

Marlborough School

Inspection report

| | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|
| Unique Reference Number | 117586 |
| Local Authority | Hertfordshire |
| Inspection number | 326655 |
| Inspection dates | 22–23 January 2009 |
| Reporting inspector | Joan Hewitt |

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

| | |
|---|--|
| Type of school | Secondary |
| School category | Foundation |
| Age range of pupils | 11–18 |
| Gender of pupils | Mixed |
| Number on roll | |
| School (total) | 1238 |
| Sixth form | 221 |
| Appropriate authority | The governing body |
| Chair | Mr Tony Field |
| Headteacher | Ms Anne Thomson |
| Date of previous school inspection | 25 January 2006 |
| School address | Watling Street St. Albans Hertfordshire AL1 2QA |
| Telephone number | 01727856874 |
| Fax number | 01727855285 |

| | |
|--------------------------|--------------------|
| Age group | 11–18 |
| Inspection dates | 22–23 January 2009 |
| Inspection number | 326655 |

© Crown copyright 2009

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Further copies of this report are obtainable from the school. Under the Education Act 2005, the school must provide a copy of this report free of charge to certain categories of people. A charge not exceeding the full cost of reproduction may be made for any other copies supplied.

Introduction

The inspection was carried out by five Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Marlborough School Science College was designated a specialist Science College in 2003 and re-designated in 2007. It is located on the southern side of St Albans, Hertfordshire and it is larger than most secondary schools. The socio-economic background of the students is favourable compared to the national picture. The number of students eligible for free school meals is below average. The students' attainment on entry is broadly average. Currently, there are 8% more boys than girls on the school roll. Students are predominately from White British backgrounds. The proportion of students who speak English as an additional language is below average. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is average; however, the number with a statement of special educational needs is below average. Student mobility is low. This specialist school operates as part of a sixth form consortium with two other schools and a local college. The school gained Healthy School recognition in 2006 and has the Investor in People Award. It also holds the Sportsmark Gold and Connexions Career Advice Award.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

Marlborough School Science College is a satisfactory and improving school. It has many strengths, most notably students' personal development and well-being, which are good. Students and parents speak highly of the school and one parent commented, 'My daughter's happiness and confidence have blossomed.' This is further supported in the increasing number of applications to attend the school. Students react positively to their education. They are open, friendly and welcoming because the school provides high quality care, guidance and support for them. An example of the effectiveness of these can be seen in the high number of students who go on to further education, employment or training. The school works well with its partners to improve the support students receive and develop the curriculum so that it is accessible to all.

The school has experienced some turbulence in staffing, particularly in science. Nevertheless, the impact of specialist science status has been positive. It is contributing to raising standards overall and broadening curriculum choice. This is particularly impressive in the sixth form where students have a wide choice of motivating courses. Recent developments in the curriculum have resulted in students following one of three pathways that are designed to meet their individual needs.

Achievement of students is satisfactory rather than good because progress is inconsistent across different subjects. Students come to the school with standards in line with national averages. The school's data demonstrates good progress in Key Stage 3. By the time they leave at the end of Year 11, the percentage of students gaining five good grades at GCSE is above the national average. However, the school's performance in English and mathematics is below the national average and improvement is too slow, even though youngsters who find learning more difficult make good progress in these subjects as a result of the additional support they receive. In information and communication technology (ICT), students do well when they take GCSE qualifications, but the progress they make across the school in Key Stage 4 is not measured accurately and this reduces the school's ability to promote their economic well-being. Progress is good, however, in Art and Media, and also good in the sixth form where it is consistent and sustained.

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory. Though it is improving, there remains scope for improvements in key subjects. The school knows what motivates the students, and in many lessons they are given opportunities to be independent, engage in challenging activities and understand how they can improve their attainment; consequently, they make good progress. For example, in a good Year 11 art lesson, students were given the opportunity to collaborate and experiment with different materials to encourage them to try different approaches. However, in some lessons, activities are not challenging enough, with too much teacher talk leading to excessively passive learning by students.

Leadership and management are satisfactory because there are inconsistencies in the quality of the work done by middle leaders. Some do excellent work in evaluating students' progress and taking effective steps to intervene where there is underachievement. However, this is less secure in other areas and consequently, performance has not improved as rapidly as it could. The leadership of the headteacher is distinguished by the high standards she sets for herself and the realistic balance of challenge and support she provides for staff. The committed senior team are energetic in their work to secure improvements. However, this strength has not been sufficient to raise performance in English and mathematics at a fast enough rate. The school

acknowledges that there is more work to be done in ensuring all middle leaders have a clear understanding of the school's priorities and their role in meeting them. Self-evaluation strategies are rigorous and timely so that senior leaders know the school well. However, the written feedback to teachers is not always effectively focused on learning and this hinders their ability to improve their practice.

