

The Willink School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	110048
Local Authority	West Berkshire
Inspection number	325090
Inspection dates	14–15 January 2009
Reporting inspector	Janet Mercer 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	11–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	907
Sixth form	125
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Kate Bessant
Headteacher	Mr Peter Fry
Date of previous school inspection	19 October 2005
School address	School Lane Burghfield Common Reading RG7 3XJ
Telephone number	01189 832 030
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Age group	11–19
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Introduction

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

Description of the school

The Willink School serves a relatively prosperous, largely rural area in West Berkshire. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is well below average, as is the number of students from minority ethnic heritage. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those with statements of special educational needs is below average. The school has been a specialist language school since 1996 and is the hub for extended services in the eastern part of West Berkshire.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

The Willink School is a satisfactory and improving school. Attainment is good and the majority of students make satisfactory progress, relative to their prior attainment, by the end of Year 11. The school provides good care, guidance and support for its students, which supports their good personal development. Students say that they feel safe and well cared for by staff, who know them individually. The effective leadership of the headteacher, who joined the school in September 2007, is providing a clear focus for improvement. Since his appointment, the school has clearly identified strengths and areas for improvement, and actions to secure improvements are beginning to have effect.

The school has a strong senior and middle leadership team, committed to raising achievement. They are focusing on improving teaching and learning and developing the curriculum to meet the students' diverse range of needs and abilities. The use of data to record and monitor students' progress has improved greatly over the last year. This is now helping managers and teachers review performance regularly and take prompt action where they identify any areas of underachievement.

The school experienced a decline in GCSE results in 2005. Standards have risen over the last few years and, in 2008, were above the level seen in 2004. The proportion of students achieving five or more A* to C grades, including English and mathematics was well above the national average in 2008. However, the school rightly identified that students were not making as much progress in English as they should and results in two of the three modern foreign language subjects were well below average. In-depth reviews carried out in these areas have led to changes in curriculum management and teaching staff, who are striving to improve teaching and raise achievement. There are some early signs of improving progress, for example, in some modern language subjects and in GCSE science modules.

The quality of teaching is satisfactory. While inspectors observed much good teaching, and some outstanding practice, there is still too much variation in the quality of lessons and assessment, both within and between subjects. The school has identified this in their self-evaluation and has set clear priorities to improve the consistency of teaching and learning in the school development plan. These include some of the weaker aspects noted by inspectors, for example, improving assessment feedback to help students know how to improve their work and ensuring that teaching and lesson content meet the needs of all students.

Over the last few years targets for individual students and at whole-school level were not always sufficiently challenging to raise student achievement beyond a satisfactory level. Since September 2008, the school has been setting more challenging targets, to raise expectations and increase the levels of challenge for students.

The curriculum, while broad and balanced, is still a largely traditional one, with limited developments to date in providing more flexible pathways to meet different needs. A number of vocational courses are available through collaboration with local providers. The range of extra-curricular activities is good, and student participation is high. These activities contribute significantly to students' enjoyment of school life. The language specialism has developed the international aspect of the school's work and helped to enrich and broaden students' experiences. There are very good opportunities for students to travel abroad, with visits to countries such as China, Moldova and Russia.

However, the specialism has not yet had sufficient impact on raising achievement in modern languages and developing teaching and learning across the school. The school has recently appointed a senior manager as director for the specialism and this is already beginning to demonstrate some impact. There are some exciting new initiatives, such as the cross-curricular project in Year 7, which is developing the use of modern languages through the curriculum. There is strong capacity for this to develop further.

Most students enjoy school, have positive attitudes to learning and behave well, both in lessons and around the school. Attendance rates are very high. The majority of parents are very supportive of the school and say that their children have settled into the school very well. They value the good care and support their children receive, and how most staff focus on them as individuals. A small minority said they have not always had effective communications with the school. The concerns of some parents about the consistency of the quality of teaching and setting and marking of homework are reflected in the school's priorities for improvement.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

The overall effectiveness of the sixth form is satisfactory. Progress data indicate that students make satisfactory progress, relative to their prior attainment. Results in AS- and A-level examinations are broadly in line with national averages. AS-level pass rates, which had been below average, improved in 2008 and the proportion of students achieving A to B grades increased to around the national average. More A-level students also achieved A to B grades in 2008, although this proportion remained a little below average. Boys generally achieve better than girls. In psychology, sociology and media studies students' achievements have been poor over the last two years.

