

Chesham High School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	110504
Local Authority	Buckinghamshire
Inspection number	325160
Inspection dates	11–12 February 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	Grammar (selective)
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1206
Sixth form	357
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Kris Wilson
Headteacher	Mr Philip Wayne
Date of previous school inspection	14 December 2005
School address	Whitehill Chesham HP5 1BA
Telephone number	01494 782 854
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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 four Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Chesham High School is a selective grammar school, with a large sixth form. Students come from a wide catchment area and most are from White British backgrounds. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including those with statements of special educational needs is well below average, as is that of students entitled to free school meals. The school caters for students who have physical disabilities. Very few students have specific emotional or behavioural needs. The school was awarded specialist status in humanities in July 2007.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Chesham High School is a good and rapidly improving school, with an outstanding sixth form. The headteacher has shown outstanding leadership in identifying key areas requiring improvement. Strong support from very able senior leaders and governors has ensured that prompt and effective actions have been taken, resulting in significant improvements in a number of key areas. Many parents commented on how much the school has improved during the last 18 months.

While examination results in the school have been consistently high, in recent years students have not made the expected progress in Years 10 and 11. Almost all students gained 5 or more A* to C grades at GCSE, including English and mathematics, but the school identified that too few were achieving the highest A* and A grades. This has been a clear focus for improvement since 2007 and examination results in 2008 demonstrated improvement in this respect. The school has greatly improved its use of data to monitor students' progress. This has enabled teachers and tutors to identify any students at risk of underachieving and take prompt action to improve their work and progress. As a result, there are early signs of much improved progress in this current year, with most students making good progress and on course to achieve their predicted grades. Students make outstanding progress in the sixth form, reflected in the very high proportion of A and B grades achieved at A level.

Improving teaching and learning has been central to the school's drive to raise achievement and inspectors noted improvements since the last inspection. Teaching and learning are now good overall and inspectors observed examples of outstanding practice in both the main school and the sixth form. Lessons are well planned, and most students participate well in the various activities. Learning is most effective when teachers challenge students to develop their thinking, by good use of probing questioning and tasks which stretch their capabilities. However, in a few lessons observed, the work set was not always closely matched to students' abilities and, when it was not challenging enough, students made less progress. While regular assessment takes place, marking does not always provide sufficient feedback on how students could improve their work.

The curriculum has improved considerably since the last inspection, as a result of rigorous evaluation and careful attention being paid to students' and parents' views. Significant progress has been made in the information and communication technology (ICT) curriculum over the past two years, with improved access to computers and much more effective use of ICT by students in lessons.

Students and parents value the strong pastoral support provided by the school. The school attracts students from a wide catchment area and works closely with feeder schools to ensure students settle in quickly. While there have been significant improvements in the monitoring of student progress, managers acknowledge that this is still in development and not yet consistent across the whole school. Systems for monitoring academic progress have been in place for longer in the sixth form and are very effective in supporting students to achieve very well.

Students' personal development is outstanding, well supported by a strong personal development programme. They are proud to belong to the school and behave impeccably both in lessons and around the site. Most are mature and articulate. They make an outstanding contribution to the community, both within the school and in the wider community. The school's specialist

status has enhanced and strengthened its links with the local and wider community. For example, students have been involved in local history projects with other schools, community groups and the local museum and have also supported older learners from the community working with computers and the internet.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 1

Academic achievement and personal development are outstanding. The proportion of students gaining A and B grades at A level is significantly above the national average. Sixth-form students provide excellent role models for younger students by acting as prefects, mentors and members of the school council. A large number of them are active in the wider community through fund raising and voluntary activities. Students' sensitivity to the needs of people in developing countries is evident in their participation in a range of global projects with link schools in Ghana and Beijing and through World Challenge opportunities.

Most teaching is good, with some outstanding practice. Teachers use their excellent subject knowledge to plan challenging tasks, which require analytical and critical thinking skills. Students are highly motivated when presented with demanding activities and opportunities for class discussion, which give them the confidence for more independent study. The school acknowledges that there is still some variability in the quality of teaching across the sixth form.

