

Dame Alice Owens School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117579
Local Authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	326653
Inspection date	7 May 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	Comprehensive
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1428
Sixth form	409
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Tom Morkill
Headteacher	Dr A. J. Davison
Date of previous school inspection	21 June 2006
School address	Dugdale Hill Lane Potters Bar Hertfordshire EN6 2DU
Telephone number	01707643441
Fax number	01707645011

Age group	11–18
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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, teaching and learning, care, guidance and support and leadership and management. Inspectors gathered evidence from school documentation, discussions with parents, governors, staff and students, 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

This is a large school, with the majority of students living locally although a sizeable number travel from a wide area of North London. About 20 places a year are reserved for children living in Islington. This is a legacy of the school's original foundation some 400 years ago, in Islington. Some places (65) are awarded by academic selection and the overall attainment on entry to the school is very high. There are 10 places assigned on musical aptitude. There is a very low number of students eligible for free school meals, almost all students are fluent in English and there is a low proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or difficulties. The proportion of students with statements of special educational need is similar to the national average. Measures of social prosperity are higher than the national average. The school has been a specialist language college since 1996 and recently added science as a second specialism.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Dame Alice Owen School is outstanding. The commitment to the personal development of both students and staff is exceptional. It is evident in the outstanding outcomes for the well-being, social, moral, spiritual and cultural development of students, and the commitment, loyalty and enthusiasm of staff and students to the school. Excellent leadership at all levels has maintained the level of outstanding teaching identified at the previous inspection, sustaining very high academic standards at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form. The school has made excellent use of its specialist language college status and recently included science as a second specialism. The impact of specialist college status is evident in the diversity of subject options in languages and in science and in the very high proportion of students who continue to study these subjects in the sixth form. Specialist college resources are successfully directed at the recruitment and retention of staff and in maintaining up-to-date technology-based resources to enhance teaching and learning.

Students achieve outstandingly well in almost every subject they study. The school monitors the academic and personal progress of students very closely. By doing so, the school has effectively responded to evidence suggesting a few middle ability students in 2008 made good, rather than exceptional progress. Some changes to the Key Stage 4 curriculum for these students are now in place that are even better matched to their needs and interests. In addition, the school has changed how it groups students in Key Stage 3 so as to raise expectations further.

Students are full of praise for the care, guidance and support of staff, and appreciate the academic help that all staff are willing to provide to ensure they achieve their best. Almost without exception, parents are overwhelmingly supportive of the school, and affirm that their children really enjoy school life. One such comment read, 'My child is flourishing in an environment which is fostered by encouragement, praise, helpful guidance and a positive attitude'. Students said they felt very safe and secure. Their behaviour is outstanding, and attendance rates are very high. Students are confident, articulate, committed to learning and speak about their school with pride. They have an effective voice in running the school, including contributions at governing body level. They adopt very healthy lifestyles, successfully suggest further improvements to the healthy food provided at break and lunchtimes and are very committed to their school community. In addition, their charitable work raises very generous levels of support for local and international aid work. They are well prepared for further study beyond school thanks to developing good independent learning habits.

A particular strength of the school is its curriculum, both the formal lesson programme and the informal and very extensive range of extra clubs and activities. All the students we spoke to participated in something during the week. They enjoyed the many school trips and visits available, with the school ensuring no students were denied an opportunity for an extended residential trip. The school is justifiably proud of the very high quality of musical and sporting achievements. There are current examples of nationally recognised performance in jazz and classical music and football that continue the long-established school tradition of high-quality delivery in these areas. The school is also successfully developing similar high standards in drama and fine arts.

Teaching is outstanding; in addition to the expertise and excellent match of teachers' subject knowledge to their classes, there is a strong and consistent approach to assessment for learning. This is evident from the good understanding students have of the next steps in their learning,

of the levels they are working at and the planning of lessons that respond to students' prior knowledge and understanding. The school is tenacious in its very effective support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The school devotes considerable effort into matching the needs of these individual students to a personalised curriculum, which is coupled with very close monitoring of their progress. It includes the development of appropriate work-related learning opportunities.

There is a strong sense of purpose, unity, hard work and satisfying challenge that pervades all levels of school leadership, teaching and support staff. It is personified by the headteacher, whose professional expertise is matched by his personal warmth, his encouragement to aim high and his commitment to the professional development of staff. As a result, staff willingly choose to go the extra mile for students, creating a vibrant learning community for everybody in the school. Governance is now outstanding, thanks to the robust systems for monitoring the performance of the school. Governors include student and staff voice in their planning, and the resultant 'master plan' sets a clear, shared strategic direction for the development of the school. For example, staff and student groups have contributed to an extensive survey on the impact of the school's equalities policy, resulting in further strengthening of community cohesion within the school and beyond. This very strong leadership team has an outstanding capacity for school improvement, which has been further demonstrated in their successful support of a local secondary school in leading it out of special measures.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 1

The sixth form is just as outstanding as the main school because that same dedication and effort on behalf of staff is matched by an energetic commitment to learning by sixth form students. Their academic progress is exceptionally high. Students are successful in pursuing future careers, which for the vast majority means higher education at University. The school continues to increase the numbers of students accepted to read at Oxford or Cambridge, to 27 in 2008. Sixth form teaching is exceptionally well-planned, with very careful recognition of the different learning needs of students to ensure challenge and high achievement.

What the school should do to improve further

The school has no significant aspects that need urgent attention. It has accurately identified small changes that will further improve the curriculum.

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

Achievement and standards

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

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?	1	1
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?	1	1
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	1	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1	1
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	1	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1	
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 Dame Alice Owen's School, Potters Bar, EN6 2DU

Thank you very much for your polite, and enthusiastic welcome to your school. The school is doing an outstanding job in providing you with every possible opportunity to succeed. In particular, teachers and support staff at every level, from the site maintenance staff, office staff and teachers to school leaders are dedicated to your personal and academic development. Governors are equally committed, and have ensured that staff get really good support to improve their own professional work. This is very motivating for staff, which is one reason why they are so willing to go the extra mile to help you, offer so many additional activities such as sports and music and keep such an effective and close eye on your progress through school.

Their efforts are matched by your own hard work, and strong sense of loyalty to the school. There is a 'buzz' about the school, because your hard work is rewarded, and nobody is left behind. In addition, teaching is challenging enough to make learning really enjoyable and interesting. As a result you make excellent progress in your academic studies, achieving very high standards in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form. You have a strong voice in helping to run the school that Governors and the headteacher recognise as a vital part of school management.

The school is rightly proud of your achievements. You are all being exceptionally well prepared for your future lives and we wish you every success.

Yours faithfully

Brian Cartwright

Her Majesty's Inspector