

Rickmansworth School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117572
Local Authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	326652
Inspection dates	24–25 September 2008
Reporting inspector	Lindsay Hebditch HMI

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)	1255
Sixth form	284
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Harvey Collyer
Headteacher	Dr Stephen Burton
Date of previous school inspection	15 November 2005
School address	Scots Hill Rickmansworth WD3 3AQ
Telephone number	01923 773296
Fax number	01923 897314

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

Rickmansworth School is a large, popular mixed comprehensive school, which draws its students from a largely prosperous area of southwest Hertfordshire. The standards of students entering the school are above average. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is low and the percentage of students with learning difficulties and disabilities, including those with a statement of special educational need, is well below average. The majority of students are of White British heritage. The school achieved specialist status in the arts in 2003 and was re-designated in 2007. It achieved specialist status in science in 2008.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

This is a good and improving school with many outstanding features, particularly in its specialist arts provision. Despite some unsatisfactory accommodation, it provides an excellent learning environment in which students enjoy their education and thrive. Parents praise the school for its high standards and constant drive to improve standards still further.

Leadership and management are good. The headteacher provides strong leadership. His clear vision of how to take the school forward has been communicated effectively to staff and morale in the school is high. The headteacher receives very effective support from the senior leadership team and enjoys the confidence of a highly experienced and able governing body. Decisive action has been taken in subjects where improvement has been required and this has led to an overall improvement in the school's performance.

Achievement and standards are good. Standards are very high. Students enter school with standards which are above average, make satisfactory progress in Key Stage 3 and very good progress in Key Stage 4, so that by the end of Key Stage 4 they have made at least the progress expected of them during their time at school. Progress varies between subjects, particularly in Key Stage 3, but is outstanding in visual and performing arts. GCSE pass rates are excellent, with recent improvements in science and consistently very high standards in mathematics.

Teaching and learning are good overall but in the best lessons students make excellent progress and produce work of outstanding quality. In a minority of lessons, teaching is not as effective and, as a result, students make satisfactory progress. Students who find learning difficult are supported well in lessons. Assessment is good but marked work does not always provide students with sufficient guidance on how to improve. The school provides an outstanding curriculum. The school's specialisms are being used effectively to foster community links and partnerships and to stimulate some innovative curriculum development. Students benefit from an excellent range of academic courses and exceptional opportunities to study visual and performing arts subjects. There are good opportunities for sport, although the increasing number of students at the school has placed a strain on the existing accommodation for it. The range of enrichment activities is outstanding, and student participation in extra-curricular events is extremely high. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have their needs carefully met so that their progress matches that of other students.

Care, guidance and support are good. There are excellent arrangements for the transition from primary schools. Systems for monitoring all aspects of students' progress are comprehensive and enable teachers to take swift action when support is needed. Procedures for child protection are secure but the school's health and safety procedures are not implemented fully. Where risks have been identified, there are no records of subsequent remedial action taking place, allowing potentially hazardous situations to persist.

Personal development and well-being are outstanding. Students thoroughly enjoy school and make a significant contribution to the community at school, local and national levels. They make healthy choices with regard to diet and physical activity and work safely in the school. Spiritual, cultural, moral and social development are outstanding and there are excellent opportunities to develop economic understanding through enterprise activities and work experience. Students are proud of their school and are excellent ambassadors for the standards it expects and achieves. Behaviour and attendance are outstanding.

