

Didcot Girls' School

Inspection report - amended

Unique Reference Number	123260
Local Authority	Oxfordshire
Inspection number	327880
Inspection dates	24–25 March 2009
Reporting inspector	Meena Wood HMI

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	11–18
Gender of pupils	Girls
Number on roll	
School (total)	1296
Sixth form	195
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr David Locke
Headteacher	Mrs Paula Taylor-Moore
Date of previous school inspection	7 March 2006
School address	Manor Crescent Didcot OX11 0DA
Telephone number	01235 812092
Fax number	01235 511245

Age group	11–18
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Amended Report Addendum

Following a complaint the grade for 'The standards reached by learners' for the Sixth Form has been amended from a 3 to a 2.

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Didcot Girls' School is a large comprehensive. Sixth form provision is offered in partnership with St Birinus, a local boys' school. The school has Language College status and designated status in Applied Learning and Mathematics and Computing. It was designated as a High Performing School in 2007 and in June 2008 was re-designated as having Healthy School status.

The proportions of students from minority ethnic groups and for whom English is not their first language are low. The most common heritage languages spoken, apart from English, are Slovak, Polish, Russian and Spanish. The school has low numbers of students in receipt of free school meals. The proportion of students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including those with statements of special educational needs, is low. These include behavioural, emotional, social and communication needs, dyslexia and autism. The school gives support outside of lessons to these students, those of lower ability and those who underachieve in the Study Centre, the 'Bungalow' and offsite in 'The Work Place'.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

Didcot Girls' is a satisfactory school. Since the last inspection, the senior management team, governors and the staff have worked hard to put in place a good curriculum that is more focused on students' needs and abilities. A tutoring system was introduced last year to develop greater cohesion among younger and older students. The school is beginning to see the impact of these successful initiatives in students' progress. Achievement is good and standards are slightly above national averages. Most students are now making good progress and indications suggest that they are on track to achieve standards above national averages in Years 9 and 11, although a minority of students in mathematics are still not making enough progress.

Behaviour is mostly satisfactory. A small minority of parents who communicated with inspectors, and some students, expressed serious concerns about students' behaviour and school discipline. Inspectors observed many students behaving well but a small number of students misbehave and disrupt others' learning in lessons. The school has underestimated the impact of the disruptive behaviour of these students. Strategies to tackle misbehaviour have not been consistently effective. Nevertheless, the majority of students feel safe and enjoy their learning. Students' personal development and well-being are satisfactory and students enthusiastically contribute to local communities through successful fundraising initiatives. Attendance is good and punctuality to lessons is satisfactory.

Care, guidance and support are satisfactory in the main school and good in the sixth form. Academic learning support outside lessons is well planned and enables most students who have learning disabilities and difficulties to make good progress. Academic guidance is generally good in the sixth form, with good careers advice across the school. In the main school, academic guidance is satisfactory. The teachers help students to understand the levels they are working at, but do not give them sufficient information on how to improve in all subjects. Students of lower ability are not always well supported in lessons as teaching assistants and teachers do not consistently plan lessons that meet these students' needs.

Across the school, enjoyable extra-curricular activities help students develop skills in the performing arts, music and physical sports, to leave school as well-rounded individuals. Teaching and learning are good in the main school and in the sixth form as students are well motivated and keen to learn. In lessons where teachers plan structured activities in line with students' abilities, learning outcomes are good and students make good progress. In a small number of lessons, and especially in mathematics, there is insufficient planning, work is not well matched to students' needs, the pace of learning is too slow and most students only make satisfactory progress, while a minority disrupt the learning of others.

The leadership and management of the sixth form are good, and are satisfactory in the main school. Leaders and managers work positively as a team to enable changes to take place, but the pace of change is slow. The previous report asked the school to continue to implement the school's quality improvement systems to raise standards in all areas, raise teachers' expectations and improve the achievement of students with lower prior attainment. Although senior staff are involved in improving the quality of provision and outcomes, this responsibility has not yet spread sufficiently to all subject leaders. While the monitoring of teaching and learning has led to rising standards in science, for instance, it has not yet led to consistently high standards in all subjects. This inconsistency is having a negative impact particularly on developing students'

numeracy skills and examination outcomes in mathematics. The school's capacity to improve is satisfactory.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The school has an established sixth form in partnership with a neighbouring boys' school and collaborative arrangements work well. A wide range of GCE A-level courses are offered and these, together with vocational courses, prepare students well for adult life. GCE A-level results are slightly above national averages and indicate that most students, by Year 13, make good progress in relation to their GCSE results. Students who choose applied learning subjects such as Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) applied science, and A-levels in applied art, design and graphics make particularly good progress in relation to their starting points. Transition from Year 12 to 13 is satisfactory, reflecting the number of students who stay on to complete their courses in Year 13 and then progress to degree courses and higher education. A significant number of less able students successfully achieve qualifications that enable them to enter employment at the end of Year 12 or to continue learning on alternative courses at college.