The curriculum offers a wide choice of A-level subjects and includes a vocational ICT programme. Students benefit from an extensive enrichment programme. They greatly appreciate the outstanding individual pastoral care, academic guidance and excellent support they receive, in preparation for examinations and university entrance. Almost all students progress to higher education, with many gaining places at prestigious universities.

Leadership and management of the sixth form are outstanding. Leaders have high expectations of work and commitment from students. Data is used effectively to set targets, monitor progress and identify underachievement at an early stage. Although the library provides ample resources for independent study, the school acknowledges that the sixth-form accommodation is uninviting and that these highly motivated students deserve better.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that teachers use available assessment data to plan work to match all students' individual needs and abilities.
- Maximise achievement by increasing the consistency of high-quality teaching and learning.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Standards in the main school and in the sixth form are outstanding. Results for national tests in Year 9 show that standards in English, mathematics and science are high. The proportion of students gaining the higher levels is significantly higher than national average and students make good progress relative to their prior attainment.

Standards at GCSE have been consistently high. Although the proportion of students gaining A* and A grades was well above the national average, it was lower than expected in relation to prior attainment. The school's current analysis of student progress indicates that further improvements, particularly in the number of A* grades achieved, are likely to be made in 2009.

While the performance of girls is better than that of boys, the difference is less than that seen nationally.

Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities also make good progress as a result of effective support. Although it is too early to judge the impact of its specialist status on overall achievement and standards, there is evidence that improvements are being made, particularly in English.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

The school's inclusive ethos is reflected in students' outstanding personal development and well-being. Most enjoy school thoroughly and are keen to learn, especially when their teaching is lively and stimulating. Attendance is consistently above average, with exceptionally low levels of persistent absence. There are excellent opportunities for students to influence decision making within the school. Many school procedures are developed through the student council and student research group, taking the views of students into account.

Young people are encouraged to develop healthy lifestyles and most appreciate the school's commitment to this in offering healthy food choices. The majority of students take regular exercise through physical education lessons and other sports activities. Students' participation in extra-curricular activities is consistently high, with the majority involved in life outside the classroom. Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development are outstanding. They have a clear sense of right and wrong on issues such as bullying, discrimination and justice, and there is a strong commitment to racial equality.

Students make an outstanding contribution to the community, for example through significant charity donations, a thriving junior sports leaders' programme and excellent student support for senior citizens in the local community. They develop good skills to enhance their future economic well-being, with focused opportunities for enterprise and work-based activity built into many aspects of school life. Most students join the school's sixth form at the end of Year 11.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Effective systems for monitoring teaching and learning have enabled the school to identify best practice and where further development is needed. The majority of teachers are specialists in their subject and are successful in creating a classroom environment where students enjoy learning and are eager to achieve. For example, in an outstanding Year 8 French lesson all students were enthusiastic language learners as a result of a wide variety of carefully planned activities and imaginative use of the interactive whiteboard. Students were able to assess their own progress and that of their peers. Students make rapid progress in lessons when teachers share their enthusiasm for their subject and make students think deeply by asking probing questions and allowing time for extended answers and class discussion.

The quality of teaching and learning is, however, still variable across the school. In less effective lessons, too much time is spent on whole-class teaching and the use of textbooks at the expense of more active tasks which would involve students more directly in their learning. Progress is

limited in lessons when the teacher's expectations are too low and planning does not take sufficient account of students' prior knowledge.

Regular assessment which informs lesson planning is now a more established routine in the school. Although the standard of marking by some teachers is exemplary, this is not consistent across departments. Advice to students on how to improve is frequently missing or not sufficiently detailed to help students to improve their work.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The broad academic curriculum meets the needs of students well. A carefully considered personal development programme provides well for work-related learning and health, moral and social education. However, curriculum content is not always sufficiently related to students' prior attainment, which affects their progress in lessons.

There is excellent curriculum provision for students with special educational needs, especially the most vulnerable. The curriculum for gifted and talented students is developing well, with a range of fast-track programmes on offer and specific provision for the most able in lesson plans and subject schemes of work.