The school has made good progress since the last inspection and addressed its areas for improvement well. Capacity to improve is good but the school's self-evaluation lacks sufficient detailed analysis and accurate evaluation. Value for money is good.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

This is a successful sixth form. Students develop into confident and highly articulate young adults who set a positive example for the whole school. Standards are very high in the vast majority of subjects. Progress in all subjects is at least satisfactory and often good. The quality of teaching is good and most lessons successfully develop students' critical thinking and analytical skills. Students are very responsive and strongly motivated by intellectual challenge. Students are clear about what is expected of them because of the rigour of target setting and the quality of the feedback they receive from teachers on completed work. Systems for checking on students' academic progress are rigorous. Nearly all students complete their courses successfully and are well equipped by their time in the sixth form to make a smooth and successful transition into higher education. Students value the opportunities they have to voice their own opinions through the sixth form council and are quick to take an initiative. The curriculum provides excellent opportunities for students to extend their learning through enrichment activities, although they say that they would welcome more opportunities to be involved in sports. Leadership and management of the sixth form are good and provide outstanding support for students' personal development and well-being. Accommodation in the sixth form block is unsatisfactory and has an adverse effect on what is otherwise an extremely enjoyable experience of sixth form life for students.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve achievement in Key Stage 3 and reduce variations in performance between subjects.
- Improve the management of risk assessment
- Improve the quality of the unsatisfactory accommodation, particularly in the sixth form block. Improve the consistency of marking to provide students with sufficient guidance on how to improve.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Standards are very high throughout the school. The subject areas related to the school's specialism in art are strong and the impact of this is demonstrated by the extremely high quality of the work that students produce in performing and visual arts. Standards in science are improving. Attainment of students on entry is above average in English, mathematics and science. Progress has been variable in recent years but is improving. In Key Stage 3 students make satisfactory progress overall but good progress in English. In Key Stage 4 students' progress is very good. The proportion of students achieving five or more GCSE grades A*-C including English and mathematics has been consistently very high, and in 2007 was well above the national figure at 82%. The school has few students with learning difficulties or disabilities but their progress matches that made by other students. Students of minority ethnic backgrounds make similar progress to White British students. The school has an excellent record of meeting its targets for specialist status, and frequently exceeds them.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Students' enjoyment of school is reflected in their outstanding behaviour and attendance and the strong sense of community and mutual respect which they share. Incidents of bullying are rare and are dealt with quickly and effectively. Assemblies are used effectively as a forum not only for the dissemination of information and spiritual, cultural, moral and social development, but for the celebration of achievement. Students are given the knowledge and understanding necessary to equip them to adopt healthy lifestyles and to develop their emotional intelligence through the school's creativity initiatives and the CORT thinking skills programme. High levels of economic awareness and enterprise skills are fostered through imaginative activities in lessons, enrichment activities, off-site events and as part of activities week in the summer term. The work experience programme in Years 11 and 12 provides an excellent opportunity for students to learn how they might apply these developing skills to their future careers. There are very good opportunities for students to take responsibility and most make an important contribution to the work of the school and the wider community by undertaking voluntary work or participating in the school's well-targeted fund raising activities.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teaching and learning are good. This is lower than the school's assessment. Students confirm that most teachers have high expectations of them. Teachers display genuine passion for their subjects and in the best lessons this is translated into inspirational teaching which enthuses students and encourages them to take responsibility for their own learning. These lessons are characterised by a high level of challenge, a strong spirit of enquiry and good pace. Responses to questions are met by further, more penetrating questions. One Year 11 student said, 'It's hard work and I have to work quickly, but I like that'. In a minority of lessons teaching is not as effective because the level of challenge is not as high and students do not make as much progress as they could. In these lessons teachers sometimes spend too much time talking, rather than allowing students to find things out for themselves, or concentrate on developing lower level skills, such as notetaking.

