

Monks Walk School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117536
Local Authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	326639
Inspection dates	6–7 May 2009
Reporting inspector	Mark Sims 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	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1223
Sixth form	183
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Alan Squires
Headteacher	Mr Philip Bunn
Date of previous school inspection	17 May 2006
School address	Knightsfield Welwyn Garden City Hertfordshire AL8 7NL
Telephone number	01707322846
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Age group	11–18
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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

Monk's Walk is larger than the average secondary school. The percentage of students entitled to free school meals is below the national average. The proportion of minority ethnic students and students for whom English is an additional language is very small. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including those with a statement of special educational needs, is below the national average. The level of socio-economic disadvantage is below average. The school has specialist status as a science college. There is a partner special school on site for hearing impaired students, many of whom attend lessons at Monk's Walk. The school is a member of the 14 to 19 Welwyn Hatfield Consortium with five other secondary schools and a further education college.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

Monk's Walk provides a satisfactory standard of education overall and a good standard in the sixth form. It is an improving school. Since its last inspection, the school has successfully raised standards in examination results at GCSE, including the proportion achieving five good grades with English and mathematics, so that standards are now above the national average. The quality of care in the school is high. One parent summarised the views of many by saying, 'The care, sympathy and support from the headteacher, through to all members of staff who know our family, has been exceptional.'

The school has also been successful in raising the standard of behaviour in the school, which is now recognised by the great majority of parents and students to be good. The level of attendance, another priority for the school, has also risen and is now also good. Overall students' personal development and well-being, including their social, moral, spiritual and cultural development, are good. Whilst much of the teaching and learning is good and an increasing proportion is outstanding, there remains an element that is inadequate, particularly in mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT). Where parents still have concerns about behaviour it is often linked to the small number of lessons where teachers' classroom control is inadequate. The overall quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory despite this weakness.

The curriculum has been improved, for example through the development of provision for lower attaining students at Key Stage 4, but changes have been too recent to have had an impact on achievement, which is satisfactory. Opportunities for vocational courses are underdeveloped but students enjoy a rich variety of extra-curricular activities. Students are very well looked after at Monk's Walk and they feel safe and secure from harm. Students are guided well in the next steps of their education and future careers but guidance through individual target setting and marking is too varied. Too many targets are vague about how students can improve their work and marking is too often limited to ticks and brief comments offering praise. Tracking of students' progress is not consistently good across all departments.

The headteacher, supported by a strong senior leadership team, knows the strengths and weaknesses of the school very well and there is a drive and determination to seek further improvements. There is a relentless focus on raising standards. Effective action has been taken to raise attendance, improve behaviour and reduce the proportion of weaker teaching but there is still more to do, particularly in mathematics and ICT. The school works well with its partner school to integrate hearing impaired students in lessons. The governors are very supportive of the school's work and are well informed about how to hold the school to account for its performance. The school is well placed to make further improvements and has good capacity to do this. It gives satisfactory value for money.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Provision in the sixth form is good. When students enter Year 12 they become part of a five school consortium which ensures a wide choice of A-level courses. Students are well cared for and guided throughout their time in the sixth form. They value the help and guidance they receive with university entrance and career progression. Students enter the sixth form working at broadly average levels of attainment and make satisfactory progress so that by the time they

leave they have reached a level of attainment in line with the national average. Those students who study courses at the Monk's Walk site are well taught. Much of the teaching seen by inspectors in the sixth form was outstanding. Lessons were challenging and gave good opportunities for students to work independently.

Students are happy with the education they receive and value the good relationships they have with their teachers. One said, 'They are always trying to make things better.' Indeed, they are enthusiastic about their school and all students interviewed stated categorically how much they enjoy the whole experience. Opportunities for students to develop their personal qualities are good. Students are mature and play a leading role in the life of the school, as mentors and as a significant part of the student voice. They have the opportunity to take part in a choice of over 50 extra-curricular activities. Senior staff provide effective leadership by regularly analysing and monitoring students' progress and planning appropriately to ensure improved performance.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning, particularly in mathematics and ICT.
- Ensure greater consistency in marking and the setting and tracking of individual targets so that students know how they can improve their work.
- Broaden the curriculum by ensuring that students have more opportunities to achieve vocational qualifications.

