

Denbigh School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	110498
Local Authority	Milton Keynes
Inspection number	325158
Inspection dates	14–15 May 2009
Reporting inspector	Martin Beale

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

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1374
Sixth form	361
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr William Butler
Headteacher	Mrs Sarah Parker
Date of previous school inspection	8 March 2006
School address	Burchard Crescent Shenley Church End Milton Keynes MK5 6EX
Telephone number	01908 505030
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Age group	11–18
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by five additional inspectors.

Description of the school

Free school meal eligibility is below average in this large school. Student numbers have fallen in the main school since the last inspection, while the number of students in the sixth form has increased. The sixth form is large and very popular. Three quarters of Year 11 students choose to stay on, and about sixty joined from other schools in 2008. Denbigh has been a Specialist Technology College since 1997. The proportions of students from minority ethnic backgrounds and of those learning English as an additional language are both average. Fewer students than in most schools are identified as having learning difficulties, and the number with a statement of special educational needs is below average. The school has gained the Healthy School and Activemark awards.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Under the excellent leadership of the headteacher, Denbigh School has made impressive progress since the last inspection. The school's effectiveness is outstanding, agreeing with the staff and governors' evaluation. Not only has the school improved rapidly in recent years, but highly skilled leadership at all levels has built a very firm platform for this to be built upon in the future. Everyone, from governors through the leadership team to all staff, is very ambitious for the school, and has high expectations of their own performance and for the students' achievements. This is reflected in the challenging targets set and the action taken for these to be achieved.

Great success has been achieved in the relentless drive to improve teaching and learning. The particularly sharp focus on how students learn and how their learning can be improved is visible in all classrooms. Much teaching is of an exceptional quality from a highly skilled team of teachers, who reflect on their practice, share ideas with each other, and have a great enthusiasm for their work. This is the major factor in the rapid improvement in the students' achievement in recent years. Achievement is outstanding. From starting points around or slightly above the national average, students make rapid progress. Standards as reflected in 2008 GCSE results and the students' current work are very high by the end of Year 11.

Doing what is best for each student is the rationale behind all that the school does. Programmes are matched closely to each individual's needs and interests, with clear academic and vocational routes available. The next priority for the school is to meet its goal of bringing greater personalisation to the Key Stage 3 curriculum to enrich and deepen the students' learning further. One noteworthy development since the last inspection has been increased challenge for the more-able students in lessons and through the extensive additional activities for those identified as gifted and talented. Students with learning difficulties receive sharply focused support so that their progress towards their individual targets is outstanding. This support also accounts for the rapid progress of students learning English as an additional language.

The students make a huge contribution to the school. They have a vested interest in its success, respect each other and are proud of their school. Their voice is heard extensively in all manner of developments, including helping in the drive to improve teaching and learning. The mixed-age tutorial groups also contribute to the strong sense of belonging that pervades the school. This is reflected in the students' great enjoyment of all that it provides. As one said, 'This school is the best a school can be.'

There is no complacency at Denbigh School; instead, everyone keeps striving to become better at all that they do. There is a great optimism about what teachers and students can achieve together. One example of this is the intention to help the students to even greater independence through extending their voice in the school and developing further the use of its Virtual Learning Environment across all phases. The Technology specialist status has been used very skilfully as a catalyst for developing teaching methods and enhancing the curriculum.

The students feel safe, and value highly the support they receive. Many commented that this is an excellent school where 'if you want to achieve something here, you can do it'. Their behaviour is exemplary, and students of all ages and backgrounds treat each other with great consideration. The students know that there is someone to turn to if they have a problem and that it will be dealt with constructively. They are very aware of their community responsibilities and of their role in the wider world. They stay fit and healthy through their participation in a

wide range of sports and physical activities, both in and beyond the school day, as recognised by the Healthy School and Activemark awards. The students' outstanding personal qualities and their excellent academic achievement give them a very firm base for success in the next stage of their education and beyond into the world of work.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The sixth form is well led by managers who have a clear picture of its qualities. This, and the recent record of improvement throughout the school, means that there is a very firm platform from which the ambitions for the sixth form can be met. Teaching is carefully monitored, but it is not of quite the same consistently outstanding quality as in the main school. Teachers make good use of information from very effective assessment procedures to match activities to the individual students' needs. In the best lessons, they are very skilled in their use of class discussion to encourage greater student participation in lessons. However, this is not the case when lessons are teacher-led and do not encourage the students' independence. The relaxed rapport between teachers and students makes for a purposeful learning environment. Consequently, students make good progress from their starting points. In the 2008 A-level examinations, the proportion of students obtaining a pass grade was broadly average. The percentage gaining higher grades was slightly below the national figure. The few students who followed vocational courses were more successful in achieving higher grades.

