

Gosford Hill School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	123241
Local Authority	Oxfordshire
Inspection number	327876
Inspection dates	29–30 April 2009
Reporting inspector	Kenneth Bush

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	11–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1120
Sixth form	196
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Doreen Rose
Headteacher	Dr Stephen Bizley
Date of previous school inspection	2 May 2006
School address	Oxford Road Kidlington OX5 2NT
Telephone number	01865 374971
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by five Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Gosford Hill is a larger-than-average High School. The percentage of students eligible for free school meals is below that found nationally. The percentage of students identified by the school as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities is also just below the national average. The great majority of students are of White British origin with a small but increasing proportion whose first language is believed not to be English. The school has had specialist mathematics and computing college status since 2003. It is a member of the East Oxfordshire Consortium, providing shared courses for students aged 14 to 19 in the local area.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

Gosford Hill School provides its students with a satisfactory but rapidly improving standard of education. Under the leadership of the inspirational headteacher, the school is successfully focused on raising standards and improving rates of progress. The school has developed plans to enable sustained improvement and further raise the aspirations of staff and students. The clear progress made since the previous inspection, together with emerging strengths in leadership and management, including governance, indicate that the capacity to improve further is good.

The standards reached by students by the end of Year 11 are broadly average. An increasing proportion of students leave school with at least five good GCSE passes and in 2008 almost every student gained at least one GCSE pass, reflecting the school's strong commitment to valuing each student. The rate of students' progress over time, however, has been variable and a minority have not achieved as well as they should have done to ensure good progress. The school has recently addressed this more vigorously through radical improvements to the curriculum and a more effective response to underperformance. As this has not yet made a full impact, achievement overall remains satisfactory but is improving as progress accelerates.

Teaching and learning are also satisfactory but improving as a result of significantly better monitoring by senior leaders and through intensive and well-targeted professional development to encourage more active learning. Comprehensive assessment systems are now in place to enable good tracking of students' progress, but too many lessons do not take sufficient account of students' starting points and capabilities to support consistently good or better progress. The quality of marking and feedback has improved overall since the previous inspection, although a few pockets of uneven practice remain. The well-planned and innovative curriculum is a key strength of the school, providing as it does a strong platform for sustained improvement. It is broad, balanced, extremely flexible and matches students' needs and capabilities well. School leaders and managers are becoming increasingly proficient in responding creatively to local and national initiatives and the school is at the forefront of developments such as 14 to 19 diplomas.

The care, guidance and support of students are good and create a positive learning environment; support for lower-attaining and vulnerable students is particularly impressive. Parents are generally supportive and endorse the measures that the headteacher and the senior team are taking to move the school forward. One parent commented: 'We feel that there is some clear, strong leadership emerging in the school; behaviour, in particular, has improved noticeably.' A small minority of parents, however, felt that students' behaviour was not always as good as it should be, although inspectors found behaviour to be good overall. In general, students have a high regard for their school and enjoy their education, but too great a proportion are persistently absent. They are, however, developing a good range of personal skills that are preparing them well for their education and employment after school. The specialism makes an impressive contribution to the wider community with numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) courses on offer to adults, masterclasses for Years 6 and 7, and effective collaboration with both Oxford University and local museums.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

Standards in the sixth form are broadly average with some variation between subjects. There are particular strengths in sciences and physical education with lower, but improving, attainment seen in humanities, media and business studies. Inspection evidence revealed that attainment of the higher grades has improved since last year. Achievement, overall, is satisfactory with better progress seen in English, science and the specialist subjects. Students report they enjoy school overall but feel that their curriculum does not support them fully to live a healthy lifestyle because there is no regular, planned physical activity. They also feel their enrichment programme could be better tailored towards helping them to cope with student life. Students' contribution to the community is good; all students undertake community service regularly and Year 12 students act as mentors for younger pupils. Moral and social awareness are well developed, spirituality has improved since the previous inspection, but students' appreciation of the multicultural nature of British society is less evident. Students have a mature outlook and are keen to do well in their studies. Attendance and progression rates from AS to A2 are satisfactory, although the school has identified that retaining more students who begin courses in Year 12 and subsequently leave school is an area in need of improvement.