The school initiated a review of the sixth form in 2007, to improve these weaker areas. Managers have a good understanding of the strengths and areas requiring improvement. There has been a clear focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning and there are now good systems in place to monitor students' progress.

The quality of teaching is satisfactory overall, but this varies between subjects. Students make most progress where they are actively involved in their learning, through varied and interesting tasks, group work and discussion. In weaker lessons, teachers do not use strategies which engage students, sometimes dominating the lesson too much, rather than encouraging students to work independently.

The curriculum provides well for those students who wish to stay on to study A-level subjects but has limited opportunities for those who would benefit from Level 2 or vocational work. Partnerships to extend the offer are being developed and the school is aware of the need to work collaboratively in the local area to increase post-16 progression opportunities.

Students value the good support they receive from teachers and tutors. They are well supported in making career choices and in progression to higher education. Most choose to go to university and are successful in gaining their first choice. Personal development is good, with students making a significant contribution to the school and local community, for example, through mentoring younger students, working with local primary and special schools, organising arts events in the local area and fundraising for charity.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise rates of progress, especially in Years 10 and 11 and the sixth form, through improving the consistency of teaching, learning and assessment.
- Further develop the curriculum to meet the needs of students of all abilities, through expanding vocational options and more flexible approaches.
- Ensure that the recent developments within the language specialism drive improvement and innovation across the school and raise achievement in modern language subjects.

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' attainment on entry is a little above average, and has risen slightly over the last few years. Students make good progress during Key Stage 3 and results in national tests at the end of Year 9 have been above average for several years.

Students' progress in Years 10 and 11 is satisfactory, based on their prior attainment. The proportion achieving at least five A* to C grades at GCSE is in line with the national average, and the proportion achieving five or more A* to C grades, including English and mathematics, has been above average for several years. However, rates of progress in English are less good than in mathematics. GCSE results in French are around the national average, but results in German and Spanish were well below average in 2008.

Students with learning difficulties receive good support, which enables them to make progress at the same rates as other students. There are no significant variations between different groups of students.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Students' personal development and well-being are good. Students say that they feel safe because adults deal with the few instances of bullying effectively. They are encouraged to develop healthy lifestyles, and most appreciate the healthy food choices available. A high proportion regularly participate in sports activities. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural education are good. Although opportunities for spiritual reflection are limited, many benefit from being involved in fundraising and in visits in this country and abroad. In particular, the school initiative where all tutor groups are given £10 to turn into a larger sum for the charity of their choice develops students' understanding of others less fortunate than themselves. This, together with the strength of the student voice, the contribution of sports ambassadors and the sixth form students' work with a local special school, supports students' outstanding contribution to the community. Skills to enhance students' future economic well-being are good, with opportunities for enterprise and work-based activity built into many aspects of school life.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

The school has set clear priorities for improving teaching and learning, acknowledging that the quality of lessons varies both within and between departments. In the best lessons, teachers engage students in a range of active tasks, and pose challenging, open questions, so they make good progress and enjoy their lessons. In such lessons, students learn well together in groups and pairs, and the pace is good. Teachers ensure that students understand exactly what they need to achieve and how their work will be marked.

Weaker lessons do not meet the needs of the whole range of students, where the composition of the teaching group, the use of teaching assistants, or the work itself are not adapted to stretch the most able or to support those who need additional help. Lesson plans are too often focused on task or activities rather than what students are actually learning.

Assessment of students' work varies in quality. Good assessment gives students clear guidance on how good their work is and what specifically they need to do to improve. Where assessment is weak, marking does not provide enough helpful feedback. The new half-termly assessments are not yet embedded enough to have a consistent impact on improving students' achievement.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

All students follow a broadly similar programme at Key Stage 3 and 4. The school has not used the available flexibility to enable students to progress at different rates, according to their individual abilities. All students study two modern foreign languages during Key Stage 3 and take at least one at GCSE. Students can choose from a range of options at Key Stage 4, but the curriculum does not provide a range of pathways, including vocational courses, for students of all abilities. Plans to do this are being developed.

