

Plymouth High School for Girls

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	113532
Local Authority	Plymouth
Inspection number	325837
Inspection dates	28–29 January 2009
Reporting inspector	Kenneth (Ken) Bush

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	11–18
Gender of pupils	Girls
Number on roll	
School (total)	805
Sixth form	204
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	David Walters
Headteacher	Mary Utton
Date of previous school inspection	10 May 2006
School address	St Lawrence Road Plymouth PL4 6HT
Telephone number	01752 208308
Fax number	01752 208309

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by a team of four Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Plymouth High School for Girls is a smaller than average selective grammar school. The percentage of students eligible for free school meals is well below that usually found nationally. The percentage of students identified by the school as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities is also well below the national average. The great majority of students are of White British origin, with a very small but growing proportion whose first language is believed not to be English. Plymouth High recently gained the Healthy Schools award for the second time and has both the Artsmark Silver and International School awards. The school has training school status, specialist technology college status since 2002 and a second specialism in languages since 2008.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

Plymouth High School for Girls is an improving school which provides its students with a satisfactory standard of education. The dynamic headteacher, who took up post in early 2008, has made a strong start in tackling a legacy of high attainment but limited progress, where students have not generally achieved as well as they should. Progress since the previous inspection has been limited and only in the past year have the necessary improvements begun to be addressed with the degree of rigour required. However, the school is now aware of what it needs to do to move forward, and developments such as the rapid improvement in teaching give strong indications that it is beginning to do so. The school has a number of strengths, one of which is students' personal development and wellbeing. The capacity to improve further is good.

The standards reached by the end of Year 11 are consistently very high, as typically found in a selective school where students join with well above average levels of attainment. The most able students do particularly well in biology, chemistry and physics and less well in mathematics and modern foreign languages. However, the overall achievement of students is no better than satisfactory because the progress they make over time has not been as rapid as it should have been. Inspection evidence reveals that recent improvements in teaching and increasing proficiency in the identification of underperformance are beginning to contribute to better progress, but these measures have had insufficient time to yet have a clear impact upon achievement.

Teaching is good overall and improving. Relationships between staff and students are excellent, and in the very best lessons, there is a very strong sense of able young people developing their intellectual capacity through appropriately challenging tasks. The headteacher is rightly committed to developing this more widely across the school through raising the expectations of staff – particularly those at middle leader level – and students in order to promote higher levels of achievement. Information about students' progress is beginning to be used effectively to plan the next stages of learning and set appropriately focused individual targets, but these examples of good practice are not yet seen consistently enough across the school and there is also considerable variability in the quality of marking. The curriculum is broad and balanced, and matches students' needs and capabilities well. School leaders and managers are becoming increasingly proficient in responding creatively to local and national initiatives, such as being the lead school in Plymouth for the International Baccalaureate (IB) and its involvement in the delivery of diplomas.

The school has a well-deserved reputation amongst parents as being caring and supportive and in this inclusive environment, students thrive as individuals, including those who are vulnerable. Academic guidance, however, is no better than satisfactory because whilst systems are now in place to set and monitor targets, practice across the school is inconsistent. Students' personal development and well-being are outstanding. They are proud of their school and appreciate the range of opportunities available to them, both within and beyond the curriculum. Students have high regard both for their teachers and their peers, and their extremely positive attitudes to learning are shown in their excellent attendance and behaviour. They are also increasingly taking advantage of the headteacher's determination to enable them to have a strong 'voice' in the further development of the school. Students have very well developed skills in literacy, numeracy, and information and communication technology (ICT) and are well prepared for making choices for their courses in Year 10, the world of work and post-16 higher education.

A very small number of parents/carers expressed concerns that the school's communications could be improved but the vast majority are very supportive of the school's work with their children. One parent wrote: 'The school feels like a real community; the teachers and pupils are always welcoming and happy... we cannot praise the school highly enough.'