Good links are being made with other schools to improve the curriculum for students in the local area. Equality and diversity are promoted well through the curriculum, which is well informed by the different cultures represented in the local community. The strong international dimension enhances students' understanding of global issues and strengthens community cohesion. The school is making reasonable progress in implementing the revised National Curriculum for Year 7 and using the new flexibility it provides.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Pastoral care is a strength of the school. Students are very positive about the care they receive and feel safe and valued within the school community. Students new to the school speak highly of the support they receive to help them settle quickly. The school has robust and efficient staff recruitment arrangements, with clear child-protection practices that are known and understood by all staff.

Statistical information on students' past attainment is analysed so that leaders and managers can set challenging targets and monitor academic performance. However, use of this information by teachers as a focus for raising achievement in lessons is still developing and is not yet consistent.

Sensitive and skilful support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities enables them to match the good progress of others throughout the school. Those in most need receive outstanding mentoring support from significant adults and positive student role models.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Leadership and management are good and make a significant contribution to improvements in the school. The outstanding leadership of the headteacher has set a very clear vision for the

school. This is fully supported by the strong senior team and shared by middle leaders, teachers and governors.

Challenging targets, based on students' prior attainment, are set for individual students and these inform departmental and whole-school targets. There have been considerable improvements in using data to monitor students' progress, and to raise expectations of both students and staff of what they can, and are expected to, achieve. Middle leaders are well supported and are held to account for the performance of their areas and they value the opportunities they have to innovate and develop their work. The school rightly acknowledges that there is still more work to do in ensuring that all middle leaders are able to meet the high standards of the best.

The school has developed rigorous self-evaluation at school and departmental level. This has enabled senior and middle leaders to identify accurately the school's strengths and areas requiring further improvement. Actions taken over the previous 18 months are having a positive impact across the school, for example, improving progress in Years 10 and 11, the quality of teaching and learning and the provision for and use of ICT to enhance learning.

Open and constructive relationships with the headteacher have ensured that governors are well informed about all aspects of school life. This has enabled them to support and challenge the senior team effectively. Governors have a clear understanding of the school's strengths and areas that require further improvement. Finances are well managed and resources effectively used to focus on improving teaching and learning and on raising achievement. There has been significant investment to improve ICT resources. In the context of achieving consistently high standards and outstanding progress in the sixth form, the school provides outstanding value for money.

Effective partnerships within the local community promote community cohesion well. The school is actively developing links with local faith and ethnic groups and supporting community groups to develop their learning, for example, English for speakers of other languages and ICT for older learners.

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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	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?	2	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1	1

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	1
The standards ¹ reached by learners	1	1
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	1
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	2	

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	2	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	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	1

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2	1
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	1	1
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	1	
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**

26 February 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Chesham High School, Chesham, HP5 1BA

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 very positively about the school. We have taken these views into account in arriving at our judgement that your school is a good and rapidly improving school and that the sixth form is outstanding.

You achieve excellent results in tests and examinations at the end of Years 9 and 11 and in the sixth form. However, in recent years not all students made as much progress in Years 10 and 11 as they should have, and too few achieved the highest A* and A grades. The school has worked hard to improve this and current Year 11 students are now making good progress towards their more ambitious targets.

Some of you told us that the quality of lessons and the marking of your work varies within and between different subjects. Inspectors agree and we have asked the school to make the quality more consistent across the school to help you improve your work and raise achievement. The majority of lessons are well planned but occasionally the work is not challenging enough to make sure you all achieve the best you can. We have asked the school to make sure that all teachers plan work to meet the different needs and abilities of all students, so that you make the best possible progress.

Most of you told us that you really enjoy school and the vast majority of students behave very 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. Many of you take up the opportunities to get involved in school and local community events and contribute strongly to helping others, for example in local schools, through fund-raising activities and links with schools in other countries, such as Ghana and China.

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 and aspire to making Chesham High an outstanding school. We hope you will all contribute to this by working hard to achieve your full potential.

With best wishes for the future

Yours faithfully

Janet Mercer

Her Majesty's Inspector