Students can choose from a very wide range of academic courses and an improved selection of vocational courses. The Football Academy is very popular and there are good opportunities to participate in enrichment activities. Modern languages students undertake work experience abroad and it is evident that the World Challenge visit to Malaysia was a tremendous success. Students show considerable maturity and provide very good role models for the rest of the school. The school wishes to extend their voice in the school to develop their independence further, although they already make a huge contribution to school life. Some are trained as mentors to younger students, while others are involved in the school council and sports council, and provide strong leadership for the house system. Students are kept informed of their progress, are aware of what they need to do to improve, and are effusive in praising the guidance they get in choosing careers and higher education courses.

What the school should do to improve further

- Extend the students' learning skills throughout the school by maximising the use of the Virtual Learning Environment and achieving greater consistency in teaching in the sixth form.
- Extend personalisation of the Key Stage 3 curriculum to deepen and enrich the students' learning experiences.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

The school sets itself very challenging targets for examination performance, which it mostly meets and at times exceeds. It also regularly meets its specific targets as a Specialist Technology College. Standards are rising, and the students now make outstanding progress in lessons across the school. The most recent year for comparable Year 9 test results was 2007, when results in English, mathematics and science were well above the national average. GCSE results rose in 2008 and are on track to continue this trend in 2009. The proportion of students obtaining five good GCSE grades rose to the high level of 80% in 2008. For three quarters of these students,

this included at least a grade C in both English and mathematics. Current school data indicate that students are on track to maintain these high examination results. School predictions also show that more are on track to gain the highest A*/A grades than did so in the above average results of 2008. GCSE results were above average in most subjects in 2008. Unusually, compared with the national picture, all students at Denbigh School take a modern foreign language at GCSE, with the consequence that results were slightly below the national average. The more-able students are entered a year earlier for some GCSE examinations, or study the three separate sciences with considerable success.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

The students' outstanding spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is reflected in all aspects of school life, from their excellent behaviour to their positive attitudes to learning and their developing maturity. Attendance is good, and shows signs of continuing improvement because of firm measures taken in the school and the high level of students' enjoyment. Behaviour is influenced by consistency of expectations across the school, leading to infrequent use of exclusion. Rather, students are rewarded for good contributions to school life, as in the innovative scheme where they earn 'shares' which change in value depending on the school's success. Incidents of bullying are very rare and are dealt with promptly through a very effective pastoral system. The students make an outstanding contribution to school life through the excellent mentoring and house support systems. The school council is a key force for discussion, through which the school seeks students' views and actively responds to their concerns. For example, changing the school uniform to jumpers and providing information by television in the main concourse involved consultation with students. This gives them a clear message that the school wants to treat them respectfully and listen to their views. Students engage in numerous charitable activities, and older students are encouraged to serve the school and local communities as role models and mentors.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 1

School leaders have worked hard to improve the quality of learning, recognising that this is a key to sustaining high standards. They have identified the key for taking good lessons to the next level as increasing the opportunities for students to develop even greater independence in their learning. Students make outstanding progress, because they are fully involved in their work. In a Year 8 mathematics lesson, for instance, the students' evaluation of learning was used to determine individual topics that needed to be consolidated for their homework. Those of higher ability are challenged extremely well through probing questions and discussion groups. This deepens their understanding and enables them to move quickly on to higher levels. Teachers use highly motivating methods to engage their students. Interactive whiteboards often play a part in this. A particularly telling demonstration of the presence of faulty genes in society, using a full football stadium, drew gasps of amazement from students as it completely emptied, to show we all have them. The excellent relationships between staff and students extend to a partnership in which students help to evaluate teaching. Students are strongly encouraged to beat their target level and not rest on their laurels. A great deal of work is done in all lessons. A running-down stopwatch is often displayed on the whiteboard, reminding students to get on with their tasks and not waste time.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