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 join the school at the start of Year 7 having achieved levels of attainment that are above the national average in English, mathematics and science. Students make satisfactory progress throughout Key Stages 3 and 4 so that by the end of Year 11, standards are above average. The most recent GCSE results indicate a continued rising trend in the percentage of students who gained five or more A* to C grades at GCSE or equivalent. The proportion of students achieving five good GCSE grades, including English and mathematics, has also risen over the last three years and is above the national average. Students' achievement is much better in English than in mathematics where, over the last three years, there has been a decline in the progress of learners at Key Stage 4. Students' achievement has improved in English at Key Stage 4 during the same period.

The proportion of students achieving five or more A* to G grades at GCSE is slightly below the national average and has remained static over the last three years. Analysis of students' current performance in Year 11 suggests this will improve because the school has taken decisive steps to change the alternative curriculum which previously led to too many students not being able to achieve this benchmark. Students who find learning difficult make progress in line with that of their peers.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Students' cultural awareness is developed well through a range of art, drama and musical experiences. Their understanding of different cultures is enhanced through the curriculum and the relationships they develop with each other. Students have high regard for each other. Their sense of community is good and they participate eagerly in a good range of cultural activities, such as world language day or preparing food from different countries. Good behaviour is promoted by the high expectations that most staff have of students, requiring them to do their best at all times. Students are courteous and polite and take pride in their roles and responsibilities within school, such as prefects, house captains and school council members. Students enjoy school and all the opportunities it offers. This is reflected in their positive attitudes to learning and increased attendance.

Students fully understand how to lead healthy lifestyles. They participate in a range of physical activities both during lessons and through the stimulating clubs. Students make an impressive contribution to the school and the wider community. This helps them become responsible and caring young people and prepares them well for their future. The elected school council is active in supporting decision making in the school. Year 10 students and sixth formers contribute effectively to the welfare of younger students through mentoring schemes. They confidently acknowledge that this helps their own development as much as that of the younger students, for example, by running a drama club.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

The school has identified its strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning. Most teachers have good subject knowledge and plan effectively. In the majority of lessons good relationships between teachers and students create an environment that students enjoy and where effective learning can take place and good progress can be made. Most teachers use questioning skilfully to check the level of students' understanding. They praise students' work and celebrate their success and progress. In some lessons, teaching is not sufficiently targeted at students' differing needs and levels of attainment, so that they are not always appropriately challenged.

Students' behaviour in lessons is good. They work well independently, in pairs and in small groups. Assessment information is beginning to be used effectively, most notably in English, to help teachers and students identify areas of weakness and set targets for success. The quality of setting and marking of homework is variable; where it is good it contributes well to students' overall progress by providing them with ways of improving their performance. The good teaching seen regularly across much of the school is less often evident at times in a small minority of subjects, for example in mathematics and ICT. In the weaker lessons, in these subjects, planning, classroom management and the use of assessment are not as effective, which hinders students' progress.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

The curriculum is being developed to suit the needs and aspirations of students of all abilities. The introduction of a broader range of courses, for example in art and design, the off-site

provision the standards of which are now closely monitored, changes to ICT provision and the introduction of English media studies, is enabling students, at all levels, to improve their attainment.

At Key Stage 3 students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have good access to the curriculum. Programmes in literacy and ICT in Year 8, for example, are enabling students who would otherwise experience barriers to learning, to achieve success. However, the curriculum does not embrace a wide enough range of courses and accreditation at Key Stage 4 to meet the needs of students who may wish to pursue vocational courses.