Students have a good understanding of their role as global citizens because of the good work the school does involving the community at local, national and international levels. The school community is tolerant and harmonious. The governing body works well as a critical friend to the school. The impact of specialist status on improving results and the effective development of the curriculum demonstrate the school's good capacity to improve.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Provision in the sixth form is good. About two-thirds of students enter the sixth form from the main school where they are joined by a significant number of students from the consortium. Students select from an excellent range of academic, applied and vocational courses. These, together with effective use of specialist status, have resulted in the provision of an outstanding curriculum that is responsive to the needs of the local community. Links with local employers are being developed. As a result of good teaching, overall progress is good, especially in art, law, photography and textiles. Standards are broadly average and this indicates good achievement as many students enter the sixth form with standards lower than would normally be expected. Most lessons are challenging and give good opportunities for students to work independently. Students receive good care, guidance and support and are happy with the education they receive. 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 heads of school and prefects. There is satisfactory participation in extra-curricular activities. Most enjoy their education and as a result the retention rate is above average, with approximately three-quarters of the students continuing on to higher education. Senior staff provide good leadership and capacity to improve. The sixth form is managed well on a day-to-day basis and students' progress is analysed and monitored effectively. It offers good value for money.

What the school should do to improve further

- Increase the percentage of students leaving the school with good GCSE grades in English and mathematics and improve the tracking of progress in ICT across Key Stage 4.
- Increase middle leaders' involvement in evaluation and development planning so that they are consistently effective.
- Improve the quality of feedback to teachers so that it is consistently focused on strategies to improve students' independent learning skills.

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

Achievement and standards are satisfactory. Students enter the school with standards that are broadly average and by the time they leave in Year 11 they have reached standards that are in

line with those nationally. Students progress well in Key Stage 3 and the school's data indicate that achievement improved rapidly last year. The number of students achieving five good grades at GCSE is above the national averages. However, there have not been enough students achieving good grades in English and mathematics for the last three years and insufficient rigour in the assessment of students' ICT skills. The school tracks students' achievement well in other areas and ensures students who find learning difficult make good progress. Students who are more able and those from minority ethnic backgrounds make steady progress. The school has been successful in improving the achievement of both groups through timely intervention and support, so that they now perform in line with expectations. The school's thorough use of data shows that achievement in all year groups is improving, having been in line with expectations in recent years. However, this has yet to have a sustained impact on examination results at Key Stage 4 and results in English and mathematics were disappointing in 2008. In the sixth form, students make good progress because of the outstanding curriculum and good teaching. Almost all students are successful in their chosen courses. The impact of the school's specialist status can be seen in the improving results in science.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

The school is rightly proud of students' good personal development and well-being. They show respect for themselves and each other and form good relationships with fellow students and adults. Their enjoyment of school can be seen in many lessons. On the whole, behaviour is good in lessons and around the school. Occasionally, when lessons lack pace and challenge, there is some minor disruption. Behaviour during breaks is relaxed and friendly. A few parents and students have commented on some boisterousness, but the school's effective strategies mean that this is minimal. Students feel safe at school and they and their parents are confident that any bullying is dealt with effectively. Students have a good understanding of the need to lead a healthy lifestyle through regular physical exercise and healthy eating. Attendance at school has improved since the last inspection and is now in line with the national average.

Students of all ages make a strong contribution to the school and local communities, and enjoy the responsibility offered to them, a notable example of this being the support they offer to younger students and those in local primary schools. Strong links have been forged with a school in Ecuador and a community in Uganda, and students organise regular fund-raising events. This gives them a good understanding of different cultures and their place in the world. They appreciate the School Parliament and Cabinet and the opportunity it gives them to be part of the school's decision-making process. Students develop into good citizens and their spiritual, moral and social understanding is good. Literacy, numeracy and ICT skills to help prepare them for future employment are less well developed. The vast majority of students continue into the sixth form, demonstrating their commitment to continuing education.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Teaching and learning are satisfactory. In the sixth form they are good because lessons are effectively and consistently matched to individual needs. The school has worked hard to improve and develop the classroom skills of its teachers; comprehensive programmes of lesson observations, and innovative activities such as 'learning lunches' have all played their part in