At the heart of the curriculum is the clear focus on a personalised programme of study which is precisely tailored to the needs, abilities and interests of each student. The students' own enthusiasm and enjoyment in learning are skilfully harnessed to enable them to take responsibility for informed choices within a flexible structure. The exceptionally wide range of courses on offer includes triple sciences and an accelerated humanities course. All students pursue a foreign language at a level commensurate with their abilities, and their study is supported by excellent links with France, Spain and Germany. The school has effectively and innovatively improved its provision since the last inspection by introducing applied courses for students in Years 10 and 11. An impressive array of sports undertaken in lessons and extended through after-school clubs enables students to be successful at both regional and national levels. The enrichment curriculum is a major strength, with a wealth of activities which are exceptionally well supported by students, who appreciate the dedication of their teachers. Productive links with local colleges, primary schools and the wider community mean that students represent their school with pride. Learners are very well provided for in work-related activities, giving them a deep insight into the world of work.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

An exceptionally well-coordinated system of care, guidance and support underpins the students' outstanding academic achievement and personal development. All staff use the wealth of relevant information about each individual's achievements to check progress, set challenging targets, and ensure that any other issues facing them are tackled. Students know their current levels and what they should be aiming for. Academic support is detailed, and provides students with precise guidance as to how to improve. Students know what to do to reach specific levels, because 'teachers are consistent in their marking'. They say that teachers are always chasing them to drive up their performance, that 'teachers genuinely care', and consequently 'I can see that things are improving'. Support for students with emotional or behavioural difficulties, from staff and older students is outstanding. The school has extensive links with external agencies to meet students' needs. It employs its own educational psychologist to help in assessing particular needs and to work with feeder schools to smooth identification and transition of more vulnerable pupils. Transitions are handled exceptionally well, with an extensive support network for new students. Procedures for safeguarding students are extremely secure. The rigorous system for managing risk assessments requires the member of staff to attend frequent governing body committee meetings, where governors check arrangements proposed for hazardous or overnight visits before approving.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

The headteacher has skilfully built a strong staff team which shares her commitment and her aims with great enthusiasm for the school and for the pupils. She has the ambition of trying to help everyone 'to be the best they can be'. This is recognised and respected by all members of staff, who work hard to achieve their personal goals. The relentless focus on improving the quality of teaching and involving pupils more in their learning is at the root of the school's

success. Teachers are reflective and very keen to improve their skills. The senior team plays a crucial leadership role and is instrumental in helping to secure improvements and establish a positive culture of support and guidance. The sense of teamwork and of all pulling together is tangible, and members of staff at all levels thoroughly enjoy working at Denbigh School. The rigorous monitoring of performance is undertaken in a constructive and supportive manner. Success is celebrated at all levels and where targets are not met, help and guidance are provided. The wide variety of methods adopted to develop staff professionally, in the classroom and in their leadership roles, includes valuable opportunities for teachers to work together sharing experiences, skills and practices. Highly effective governance is another major factor in the school's recent successes. Governors judiciously balance challenge with support in helping to shape the school's direction, while enabling the headteacher as the leading professional to achieve their aims. The school has a very clear understanding of the community it serves, and is acutely aware of the very positive impact of its work to support families, feeder primary schools and other local organisations.

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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	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?	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	2	
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	2
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**

28 May 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Denbigh School, Milton Keynes, MK5 6EX

Thank you for your great help and cooperation when we inspected your school. We spoke with many of you in lessons, in groups and around the school. We thought you showed confidence and a strong sense of maturity. Your behaviour is excellent and you make a very considerable contribution to school and community life. It was great to hear how much you all enjoy school and feel safe.

We agree with you, your teachers and governors that Denbigh is an outstanding school. It has improved in many ways in recent years, such as the way in which you are continually challenged to do your best, and the impact of the Technology specialist status. You are doing very well in your work and are making excellent progress. Standards are rising, and GCSE results are very high. Your dedicated and determined headteacher is supported by hardworking staff and governors. By carefully assessing how well you are doing, teachers are able to make sure that the courses you study meet your needs and interests. You have outstanding teachers, who show considerable interest in your personal and academic development. They try hard to make sure that your learning needs are catered for and that all of you have the opportunity to succeed. You also benefit from a very wide range of additional activities, particularly in sport.

The staff and governors are always aiming to do even better. We think that there are things that can be even better, so we have asked your teachers to:

- enhance and extend your independent learning skills through maximising the use of the Virtual Learning Environment and 'Student Voice'
- extend personalisation of the Key Stage 3 curriculum to deepen and enrich the learning experiences of the younger students.

You can help too. Continue to be excellent ambassadors for your school.

Once again, many thanks. I wish you every success in the future.

Yours faithfully

Martin Beale

Lead Inspector