

Sir Joseph Williamson's Mathematical School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	118839
Local Authority	Medway
Inspection number	326907
Inspection date	26 November 2008
Reporting inspector	Joan Greenfield

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

Type of school	Grammar (selective)
School category	Voluntary controlled
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Boys
Number on roll	
School (total)	1178
Sixth form	321
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Michael Costello
Headteacher	Gary Holden
Date of previous school inspection	30 November 2005
School address	Maidstone Road Rochester ME1 3EL
Telephone number	01634 844008
Fax number	01634 818303

Age group	11–18
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors. The inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues: the impact of the school's provision in improving standards and students' achievement further; the effectiveness of systems to track and assess students' progress and set challenging targets; and the effectiveness of middle leaders in influencing and improving the work in their areas of responsibility.

Evidence was gathered from visits to lessons, scrutiny of students' work and teachers' planning, discussions with students, staff and two governors, including the Chair of the Governing Body, the views of parents and a scrutiny of the school's documentation. 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 its self-evaluation, were not justified, and these have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

Sir Joseph Williamson's Mathematical School is larger than the average secondary school. Students' attainment on entry is well above average, reflecting the selective nature of the school. Most students are from White British backgrounds, with the remainder coming from a wide range of minority ethnic backgrounds and mixed heritages. A small, but increasing, number of students have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. About a third of the students in the sixth form are female. The school was designated a specialist college for mathematics and computing in 2002 and added a second specialism in the humanities, including geography and history, in April 2007. The school works in partnership with five other schools in the Rochester and Walderslade Consortium to extend the curriculum for sixth form students.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

This is an outstanding school. Students thrive within its distinctive ethos, enabling them to succeed academically and to develop into confident, well-rounded individuals who are prepared extremely well for their future lives. The school's strengths lie in its culture of striving for the highest possible academic standards, its concern for helping students do the very best they can and its great sense of community. These three elements, together with the extremely positive relationships between staff and students and the students themselves, combine to produce a dynamic and challenging environment in which students flourish. Almost all parents are supportive of the school, believing that their children enjoy school, make good progress, and are well cared for and safe. These are typical of the parents' extensive comments: 'The school has provided an ideal environment for my son to flourish'; 'an excellent school'; 'my son absolutely loves it'; and 'all the staff go out of their way to be as helpful as possible'.

Students make outstanding progress. Standards are exceptionally high throughout, as shown by the national test results in Year 9 and the GCSE and A-level examinations. The Year 9 test results have been consistently well above average in recent years. In 2008, they were particularly high in mathematics, which is one of the school's specialist subjects. There were also considerable improvements in English and science, especially at the higher levels. Nearly every student gained five or more GCSE grades A* to C including English and mathematics, with almost a half of these at the higher grades of A* and A. The GCSE results have improved year on year and in 2008, exceeded the challenging targets the school set itself. In the sixth form, standards are well above average, with almost all students gaining pass grades, with well over a half of these at the higher grades of A and B. Despite these excellent results, the school is not complacent and has set itself much higher targets for this coming year in both GCSE and A-level examinations. The school's regular assessment and review of students' performance against their individual targets show that students are well on course to do even better this academic year, including in those few subjects where the results were relatively weaker in 2008.

There are many reasons for the school's success. The school's values and high aspirations are clearly reflected in the students' outstanding personal development and well-being. Students thoroughly enjoy being in school, as shown in their high levels of attendance. Their extremely positive attitudes to learning, and their evident pride in being part of the school community, are illustrated in their willingness to participate in the wide range of opportunities available to them, to show initiative and assume responsibility. Students are extremely well prepared to meet the challenges that they will encounter as they grow older, and they act responsibly. They make an excellent contribution to the school and wider community, particularly through the initiatives brought about by the school's specialist subjects. They have an increasingly strong voice in the school's development through membership of the school council and undertaking a wide range of responsibilities as prefects, peer mentors, librarians and student officers. A particularly interesting feature is the setting up of six student groups to undertake research and to take action on issues chosen by them related to the school environment and to the five Every Child Matters outcomes. Although in the early stages of development, these groups allow students considerable scope to contribute to improving the school still further.

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is excellent. This is shown in the considerable care and support that students give to their peers who have disabilities or other difficulties within the school. Their understanding of the need to maintain healthy lifestyles is highly developed and large numbers participate regularly in a range of extra-curricular sports.

Their exemplary standards of behaviour and the excellent quality of relationships show that students have a highly developed understanding of their own and others' safety. A very small minority of parents express concerns about behaviour, mainly in a few lessons and around the school, but nothing untoward was seen during the inspection. Students themselves are confident that the school deals swiftly with any misbehaviour and listens to their concerns.

Central to the rapid progress students make is the high quality teaching and guidance they receive from staff, and the careful assessment and checking of their progress. The high proportion of good and often excellent teaching in lessons and the unstinting support students receive ensure that almost all achieve outstandingly well. Although there are a very small number of areas where the teaching is not of such a consistently high standard, senior staff are taking robust action to bring about improvements. Teachers use their strong subject knowledge to provide students with interesting and challenging tasks, which stretch most of them, develop their higher-order learning skills, and prepare them successfully for tests and public examinations. The required degree of challenge for the most able students in the school is not always evident in lessons and evidence suggests that these students are capable of achieving higher still. Senior staff recognise the need to extend these students further and have implemented as one of their priorities strategies to increase the proportion of A* grades at GCSE.

