work is planned well to cater for the differing ability levels of individuals within groups. Teachers' strong subject knowledge helps them bring their lessons to life in an exciting way that engages students. Resources are chosen wisely and used to stimulate and develop students' ideas. Teachers' explanations, instructions and questioning are effective in developing and consolidating students' understanding.

Assessment of students' work is rigorous and used effectively to plan and monitor their progress. Results from assessment are communicated well to students and in the most effective lessons, they are given detailed guidance on how best to secure improvement. Assessment outcomes also effectively identify the support and provision needed for students' additional learning needs. However, this high quality feedback and guidance is not yet consistently applied across the school. Some teachers' routine feedback comments are sometimes too general and not always explicitly linked to the learning outcomes.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum is well matched to the capability and aspirations of all groups of students. Students enjoy the experiences provided by recent curriculum developments, including 'Learning to Learn' in the lower school and extended opportunities for work-related learning in Years 10 and 11. Provision for gifted and talented students is exemplary, with additional or accelerated routes available in all core subjects. Vocational alternatives to GCSEs, and alternative pathways such as ASDAN, Pathfinders and Study Plus, have a beneficial impact on middle and lower ability students' achievement. There is good provision for literacy and numeracy. However, while students' ICT skills are developed well across subjects, the statutory requirement for core ICT in Years 10 and 11 is not yet met. The school has plans to ensure this is in place for the next academic year.

There are a large number of wide-ranging extra-curricular and enrichment opportunities available to students, including sporting activities, performance and visual arts and subject clubs. The high level of students' participation in extra-curricular activities makes a good contribution to their overall enjoyment and achievement. As one parent wrote, 'The breadth of opportunities is wonderful'. Local community events and a host of United Kingdom and foreign trips, including World Challenge visits, enhance students' personal development and promote community cohesion. Almost half of Year 11 students undertake courses in the school's specialist status visual arts subjects in which they achieve very well. The range of these courses has been extended to meet the different needs and talents of pupils. However, the potential benefits of extending the use of visual teaching and learning across the curriculum have yet to be realised.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

The outstanding quality of care, guidance and support in both the main school and the sixth form results in students' exemplary personal development and well-being. The clear emphasis given to continuous improvement is reflected in the very strong focus on monitoring students' academic progress and personal development. The systems used by the school for identifying and tackling underachievement are highly effective as they regularly review and set personalised aspirational targets for each student. Students and parents comment very favourably on the school's motivating rewards scheme. Very effective action has been taken to improve attendance and reduce exclusions over recent years.

The highly inclusive ethos of the school ensures that vulnerable students, including those identified with special educational needs, are very well catered for with an extensive range of strategies employed to support their learning and personal development. One parent wrote to inspectors, 'I have nothing but the highest regard for the support and professionalism of the SEN department who have ensured that our son has been able to achieve his potential'. The school works extremely effectively in close partnership with external agencies to support the

personal development and well-being of students. Procedures for safeguarding the welfare of students fully meet the statutory requirements. At all stages of their education, students receive excellent advice and guidance on choosing courses appropriate to their needs and aspirations.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

The headteacher's exceptionally clear vision, strong direction and effective communication underpin the improvements the school has made since the last inspection. She analyses the school's performance accurately and implements strategies that are very successful in raising the quality of care and education. In conjunction with the highly effective senior leadership team and strong team of middle managers, she has created what she calls 'a shared culture of collective responsibility' that has resulted in a clear drive and commitment to improve the school's performance that are fully supported by all staff. This has been effective in raising students' achievement and standards, improving their personal development and well-being and raising the quality of care, guidance and support. As one parent wrote, 'The head and senior leadership team provide dynamic, clear, strong and visionary leadership'. The governing body gives good support and valuable guidance to the school's leaders and managers while holding them suitably to account for the school's performance.

Lessons are monitored and evaluated very thoroughly to improve the quality of teaching and learning. A range of effective professional development activities are enabling staff to enhance their teaching and share good practice. The school has used increasingly challenging targets, including those for its specialist subjects, which have contributed effectively to raising standards. The use of performance data and other information on students' achievements to track the progress of students, to identify those who are underachieving and to prompt intervention to improve their performance is exemplary. The school's self-evaluation takes account of a wide range of views, particularly the students' voice, and these evaluations are used very well to inform its impressive improvement planning.

The school's contribution to community cohesion is outstanding. The school has a clear understanding of what is required to promote strong cohesion in the school community and with local communities. A range of activities are used to do this very effectively. Links with schools in other countries, visits and visitors to the school are also used very well to develop students' understanding of United Kingdom and global communities. As a result, they gain excellent skills that enable them to participate very well in society, to understand other's lives and appreciate diversity. The school's leaders and managers promote equality of opportunity and eliminate discrimination highly effectively. They have created an ethos of inclusion that has enabled all students to flourish and progress. This is underpinned by the excellent deployment of the school's resources, particularly its staff, to ensure the school provides outstanding value for money.

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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	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	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	1	1
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	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	1
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1	1
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1	1
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	1	1
The attendance of learners	1	1
The behaviour of learners	2	1
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1	1
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1	1

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	2	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	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	1
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1	1
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	1	1
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	1	1
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1	1
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2	2
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**

19 January 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of The Castle School, Thornbury BS35 1HT

Thank you for the help you provided the inspection team when we visited your school. We enjoyed meeting members of year groups and we learned a great deal from our discussions with many of you in lessons and around the school.

Your school, including the sixth form, has improved significantly since it was previously inspected and we judge that it is now outstanding. This is because excellent care, guidance and support ensure that your personal development and well-being are outstanding. This is demonstrated by your enjoyment of school, good behaviour, adoption of healthy lifestyles, willingness to take on responsibility and significant contributions to the local and wider community. Standards have been rising over recent years. Last year, they were exceptionally high and students made good progress from the time they entered the school, including those who had learning difficulties and/or disabilities. In art and design, students' achievement was outstanding. Currently you are making better progress and are on track to achieve even better results by the end of this academic year. Teaching and learning are good and improving. Your teachers plan well and use effective strategies to help you learn. However, the quality of feedback and guidance is not yet consistently high across the school.

The curriculum you receive meets your needs and capabilities well, and outstandingly in the sixth form. The school's visual arts specialist status and the variety of extra-curricular activities you participate in have a very beneficial impact on your enjoyment and achievement. However, the school does not yet fully meet all requirements for ICT in Years 10 and 11 and it knows that the visual teaching and learning styles, used so well in art and design, could be extended more across other subjects. The outstanding leadership and management shown by your headteacher and senior teachers are driving the school's improvement. In order to improve further, we have asked them to raise your achievements by ensuring all teachers use consistently the high quality feedback and guidance already evident in the best lessons, by meeting ICT requirements and by developing further visual teaching and learning. You can help by working hard to ensure that you all attain your potential in national tests and examinations this year.

Best wishes with your studies.

Nick Green

Her Majesty's Inspector