Specialist science college status has been used to improve ICT resources in classrooms. This facilitates teaching across subjects and helps to develop partnerships within the community. Students' horizons are broadened through a good range of extra-curricular activities. Many students participate in these, especially the wide range of sporting activities and educational visits which the school offers.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

Students are well cared for. They say that they feel safe, secure and free from harassment. Child protection, staff vetting and health and safety procedures are very thorough and robust. Learners who are vulnerable and may be at risk are identified promptly and there are effective support arrangements in place. Students report that problems are dealt with swiftly and sensitively. They know who to turn to if they have a concern. Most parents recognise the important contribution played by form tutors. As one said, 'My son has had excellent support from his form tutor who has developed a good understanding of his needs.' Tutor time is not consistently used well, however.

The school recognises that there are improvements to be made in the academic guidance that students receive. Assessment of students' achievement in different subjects and the way tracking data on student progress is used are inconsistent. Most students are aware of the academic targets that they are working towards but the targets do not always include examples of exactly what they need to do to improve their learning. There is insufficient emphasis on students assessing their own work or taking responsibility for their own learning. Students who find learning difficult or who have disabilities greatly benefit from a secure and supportive learning centre. The learning support department, and indeed the whole school, works very well with parents and with an extensive range of outside agencies. According to one parent, 'It is second to none.'

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The headteacher, with good support from senior leaders, has set a clear and ambitious direction for the school. According to one parent, 'The school is well led and has a clear vision.' There is a strong focus on raising standards. Targets for students' progress are appropriately challenging. Senior leaders monitor and evaluate performance across the school and, as a result, have an accurate picture of its strengths and weaknesses. This is helping them to broaden the curriculum they provide so that it meets the needs of a wider range of learners and improves their examination results. Procedures for monitoring the performance of senior leaders are now firmly established. Effective action to improve the overall quality of teaching has been successful

in some departments. However, the school has found the recruitment and retention of specialist mathematics teachers to remain an ongoing challenge. Its programmes of professional development of staff have not yet eliminated the variability in teaching quality. This means that rigour and challenge for some students is less evident in mathematics and ICT than in English and science, for example.

Governors play an important role as critical friends and have an effective system for meetings, which ensures good communication and accountability. The school is now poised to show that it is having an impact on improving progress and is providing a thriving academic climate to complement the caring and supportive environment that it offers students. Provision for community cohesion is satisfactory and links with its partner special school reinforce the school's strong commitment to inclusion. Students' awareness of the ethnic diversity of the United Kingdom is underdeveloped. The school's specialist status in science is making an important contribution to broadening curricular opportunities for students and raising standards.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaints about school inspection', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

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	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?	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	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	2	
The attendance of learners	2	
The behaviour of learners	2	
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	3	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	3	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	3	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?	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?	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**

8 May 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Monk's Walk School, Welwyn Garden City, AL8 7NL

You will know that we recently visited your school and I thought you would like to know what we have said in our inspection report. Thank you to all of you who took time to talk to us and tell us your views about your school and particularly those of you who acted as guides for us. Monk's Walk is an improving school which provides a satisfactory standard of education. Those of you in the sixth form receive a good standard of education.

Your headteacher and senior leaders have successfully worked hard with you and the staff to make sure standards of attainment are rising. Consequently more of you achieve at least five good grades at GCSE, including English and mathematics. Your level of attendance is good, as is the standard of behaviour in and around the school. You are well cared for and looked after in school.

Many of you are well taught in most of your lessons but this is not always the case, particularly for some of you in mathematics and ICT. You have a wide range of extra-curricular activities which you have told us you greatly appreciate.

We have made a few suggestions to your leaders on how to make further improvements. We have asked them to:

- make sure the quality of teaching and learning is consistently good, especially in mathematics and ICT
- make sure that when your teachers assess your work they let you know consistently how well you are doing and set you targets that will let you know how you can improve your work
- give those of you who find learning hard more opportunities to achieve work-related qualifications.

I hope you enjoy the rest of your time at Monk's Walk and are successful in your future careers.

Yours sincerely

Mark Sims

Her Majesty's Inspector