Students are well supported in all areas of school life, and receive regular feedback on their progress. Teaching is generally good and most students are developing good independent learning skills. Students value the good advice and guidance they receive when considering opportunities for employment and for further and higher education. They are good role models for younger students and many spend time mentoring younger students, helping to raise their confidence and self-esteem. Students enjoy the sixth form. Registration procedures for students moving between the two sixth form sites was raised by inspectors as a concern and is being reviewed by the school. The leadership of the sixth form encourages a sense of responsibility and good personal development within the student body and students make a good contribution to the whole school and wider community.

What the school should do to improve further

- Address as a matter of urgency the issues concerning inappropriate behaviour by a minority of students.
- Accelerate progress in mathematics lessons so that students reach higher standards.
- Develop the capacity of subject leaders to evaluate the impact of teaching and learning on raising standards.

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: 2

Most students' progress across subjects has steadily improved between 2006 and 2008 and students attain standards slightly above national averages in Years 11. In the current year, the school has put into place good academic support outside lessons for underachieving students. From broadly average levels of attainment on entry to the school, students are now making good progress and are on track to achieve standards above national averages in Years 9 and 11, although a minority of students in mathematics are still not making enough progress. In

English most students make good progress. In 2008, three-quarters of Year 11 students attained A* to C GCSE grades in English. This was above national averages. The progress made by students who have learning difficulties and disabilities is mostly good as they are well supported in lessons and the Study Centre.

Students make good progress in two sciences and additional applied science, and their GCSE results are above national averages. As a Languages Specialist College, the school enters a high number of students in languages in Year 11. Results for French and Spanish are broadly at national averages. A high proportion of students study languages in the sixth form. GCE A-level results in 2008 were below national averages in French but above average in Spanish. The school has set challenging targets, but did not reach its 2008 targets for five GCSE A* to C grades with and without mathematics and English.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 3

Through the peer mentoring system, students learn to help and support each other in times of difficulty. Students also know that, if necessary, they can talk with their form tutors or other members of staff. Generally, students understand the benefits of eating healthily and following an active lifestyle. Inspectors observed students enjoying their lessons, especially dance and drama. However, in other subjects such as mathematics, students are not as well motivated. The behaviour of students in lessons and around the school is satisfactory overall, but varies considerably. There are occasions when behaviour is exemplary in lessons but, in a minority of lessons, a small number of students talk persistently, despite repeated demands being made by the teacher for them to be quiet. Attendance is good. Although punctuality to school is good, students are sometimes late for lessons because they have to travel between school buildings for lessons. All students apart from sixth form students attend weekly assemblies and these contribute positively to their spiritual and moral development. Students' social and cultural development is good and is enhanced by the off-site visits to local dance and drama groups and through fundraising activities. Students' skills contributing towards their economic well-being are satisfactory.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

In the majority of lessons, students make good progress and show positive attitudes towards their learning. Teaching is effective and teachers' good subject knowledge lends confidence and enthusiasm to their teaching. Teachers are skilled in asking questions which will develop the learning of their students. When the lessons are well matched to their needs, students behave well and enjoy their learning. In one outstanding drama lesson, the teacher's enthusiasm and focused planning motivated students of all abilities to move seamlessly through a variety of learning experiences, making excellent progress. In a Year 11 English lesson, the teacher skilfully enabled students to hold an enjoyable and stimulating debate, in which they expressed their views articulately and with confidence.

In most lessons, students have opportunities to consolidate their learning. In the better lessons, the pace is fast and changes in activities maintain students' interest. The use of computers in music and design technology enlivens the subjects and stimulates learning. A few lessons, although satisfactory, do not sufficiently challenge and enthuse students in their learning. In

mathematics, for example, the pace of activities is too slow for some pupils, while too fast for others, in relation to students' levels of attainment, and this sometimes leads to distracted chatter. In these lessons, teachers and teaching assistants do not structure support well enough for the less able students and those who are working at higher levels.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The school provides a good curriculum which meets students' needs through a wide range of vocational and academic subjects. The school has successfully broadened its vocational programme through new 'Pathways' starting in Year 9. All students study information and communication technology and one vocational subject, thus preparing them well for adult life. An effective alternative curriculum is in place on the school site. This is more appropriate to the needs of students who are at risk of exclusion, as they find it difficult to settle and progress in lessons in the main school. The specialist status for languages enables students to study a variety of languages, including Mandarin. Able students can study GCSE Latin, three separate sciences, and take examinations in subjects when they are ready to do so, providing a 'stage not age' curriculum. Students are given additional responsibilities such as mentoring younger students, being environmental representatives or acting as librarians. The enrichment of the curriculum through learning out of school is a great asset. Residential visits, for example the history trip to Belgium, and schemes such as the Duke of Edinburgh's award, are considerable strengths and assist students in their all-round personal development. Extra-curricular clubs, whether artistic, sporting or academic, are appreciated and popular with the students. As part of the Ridgeway Partnership, and in light of the school's designation for Applied Learning, there are good links with employers who offer, for instance, extended placements for BTEC First and BTEC National students. They are currently working with the school to develop the Diploma in Society, Health and Development.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

The 'vertical tutoring' system is beginning to provide more individualised support to students through smaller tutor groups, leading to a stronger focus on students' learning targets. The school's support and guidance team has successfully increased attendance of a group of older students who were at risk of expulsion and who are now on work placements. Poor behaviour by a minority of students is an area of major concern to parents, some students and some staff. A small minority of parents have expressed concerns about a lack of discipline and poor behaviour, while some mention incidents of racism and bullying. Some parents report raising these concerns with the school over a period of time. Inspectors generally observed satisfactory or better behaviour around the school and in lessons. In a minority of lessons, however, behaviour was inappropriate because teaching did not meet students' needs. The number of incidents of poor behaviour recorded by the school has increased significantly in the last year as school sanctions are not consistently effective in deterring a minority of students from these anti-social behaviours.