Students are highly valued as individuals and their excellent academic and personal standards reflect the exceptional support and guidance they receive. Safeguarding and health and safety arrangements are robust. Students receive very good guidance at points of transition, which prepares them successfully for their next stage of education. Very effective systems exist for tracking students' progress and identifying those in danger of underachieving or who might benefit from additional support. Students are aware of their targets, as well as what they need to do to reach them. The curriculum meets students' needs and aspirations extremely well and enriches their learning and personal development considerably. Students and staff have responded enthusiastically to the changes to the curriculum in Year 7, as they allow students to undertake a variety of cross-curricular topics, enhancing their skills of learning independently and creativity. A variety of different pathways at Key Stage 4 enables students to tailor the curriculum to their individual interests. The partnership arrangements with other schools bring clear benefits as they widen the range of courses available to sixth form students. This also benefits staff, for example through the strong collaborative planning to introduce diplomas and their involvement in joint staff development activities.

A 'buzz' of excitement pervades the school. Building on its existing strengths, the new headteacher has clearly articulated the correct priorities for the school's further development. These include a relentless focus on raising standards further, improving teaching and learning, and sharpening the quality of leadership and management, especially of middle leaders. Actions to address these priorities are already making a considerable difference. The headteacher receives excellent support in this work from his senior colleagues and through the commitment of the extremely effective governing body. The impact of the school's specialisms in mathematics and computing and the humanities is extensive, especially in identifying and sharing best practice and the links with other schools. In addition, the implementation of coaching and mentoring arrangements to support staff, especially middle leaders, is effective in ensuring even greater consistency across departments. The school's involvement with the wider community and its strong links with other partners are bringing great benefits to the students and promoting community cohesion well, although the governing body has not yet fully developed its monitoring and evaluation procedures in this area. The evidence shows that the school has a

very clear view for where it wants to be, is taking successful action to tackle its priorities, and has excellent capacity to improve.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 1

Students gain much from being in the school's sixth form and receive an outstanding education. They achieve extremely well because of the excellent quality of the teaching, the high levels of care, guidance and support they receive, and the systematic tracking of their progress against challenging targets. This ensures that their progress is first-rate as staff take firm action where there is any danger of underperformance. Standards are well above average and the school's robust analysis of the students' current performance indicates that standards are set to rise considerably this year, especially at the higher grades of A and B. The school's A-level results in 2008 were not quite as strong as those in the previous year, clearly affected by the students' weak performance in critical thinking. This course, which was compulsory for all students, was allocated insufficient time on the timetable. Senior leaders took immediate steps to rectify matters and are supporting successfully those few subjects that did not reach the high standards of the majority.

Students are keen and interested, and say they thoroughly enjoy their courses. High levels of challenge in the teaching keep students well focused and on track. Their skills and abilities to work independently are very high. They make a strong contribution to the school community and set an excellent example to others, particularly in their roles as prefects and mentors to younger students. The curriculum meets students' needs and aspirations extremely well. Students are able to choose from a wide range of AS and A-level courses and benefit from the partnership arrangements with other schools, including the informal arrangements with the girls' grammar school, which give students additional flexibility to study their chosen subjects. Retention rates are very high and almost all go on to higher education when they leave school. The sixth form is led and managed very well.

What the school should do to improve further

- Provide greater challenge to the most able students to ensure more of them attain the highest grade in GCSE and A-level examinations.

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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?	2	
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**

27 November 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Sir Joseph Williamson's Mathematical School, Rochester, ME1 3EL

Thank you for making us feel so welcome when we visited your school recently. We enjoyed talking to so many of you about your work and the way the school helps you to do so well. We valued your openness and appreciated your views and opinions. This letter is to tell you what we found, but we hope that as many as possible of you will read the full report.

- You go to an outstanding school that helps you to achieve very well and reach very high standards.
- You work hard and most of you make excellent progress in your learning because of the challenging teaching you receive and the careful monitoring of your progress.
- You are courteous and friendly to one another and to adults in the school.
- You are developing into mature and responsible young citizens, well prepared to deal with the challenges that you may encounter when you leave school.
- Staff give you excellent levels of care, guidance and support to ensure that you get the most out of being at school.
- The school provides you with a wide range of curricular opportunities and other enrichment activities that successfully enhance your learning and personal development.
- The school is outstandingly well led by the headteacher, senior staff and governors, who are committed to ensuring that the school continues to improve what it does so that you all receive the very best opportunities to be successful.

The school has many outstanding features. It knows what it needs to do to improve further but we have asked the school to focus on one area in particular to improve the high quality of education that you receive.

- Provide the most able of you with additional challenges to ensure that you reach the highest grades in GCSE and A-level examinations.

We hope that you will all continue to do the very best for your school and wish you every success in your future lives.

Yours faithfully

Mrs Joan Greenfield Lead inspector