Teaching and learning are satisfactory, but of inconsistent quality across the range of the curriculum. However, students feel that most of their teachers go out of their way to help and guide them in their studies. Assessment is thorough and students get effective feedback which enables them to improve in most subjects. The curriculum is satisfactory overall with good provision for sciences, although there are fewer vocational and Level 2 courses than in similar schools. Leadership and management in the sixth form, which has been recently restructured, are satisfactory with improving systems for monitoring and evaluation of the quality of provision and more effective tracking of students' progress.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure greater consistency in the quality of teaching and learning in order to improve achievement.
- Reduce the proportion of students who are persistently absent.
- Extend the range of vocational and Level 2 courses on offer to students in the sixth form to promote better retention and achievement.

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 typically begin at Gosford Hill with levels of attainment which are broadly average. By the end of Year 9, standards remain in line with national expectations and progress overall is satisfactory. In 2008 the proportion of students gaining five good GCSEs increased. Attainment in English rose markedly and the proportion of students gaining two good passes in science exceeded the national figure. The school's specialist status is making an impact on standards and progress in mathematics and ICT, both of which are on a rising trend of performance. Challenging targets in these subjects have been met in each year since designation.

In recent years students' have generally made comparatively better progress at Key Stage 4 than in their first three years, especially in English. However, there are early indications that progress is now being made more consistently in both key stages due to increasingly flexible and well-focused curriculum provision and more effective intervention with previously underperforming groups of students, such as middle-ability boys. As a consequence of timely and effective support, the progress of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and other vulnerable groups does not differ significantly from that of their peers. Therefore, standards and achievement overall are satisfactory, but improving.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is now good, having improved since the previous inspection. They benefit from the increasing opportunities to reflect upon their own thoughts and feelings about a wide range of moral issues, such as civil partnerships and euthanasia. Behaviour is generally good both around the school and in lessons, although a few examples of immature conduct by younger students were seen during the inspection. The number of days lost through exclusion from school has decreased in the current year and permanent exclusions are low. Attendance rates overall are broadly in line with national levels but the proportion of students who are persistent absentees is relatively high. Attitudes to learning are mostly positive and the majority of students work hard and are keen to be successful in their studies. Students generally enjoy their time in school and feel safe from harm, including bullying. Students feel bullying has decreased recently and that those incidents which do occur are dealt with quickly and effectively. Students show good knowledge and understanding of healthy lifestyles, and show a strong interest in maintaining a sensible diet and taking an active part in the wide range of physical activities available. Students make a positive and increasing contribution to the school and the local community, including through the links provided by the specialist status. The economic well-being of students is improving with good and developing workplace skills such as teamwork and problem-solving. Work experience and other insights into employment enable students to be well prepared for further education and adult life.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Although teaching and learning are satisfactory overall, recent efforts to raise their quality are having a positive impact on students' experiences in most of their classes. Leaders, aware of too much variability in practice, are now working with determination to bring all up to the standard of the best. A new lesson-planning format has led to a clearer focus on learning objectives in the majority of lessons, although there is still inconsistency in the way teachers use their knowledge of students' attainment and capabilities. This leads, in some cases, to insufficient support for lower-attaining pupils and, in others, to not enough challenge for the more able. Consequently, in a minority of lessons students are not fully engaged in their work. Assessment is satisfactory and improving, although students are not always given the appropriate quality of feedback on their work to help them to improve. Students accept and enjoy responsibility for helping others to learn and gain confidence from the numerous opportunities afforded them to engage in collaborative learning. For example, in a very successful Year 11 English lesson, students analysing poetry in mixed-ability groups contributed enthusiastically

and effectively to the completion of excellent revision charts in preparation for final examinations.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Close analysis of students' needs, interests and aspirations is the basis of the good curriculum that the school has developed. Clear pathways with appropriate progression routes provide appropriate courses for students from their entry in Year 7 through to the end of Key Stage 4. The school's flexible approach allows students to move between curriculum pathways, including at Key Stage 3, while enabling staff to plan specifically for groups with different needs. The school makes good use of its membership of a local consortium to provide a broad choice of academic and vocational courses at Key Stage 4.