Students identified with disabilities and learning difficulties are exceptionally well supported. Systems for ensuring a smooth transition from primary schools are good. At the various stages of their education, students get good preparatory advice and guidance relating to option choices and careers and use the 'web-based area prospectus' on 14-19 choices. The school's systems monitor students' progress towards their targets and inform students, and their parents, how

well they are doing. The school is working hard to further refine assessment procedures and, although good use of these was observed, this is not consistent throughout the school. In some instances, students are able to accurately assess their own performance and that of others. Teachers' marking of students' work is erratic and written comments do not generally inform students of what they need to do to improve their grade although some good examples were seen of informative assessment.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Leadership and management are satisfactory. The senior leadership team has rightly identified its main priority as raising GCSE standards in line with school targets, especially in mathematics. Management reviews of behaviour and anti-bullying procedures in the last year have led to positive signs of improvement, for instance in the tutoring system and the effective work of the student support and guidance team. However, managers have underestimated the urgent need to create more responsive communication with students and parents and to strengthen discipline and sanctions further. Governance is satisfactory. Governors are knowledgeable and offer good support, for example in the effective intervention plan for science that has led to raising standards. Governors are well focused on the management of finances and their own self-evaluation of areas of expertise has been thorough. However, in the last year, they have not provided the school with sufficiently critical support to ensure all the priorities for improvement are being successfully implemented and evaluated for impact.

While all managers are held to account for the quality of provision, a number of subject leaders have not yet developed the skills to raise standards through monitoring teaching and learning. Most subject leaders do not use performance data to analyse the impact of teaching on students' progress and learning, nor do they consistently ensure teachers use this data to plan lessons that match all students' abilities. Some excellent practice exists in science and humanities, in terms of their target setting and departmental plans. This expertise is starting to be shared across all subjects. Senior managers are beginning to implement more robust monitoring to ensure greater consistency in teaching and learning, and in subject management across the curriculum. The school's self-evaluation has not been sufficiently analytical of its strengths and weaknesses, particularly in relation to some aspects of personal development and well-being, care, guidance and support. The school has been over-generous in judging its capacity to improve.

Community cohesion is good and has been fostered through the school's close working relationships with local primary schools, family learning classes, and students' e-links with international schools. Positive contributions to the local community have included materials for the Didcot Railway Museum and productive links with employers.

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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	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	3	3

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3	2
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?	3	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	3	
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	3	
The attendance of learners	2	
The behaviour of learners	3	
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?	2	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	3	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	3	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3	
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	3	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	3	
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**

20 April 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Didcot Girls' School, Didcot, OX11 0DA

Thank you for your welcome when inspectors visited the school recently. Your comments in lessons and break times helped us greatly in forming our views. I write to tell you about our findings and encourage you to read the full inspection report.

Your school is a satisfactory school and your sixth form is good. Your personal development is satisfactory. Although most of you come to school wanting to learn, and we observed that most of you behave well, a significant minority of you do not concentrate in lessons and chatter, especially when the work you are given lacks interest or challenge or you find it too difficult to complete. You end up disrupting your own learning and that of others. You are aware of how to lead healthy and safe lives. Many of you make significant contributions to the life of the school and the local community. The school effectively supports those of you who have problems in your personal lives. The majority of you come to school regularly but, in school, too many of you do not move quickly between lessons and therefore miss learning.

The most recent academic outcomes at your school show that in the current year, most students are making good progress in the majority of subjects. We observed some good teaching and this was because teachers are enthusiastic and plan your lessons well. In a minority of lessons, and especially in mathematics, too many of you are not achieving your potential as the teaching does not help you to learn as effectively as you should. In a number of subjects, the advice you get from marking and verbal comments is not good enough to consistently help you to improve. The curriculum in the sixth form and in the main school is good, you have good opportunities to learn outside the classroom and you are helped to make the right choices for your courses of study. Those of you who attend the Study Centre outside lessons receive good support.

We have asked the school to speed up your progress by:

- working with you to improve the behaviour of a few pupils
- improving teaching and learning in mathematics
- developing further the leadership and management skills of subject leaders.

We heard from you and some of your parents that they also share these concerns. You can help the school improve through arriving at your lessons punctually, being ready to learn and taking greater responsibility for improving your behaviour. I wish you all the best in your studies and for your future.

Yours faithfully

Meena Wood

Her Majesty's Inspector