

Simon Balle School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117519
Local Authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	326636
Inspection date	14 January 2009
Reporting inspector	Brian Cartwright HMI

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1059
Sixth form	256
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr David Spring
Headteacher	Mrs Alison Saunders
Date of previous school inspection	21 March 2006
School address	Mangrove Road Hertford Hertfordshire SG13 8AJ
Telephone number	01992 410400
Fax number	01992 410401

Age group	11–19
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Introduction

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

Inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following aspects: achievement and standards, the curriculum, the sixth form and leadership and management. Evidence was gathered from school documentation, discussions with governors, staff and pupils, and first-hand observations of lessons. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but inspectors found no evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments, as given in its self-evaluation, were not justified, and these have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

The school is of average size, and has a relatively large sixth form that is part of a local consortium of educational providers for post-16 students. The school is a specialist humanities college. The students come from relatively favourable areas in terms of socio-economic background, and this is evident in the low proportion of students who are eligible for free school meals. Most students are from a White British background. There is a low proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The academic attainment of students entering Year 7 is above average. The attainment of students starting in the sixth form is average.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Simon Balle School provides good quality, holistic education to its students. Relationships between staff and students are exceptionally good, resulting in a strong sense of mutual respect and loyalty; this school is a delightful place in which to teach and learn. It has a distinctive ethos that is rooted in a strong belief in personal values and social justice for both its students and staff. It has a well-justified reputation locally for this holistic approach to education. The school purposefully delivers education 'in the round' that effectively enriches and enhances students' social, moral and spiritual understanding. As a result, students achieve good academic outcomes and outstanding personal development and well-being. The headteacher personifies the attributes she seeks to develop in others, and leads by her excellent example. In turn, school leaders and other staff model the dignity and consideration they expect to see in students. The school is well led and managed. Individuals, be they students or staff, are well known to the school, and the school is very effective in caring for and supporting its community.

Not surprisingly, therefore, students feel safe, very much enjoy being at school, and their parents are overwhelmingly appreciative of the outstanding quality of care, guidance and support. The curriculum is excellent, and includes extensive additional out-of-hours activities, trips, and visits, including sports and performing arts. Almost all students participate in these activities. It has been thoughtfully constructed to maximise opportunities for students' personal development, in line with the school's mission to develop 'Global Citizens'. The humanities specialist college status has been instrumental in allowing this holistic approach to flourish. It supports additional staffing, options and resources in subjects such as citizenship and religious education. Music, and more recently drama, also play a major part in uniting students and staff through shared and enjoyable activities such as concerts and plays.

Students have a strong 'voice' in the school, again because of the school's successful mission to develop young people into independent, well-informed and responsible citizens. Students have helped improve the provision of healthy food, organised charitable events, have a place on the governing body, and in the local young people's parliament. There is a thriving 'Amnesty International' society. For example, recent assemblies have addressed the conflict in Palestine by including outside speakers from Gaza and Israel. Through all of this rich cultural provision, the school is promoting community cohesion exceptionally well.

Key Stage 3 standards are steadily rising and are above average. At Key Stage 4, standards in 2008 were the school's best ever. However, the school was rightly concerned that preliminary progress measures in 2008 suggested these results represented satisfactory achievement. The school can account for this, and has introduced a more detailed progress tracking system that shows current Year 11 students to be on target for better than expected results. Taken over three years, the achievement of students in both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 has been good for all groups of learners, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Teaching and learning are good. The school has reliable monitoring records that are consistent with student achievement over time, and point to a steadily improving profile of teaching quality. This is despite almost half the teaching staff being new appointments to the school since the previous inspection. This is testimony to the excellent level of support for teachers; several staff spoke appreciatively of the high quality of professional development they had experienced. It explains why students said that teachers 'were really enthusiastic'. The teachers' enthusiasm reflects the shared sense of purpose amongst staff to teach well, raise standards

and hold students in the highest regard. The school accurately identified day-to-day assessment as needing to be more consistent. Inspectors found examples of outstanding written advice to students on the next steps needed to improve their work. In some cases, students had time to respond to that advice straight away. However, in other examples, students had not followed up this accurate marking. Teachers have good knowledge of the prior attainment of their students. However, they do not use this consistently to assign challenging tasks, including homework, that match those differing abilities. Learning objectives do not consistently clarify for students exactly what they must learn.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The sixth form is good, because students benefit from an outstanding level of care guidance and support, and an excellent curriculum that is taught well. As a result, they further develop outstanding personal qualities and make at least the progress expected from their attainment on entry to the sixth form. However, scrutiny by the school of standards in 2007 revealed that achievement was satisfactory, rather than good. As a result, the school made changes to the way it advised students regarding a suitable curriculum choice. It dealt with some concerns over attendance, and revisited the particular requirements of sixth form teaching through staff development. There are signs that as a result, AS standards rose a little in 2008, although for A level, the achievement of students remained no better than satisfactory. Nevertheless, almost all those students progressed successfully to higher education.

The sixth form welcomes a considerable number of new students from other schools as well as those who come as part of the local consortium arrangements. These students are all very clear about what makes the school so special, which is its inclusive and holistic ethos. They were keen to point out that they had not previously experienced such a high calibre of care, guidance and support. As a result, these students are thriving alongside their peers and now are fulfilling their potential.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure consistently good written feedback to students on what they should do to improve, and make sure students have time to respond.
- Make sure tasks match the abilities of students and that the success criteria for those tasks are clear.

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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	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	2	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	3
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	1	
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?	2	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?	2	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	2	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	2
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	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**

15 January 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Simon Balle School, Hertford, SG13 8AJ

Thank you for the friendly, good-humoured and well-informed discussion we had during our inspection visit. You said how much you enjoyed school and appreciated the friendly and positive atmosphere for learning. Inspectors agree with you, and your parents, that this good school has a distinctive and very strong ethos of social justice. It makes the school a delightful place to teach and learn. The curriculum is excellent, because as well as a well-balanced academic choice, you also have a very rich range of additional activities. We note in particular really good sports activities and performing arts opportunities, including music and drama. For many of you the international contacts, trips and visits will give you first hand understanding of other cultures.

All of you benefit from the headteacher's clear vision to ensure you become kind, independent and responsible 'Global Citizens'. A mark of her commitment to your outstanding personal development is the wide-reaching school parliament, which is an important part of the school's decision-making systems. Your voice does count and is influential in the wider community beyond the school gates.

The school has accurately identified improvements as to how it advises you on the next steps in your learning; most of the marking we saw was accurate and helpful, but you need time to respond to that advice, and to show your teacher the improvements. Sometimes the objectives for a task are vague, so you cannot tell exactly what would represent good learning. Sometimes the tasks you are given are not well matched to your abilities; they should be challenging, not too easy or too hard.

Best wishes for your future success.

Yours sincerely

Brian Cartwright

Her Majesty's Inspector