Technology college status provides rich opportunities for students to experience technology and science. It has had a positive impact on standards in sciences and technology and recruitment into the sixth form. In addition, there has been an increase in the interest and involvement of students in engineering. The school exceeded its technology specialism targets for science in 2008, and exceptionally so in the number of A*/A grades. The school's status as a training school has developed the confidence of staff in integrating ICT into lessons. In addition, the commitment of the school to development activities has also started to have a positive impact on the quality of teaching. There are effective links with higher and further education institutions via the training and technology specialism. Primary links are developing, particularly through the relatively new languages specialism. Whilst there has been an increase in the range of languages and language enrichment activities, this has not had the opportunity as yet to impact on standards in French and German at GCSE level. However, the proportion of students studying a language at GCSE is well above the national average.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

Sixth form provision is satisfactory, and improving. Since the previous inspection, there has been a change in leadership in the sixth form that has led to more focus on improving achievement, which in 2008 was satisfactory. A more rigorous use of data to highlight how well students are performing is now evident but it has yet to have a marked impact on progress. Standards of attainment, however, have steadily risen in recent years and are now above average. Attention is currently being placed on increasing the proportion of higher grades and highlighting the role of learning skills to facilitate more independent learning. Teaching is good and students show mature relationships with teachers. The level of debate is often challenging and at a high intellectual level, as seen during the inspection in religious education and psychology lessons. Students point to the immense help given by tutors, not just in day-to-day matters but also in career choices. The positive reorganisation of enrichment opportunities is also helping to strengthen satisfaction among students.

Students' personal development is outstanding. They are courteous, very articulate and clearly enjoy attending the sixth form. They feel safe and are positive about how they are encouraged to lead healthy lifestyles. Many students take on leadership roles in the school community, including through the house system.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that processes for tracking students' progress are embedded across the school and are used effectively to improve achievement.
- Improve students' capacity to improve their own work and meet their targets through more effective marking and feedback across all subjects.
- Ensure all middle leaders contribute fully to raising achievement, particularly through further improving the quality of teaching and learning.

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 typically join the school with levels of attainment that are well above average. By the end of Year 9, standards as shown by performance in national tests are exceptionally high, with an increasing proportion of students achieving the higher levels. Students' attainment at the end of Year 11 is also well above average, despite there being a slight dip in 2008 in the proportion of students gaining five good GCSEs, including English and mathematics. There is a similar rising trend in the proportion of students gaining the higher GCSE grades, although again this fell back slightly in 2008. Success in improving performance is particularly evident in sciences and technology, where the school's specialist status is making an impact upon standards.

Despite the very high levels of attainment when compared with schools nationally, the degree of progress that students have made in recent years at both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 has been only satisfactory. This pattern is particularly evident in the slow and declining rates of progress made in both English and in mathematics, especially in 2008. Evidence gathered during the inspection, however, shows early indications that because of better teaching, the rate of progress is beginning to increase. As a result of effective support, the relatively few students in the school with learning difficulties and/or disabilities progress at a rate which is at least equal to that of their peers. Achievement overall is satisfactory.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

The students demonstrate good, spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. They use their initiative, take responsibility and make their voice known. Students are very positive about their education and enjoy the experience. They report feeling very safe, as exemplified by the almost total lack of bullying, and are confident in the accessibility of adults within school. Behaviour was excellent during the inspection, both in and out of lessons. In the main school, the two hours of physical education offered each week enable high and rising levels of participation in competitions of different kinds. There has been an overwhelmingly positive reaction from students to the focus within the personal, social and health education (PSHE) programme on the virtues of healthy living, and students are very knowledgeable about the topic. Leadership development has been a main priority for the school. A third of the students in Years 10 and 11 undertake the Junior Sports Leaders award, and there is a strong student voice. Students willingly take advantage of the many opportunities for outside visits and the link with a school in Ghana.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Most lessons are well planned in order to meet the interests and capabilities of the students. In the small minority of less effective lessons observed, however, insufficient attention was given to assessment information about students' starting points, resulting in less challenging tasks being set. In general, a good range of strategies and resources are employed and students report that their enjoyment is enhanced by the variety of approaches used, including the opportunity to participate in well-structured and stimulating discussions. High-order thinking

skills are promoted through probing questioning and tasks requiring students to think independently, a feature which is a distinct improvement since the previous inspection. Teachers display very good subject knowledge and improving teaching skills, reflecting the school's strong commitment to professional development and improved monitoring of lessons. The regular and innovative use of ICT, driven by the school's specialist technology status, contributes to raising students' aspirations and securing engagement with learning. Recent and significant improvements in teaching are now leading to better progress in lessons, although this is yet to impact on students' overall achievement.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum supports the learning and the personal development of students well. A 'learning to learn' programme is helping students in Year 7 and Year 8 to increase their learning capacity, as well as effectively developing teamwork and leadership skills. A particular strength is the provision of sufficient time for all technology subjects to embed the skills required for pursuing these subjects at Key Stage 4. The school's active encouragement of students to study engineering is a good example of innovative practice to challenge stereotypes in terms of vocational options. However, the impact of the specialist subjects on the curriculum as a whole is limited. A small number of students have embarked on the new diploma programme in partnership with other local providers and the school is leading on the development of new diploma subjects. Progression pathways are clear and students know what is available to them. The curriculum plays a particularly strong role in developing students' awareness of healthy lifestyles and keeping themselves safe. Resources for learning are good, particularly in ICT. The curriculum is enriched by the numerous and popular extra-curricular clubs, visits and residential experiences on offer, and several 'minority' courses, such as GCSE astronomy and Russian, are available as 'twilight' options to all students.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