The specialism has made a strong contribution to the curriculum with programmes such as I-media supporting both ICT course delivery and students' research outside of lessons. The school has also received national recognition with the publication by the Qualification and Curriculum Authority of its 'creativity through algebra' case study demonstrating the new mathematics curriculum in action. Economic well-being is effectively addressed through the school's focus on cross-curricular issues such as literacy and thinking skills and there is a wide range of opportunities for work-related learning. The high number of extra-curricular activities and visits provided broadens students' experiences and enables them to successfully relate their work in school to the world beyond. Leaders have effectively evaluated the impact of changes to the curriculum but other staff, students and parents are also regularly consulted so that their views are taken into consideration in the continued development of provision.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

The school provides a strong network of support, a view endorsed both by the students and the majority of parents. Students feel safe and valued within an inclusive learning environment. They particularly appreciate the recently introduced vertical tutor group system. As one said, 'It really helps to support the younger students because the older ones have more experience.' Tutor time activities in general, however, are insufficiently developed. Support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is also good, including consistently effective deployment of teaching assistants. A number of vulnerable younger students benefit from enhanced transition arrangements before they join the school, and some older students receive good programmes of alternative education and personalised support that ensure that they continue to access relevant full-time education. The tracking of academic progress is good; students are aware of their targets and most know what they have to do to achieve them. The recently introduced behaviour tracking procedure is an example of excellent and creative practice which significantly contributes to the maintenance of good student behaviour. The school has put in place robust and effective staff recruitment practices and has clear safeguarding arrangements in general.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Since the previous inspection, procedures for monitoring and evaluating the work of the school have become much more robust. Consequently, staff now have a clearer sense of the improvements required to move the school forward and short-, medium- and long-term goals have been established. For example, systems for target-setting, tracking students' progress and intervening when underperformance occurs are now in place, although these have yet to impact fully on improving the achievement of students. While leadership is particularly strong at senior level, the effectiveness of middle leaders, particularly in terms of directing improvement, is currently less consistent, but improving. Governors discharge their responsibilities well and take an increasingly active role in the life and development of the school, ensuring that school leaders are well supported and appropriately held to account. Leadership and management of the specialism are good. There is good staff access to ICT as a teaching resource through a substantial investment in the school's infrastructure of computers, software and networks. As a result, a high proportion of staff regularly use ICT to plan and deliver lessons that enhance students' learning experiences.

Equality of opportunity is vigorously promoted both through the formal curriculum and beyond and the school is a tolerant and welcoming community. The school has forged strong partnerships with a range of other educational providers and external organisations which enrich students' experiences and help to prepare them for adult life effectively. Secure steps have already been taken by the school to establish a strong contribution to community cohesion, and the school's leaders and managers have a clear awareness of how this area needs developing further. The school provides satisfactory value for money and deploys its resources appropriately and efficiently.

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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?	3	3
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	3
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	3

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3	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	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	2	

The quality of provision

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

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2	3
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	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	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**

14 May 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Gosford Hill School, Kidlington, OX5 2NT

Thank you for the very warm welcome you gave to the inspection team when we visited your school recently. We enjoyed being in your lessons and meeting with you, and were impressed with the pride most of you have in your school.

These are the main findings of the inspection.

- Gosford Hill is a satisfactory and rapidly improving school.
- Students reach broadly average standards in terms of attainment, and the rate of progress is satisfactory, but improving.
- Teaching is generally satisfactory and is also improving.
- You have a good curriculum in the main school, which the headteacher and the senior team are working hard to improve still further. Your curriculum in the sixth form is satisfactory.
- Your personal development is good, although too many students are persistently absent.
- Staff at the school care for and support you well and give you good advice and guidance.
- Your school is well led and managed and your headteacher has good plans for how it can get even better.
- The school's specialist status makes a positive contribution to your education.

The headteacher agrees with the inspection team that your achievement overall could be improved and we have asked that:

- there is more consistency in the quality of lessons so that achievement improves
- the proportion of students who are persistently absent should be reduced
- the range of vocational and Level 2 courses on offer to students in the sixth form should be extended.

You can do your bit to help by continuing to work as hard as you can and some of you could improve your concentration in lessons. On behalf of the inspection team, I wish you the very best of luck with your studies in the future.

Yours faithfully

Kenneth Bush

Lead Inspector