There is some vocational provision at a further education college and in work placements for lower-attaining students, who do well on these courses and grow in confidence. Students who attend alternative provision outside school receive individual support to catch up on any lessons missed while at college or on work placements.

The extra-curricular programme is strong, offering a wide range of sports and arts activities, and most students participate enthusiastically. These activities provide opportunities for students to make positive contributions to their community, for example, the choir comprising students from Willink and local special schools.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Procedures for ensuring students' safety are robust. Staff recruitment arrangements and safeguarding practices meet current government requirements. There are good channels of communication on child protection issues and all staff are appropriately trained. Students and the vast majority of parents speak highly of the strong pastoral support available in the school and students feel safe and valued.

Data on students' attainment are carefully analysed so that leaders and managers can set challenging targets and monitor academic performance. Most students are aware of their personal targets in the majority of their subjects.

Support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is good and this allows them to match the progress of other students across the school. All elements of the student support structure, including the school's liaison with family support and other workers, are effective in ensuring that students receive good personal advice throughout their school career.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The headteacher's clear vision of success for the school has led to a shared sense of direction and a commitment to continuous improvement. Senior leaders play an effective role in monitoring and evaluating the work of the school, which is beginning to lead to improvement. Rigorous self-evaluation, that includes all levels of management, supports the improvement planning process, ensuring that appropriate priorities are identified. However, some elements of the self-evaluation do not focus enough on outcomes for students and the evaluation of the quality of provision does not always support the school's judgements.

The school's leadership team has been strengthened. A number of senior and middle managers have been appointed recently, so there has not been sufficient time to see the full impact of these changes. Middle managers have well-defined roles, lines of accountability are clear and there are good procedures for information-sharing, policy development and performance management. Subject leaders are well supported to manage their areas and staff development is focused on improving teaching and learning. Students' expectations have been raised by the careful monitoring of their progress and the challenging targets set for them. The school has good capacity for further improvement.

Governors are very well informed and have a very good understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. They provide a good balance of support and challenge to the school, take an active part in improvement planning and ensure that all resources are used efficiently. Financial management is good. The school meets its requirements in respect of equalities legislation and effectively promotes equal opportunities. Students from different backgrounds work well together in school and their involvement in wider community activities supports and promotes community cohesion.

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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?	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?	2	2
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	2	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/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	1	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	2	
The attendance of learners	1	
The behaviour of learners	2	
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	2	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of 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	2

Leadership and management

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

28 January 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of The Willink School, Reading, RG7 3XJ

On behalf of the inspectors who visited your school recently, I would like to thank you for making us so welcome and helping us with the inspection. We enjoyed meeting and talking to you, in your lessons and around the school. Many of you and your parents/carers spoke positively about the school. We have taken these views into account in arriving at our judgement that your school is providing a satisfactory standard of education and good care, guidance and support.

Students achieve good results in tests at the end of Year 9. By the end of Year 11 the proportion achieving five or more A* to C grades, including in English and mathematics, is above the national average. However, not all students make as much progress in English as they should and the school is working hard to improve this. Results in some modern languages are not as good as they should be, and this is another area where the school is working to raise achievement.

Some of you told us that the quality of lessons and the marking of your work vary within and between different subjects. Inspectors also found this and we have asked the school to make this more consistent across the school, to help you improve your work and raise achievement. You have a good choice of GCSE subjects at KS4 but there aren't many alternatives to GCSE. We have asked the school to consider how they can organise subjects and timetables more flexibly to meet all your different interests and needs. The school has recently started doing some really interesting projects using modern foreign languages across the curriculum and we have asked them to make sure this really contributes to developing exciting projects and new ideas in teaching and learning.

Many of you told us that you enjoy school and your attendance rates overall are excellent and most of you behave well in lessons and around the school. Lots of you participate regularly in sports and arts activities out of school and told us how much you enjoy team events, competitions and performances in drama and music. A lot of you take up the opportunities to get involved in school and local community events and contribute really well to helping others, for example in local schools and through fundraising activities. We really liked the way that each tutor group has £10 to turn into a larger sum for charity.

You told us how much you value the help and support you get from staff in the school. They are very committed to ensuring you all achieve as well as you can. We hope you will all contribute to this, by working hard to achieve your full potential.

Yours faithfully

Janet Mercer

Her Majesty's Inspector