The school rightly prides itself on its success in ensuring that students feel valued, cared for and well looked after. This is particularly evident in the way it promotes a positive attitude to school life amongst its students, many of whom thrive personally and socially in this inclusive environment. Support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is good and the Student Support Base offers effective support for vulnerable students, including those for whom English is an additional language. Staff know these students' particular needs well, and nurture them well. The school successfully uses a range of staged intervention strategies involving both internal and external professionals to support identified students. Parents comment upon the high quality care as a distinctive feature of the school.

Despite the very large number of feeder primary schools, the support as students transfer to Year 7 is strong. The visits by staff to their schools before September, the range of activities at Plymouth High School and the friendships made all contribute to students settling well into Year 7. Both parents and students appreciate this aspect of their school. Advice and guidance on future courses and careers are also thorough and enable students to make well-informed choices for their future lives. Appropriate systems are now in place to track individual students' progress. Academic tutors are involved in the monitoring process, and the liaison between academic and pastoral staff is becoming increasingly effective, although this is not yet having a measurable impact on achievement. Whilst some students are aware of their targets and their

current levels or grades, there is inconsistent practice across subjects and year groups. In addition, marking and feedback are not consistently detailed enough to enable students to be proactive in improving their work in order to meet their targets. Safeguarding and child protection arrangements are securely in place.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

As a result of the inspirational leadership of the headteacher, the school is beginning to develop plans to enable sustained improvement and further raise the aspirations of staff and students. Since the previous inspection, procedures for monitoring and evaluating the work of the school have become more robust. Consequently, staff now have a clearer sense of the improvements required to move the school forward and short-, medium- and long-term goals have been established. For example, systems for target setting, tracking students' progress and intervening when underperformance occurs are now in place, but these have yet to impact fully on improving the achievement of students. Whilst leadership is good in some areas of the school, the effectiveness of middle leaders, particularly in terms of directing improvement, is patchy.

Equality of opportunity is vigorously promoted and the school is a welcoming, tolerant and inclusive community. The school has forged very successful partnerships with a range of other educational providers and external organisations which greatly enrich students' experiences and help to prepare them for adult life. Sound steps have already been taken by the school to establish their positive contribution to community cohesion, and the school's leaders and managers have a clear awareness of how this area needs developing further. The school provides satisfactory value for money and deploys its resources appropriately and efficiently. Governors discharge their responsibilities well and take an active role in the life and development of the school. They ensure that school leaders are well supported and appropriately held to account.

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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?	1	1
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	1	2
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?	1	1
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	1	
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	2	
The attendance of learners	1	
The behaviour of learners	1	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	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?	3	2

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	3	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3	
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?	3	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	3	
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**

30 January 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Plymouth High School for Girls, Plymouth PL4 6HT

Thank you for the very warm welcome you gave to the inspection team when we visited your school recently. We enjoyed being in your lessons and meeting with you, and were impressed with the pride most of you have in your school.

These are the main findings of the inspection:

- Plymouth High is a satisfactory and improving school.
- Students reach high standards in terms of attainment, but the rate of progress is only satisfactory.
- Teaching is generally good and is improving.
- You have a good curriculum, which the headteacher and the senior team are working hard to improve still further.
- Your personal development is outstanding in the main school and in the sixth form.
- Staff at the school care for and support you well, but the guidance that you are given about how to improve your work and meet your targets is an area that should be better.
- Your school is satisfactorily led and managed overall, but your headteacher is very good. She has good plans for how it can get even better.
- The school's specialist status makes a positive contribution to your overall education.

The headteacher agrees with the inspection team that your achievement could be greater and we have asked for the following:

- Processes for tracking students' progress to be strengthened across the school and used effectively to improve achievement.
- Teachers to increase students' capacity to improve their own work and meet their targets through better marking and feedback across all subjects.
- All of the subject leaders to contribute fully to raising achievement, particularly through further improving the quality of teaching and learning.

We wish you the very best of luck with your studies in the future.

Yours faithfully Ken Bush

Lead inspector