raising standards. However, these improvements have yet to deliver consistently high levels of student achievement in English and mathematics at Key Stage 4. Teachers have good subject knowledge and most plan effectively. These strengths, together with good classroom management, have created an environment that students enjoy and where, for the most part, good learning takes place. This is particularly the case where work is well matched to the needs of all students. In these lessons teachers use questioning effectively, there is good pace, and students are clear about the next steps they should take to improve their work. For example, in a good history lesson, Year 9 students were able to discover for themselves the effects of the First World War on life in Britain. However, this good practice is not always evident and in some lessons, there is insufficient challenge and pace because learning activities are not well matched to the different needs and abilities of the students. Here, assessment procedures are not as effective and more emphasis is often placed on direct teaching rather than on giving students the opportunity to learn independently.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum is broad and balanced and meets statutory requirements. The school is aware that the monitoring of ICT provision at Key Stage 4 is not done with sufficient rigour but, in other respects, the main school curriculum caters very well for students differing learning needs by using initiatives like 'learning to learn' and 'home learning' to promote independent learning skills. The post-16 curriculum offered is similarly broad and varied. The school is part of a consortium that widens even further the subject choice available to sixth formers. Students can, and many do, access a wide range of extra-curricular activities: they can choose from a range of sporting, cultural and academic options. These include the opportunity to attend twilight GCSE courses in music and photography. A number of educational trips and visits linked to the curriculum complement these activities. Students have access to an excellent programme of work-related learning and work experience.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Adults in the school know the students well as individuals, working closely with outside agencies to ensure they are well cared for and supported. Students and parents have commented positively on the helpful induction programme when they join the school and they are given good advice about their next steps in education or life. There is a strong emphasis on learning about and demonstrating equality through an interesting and stimulating weekly themes programme. Systems to support students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities are good. Teachers assess students' progress regularly and this information is used well in some subjects, but not all students know exactly what steps they should take to improve their work. The school has been successful in improving attendance, employing a range of appropriate strategies, including rewards, to positive effect. After absence, students are given individual programmes when necessary to ease their return to school. The school's arrangements to ensure the safety and protection of students are securely in place.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Senior leaders have a good understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses and individual middle leaders also play their role in evaluating the work of the school very well. However, there are inconsistencies, particularly in English and mathematics. Consequently, improvements in these areas have not been as rapid as in other subjects. The school sets itself challenging targets and this is helping to raise standards. Lessons are regularly observed but the feedback to teachers is not always helpful in informing them how to improve their work because it is not sufficiently focused on promoting students' independent learning. The school knows that more work needs to be done to ensure the information about the quality of lessons is used more effectively. The school gives satisfactory value for money, has been effective in securing a warm and safe environment and ensures all students have equal opportunities. A strong feature is the partnerships the school has cultivated with outside agencies and the school's specialist status has had a good impact in securing good links with the local community. The school takes its responsibilities for community cohesion seriously and students are engaged with partners at local, national and international levels. Governors give informed support and play an effective role in monitoring and evaluating the work of the school. An engaging and forward thinking headteacher leads the school; she has inspired the students and the staff to improve performance. The impact of specialist status and improving results demonstrates the school's good capacity for improvement.

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 |
|---|----------------|-------|

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 | 2 |
| The standards ¹ reached by learners | 3 | 3 |
| How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners | 3 | 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? | 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 | 3 | |
| 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? | 2 | 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? | 3 | 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 | 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? | 2 | |
| 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**

26 January 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Marlborough School Science College, St Albans, AL1 2QA

Thank you for the warm welcome you gave to me and the other inspectors when we visited your school recently. Watching your lessons and listening to your views helped us to understand what it is like to attend Marlborough School Science College. You told us that the school helps you to develop good personal skills and understand how to keep safe and healthy. We agree, you eat healthily in the canteen and you are friendly and caring to each other. Some of you told us how much you enjoy school and we saw this in some of your lessons. We were impressed with the work of the 'students' parliament' because you use this well to make sure Ms Thomson and the other teachers know what you think and they respond to your ideas.

All the adults in your school take good care of you and you have good relationships with them. When you leave school, most of you go on to further education, employment or training. Many of you stay on into the sixth form. Being a science specialist school has meant that the school has been able to offer you a range of courses that is good in the main school and exceptional in the sixth form. We know you find this motivating because so many of you come back to post-16 studies.

Overall, you are making satisfactory progress in school. You are achieving successfully in some subjects but many of you find English and mathematics difficult. It is not clear how some of you are doing in ICT in Key Stage 4. These are important subjects and qualifications in them might make a difference to how well you get on in the future so we have asked the teachers to make sure you do better. Many of your lessons are good because the teachers give you opportunities to do things for yourselves and make the work challenging, but this is not the same in all lessons.

Ms Thomson and other senior staff check the quality of your work and lessons regularly. Other staff help and some do this very well. We have asked Ms Thomson to make sure staff always do this very well and to make sure all your teachers know how they can make their lessons as good as the best ones. This will help you to do the best you can. Senior staff make good plans to improve the school and we have asked them to make sure other teachers help them so that everybody knows exactly what the school's priorities are and can make improvements happen quickly.

You can do your bit to help Marlborough School Science College be an even better school by working hard, listening to the advice from your teachers and continuing to take care of each other.

Yours sincerely

Joan Hewitt

Lead inspector