Students who find learning difficult are supported well in lessons, sometimes being provided with different work which they find easier to manage. Assessment is accurate but marking does not always provide students with sufficient guidance on how to improve.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

Weaknesses in the curriculum identified at the last inspection have been remedied completely and students now benefit from a broad range of academic courses and an outstanding range of opportunities for curriculum enrichment. The curriculum now meets all statutory requirements and provides students with exceptional opportunities to study visual and performing arts subjects. There is long-standing support from business partners for work experience, enterprise education and work-related learning which help students to lay the foundations for secure future economic well-being. There are good opportunities for sport and students benefit from

an outstanding range of enrichment activities. Student participation in the extensive programme of extra-curricular events is extremely high.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Staff know the students very well and are strongly committed to helping them achieve their potential. Students say that there are many people in the school who will help them if in difficulties or reward their success. There are excellent arrangements for the transition from primary schools. Year 7 students in the school write letters to pupils about to enter it and parents appreciate the transition weekend early in the autumn term. Students settle into their new school quickly and happily. Student progress is monitored carefully and concerns are followed up quickly. The school has recently revised its procedures for setting academic targets and these are already proving effective. Progress review days take place annually and provide well-regarded opportunities to discuss achievements and highlight areas for improvement. Pastoral/Academic Liaison forms (PALs) and Blue Books are used to monitor pupil attitudes to work and progress. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have their needs carefully identified through effective liaison with feeder schools and are supported very well during their time at the school. Students receive good guidance when making decisions about their career and further education choices. Procedures for child protection are secure but the school's systems for assuring the health and safety of students are underdeveloped.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The headteacher has been successful in his aim to develop all aspects of students' potential and, together with his senior leadership team and highly supportive governors, has developed clear plans for its future growth and further improvement.

Governors take a prominent role in strategic planning and monitor the school's business. Areas for improvement identified at the last inspection have been addressed well. Decisive action has been taken where performance has been unsatisfactory and the quality of departmental management is now generally good. Highly effective leadership has contributed significantly to the excellent achievement and standards in visual and performing arts and the rapid recent improvements in science. The school is setting itself increasingly challenging targets and is confident in its ability to achieve them. Self-evaluation procedures are shared across the school but the resulting report does not provide sufficient evaluation of the school's strengths and areas for improvement.

The school makes a good contribution to community cohesion. The leadership team works successfully to create an inclusive school community that integrates students from an increasingly broad range of backgrounds. All students feel equally valued and achieve well. Performance management and staff training are generally good, although heads of department who have been allocated the responsibility for risk assessment have not been provided with sufficient training to carry out the task effectively. The school's health and safety procedures are not implemented fully because where risks have been identified there are no records of subsequent remedial action taking place, allowing potentially hazardous situations to persist.

Teachers are well qualified and are predominately specialist graduates in the subjects they teach. The school has been creative in solving recent recruitment difficulties and provides new

teachers with effective induction. The school strives to incorporate its increasing student numbers within the limitations of its site but unsatisfactory accommodation, for example in the sixth form block and food technology, are constraints on future growth. Resources are generally good and arrangements to ensure financial control are rigorous.

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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	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	1	1
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	2
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	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
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	1	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2	

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?	2	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	3	3
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	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**

26 September 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Rickmansworth School, Scots Hill, Rickmansworth, Hertfordshire WD3 3AQ

Thank you very much for making us so welcome at your school. We enjoyed talking to you and have made sure that we have reflected your views in this inspection report. You clearly enjoy coming to school and appreciate how well you are being prepared for your future lives. Lots of your parents took the trouble to complete the questionnaires we sent out and I would be grateful if you could pass on our thanks to them for replying. Your parents are as happy with the school as you are.

We think that Rickmansworth School is a good school with many outstanding features, particularly in the arts provision, and we can fully understand why you are so proud of it.

Your headteacher is keen to make the school even better. We identified three things that we think would help.

- Improve achievement in Key Stage 3 and reduce variations in performance between subjects.
- Improve the consistency of marking to provide students with sufficient guidance on how to improve.
- Managers and teachers should check health and safety requirements more carefully so that you can be guaranteed safe accommodation to work in.
- Improve the quality of the unsatisfactory accommodation, particularly in the sixth form block.

Your continued excellent behaviour and hard work will support the school's efforts. I wish you all the very best for the future.

Well done!

Lindsay Hebditch

Her Majesty's Inspector