

The Castle School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	123886
Local Authority	Somerset
Inspection number	328011
Inspection date	4 June 2009
Reporting inspector	Janet Simms

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1194
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Sheila Naylor
Headteacher	Kevin Freedman
Date of previous school inspection	1 January 2006
School address	Wellington Road Taunton TA1 5AU
Telephone number	01823 274073
Fax number	01823 274080

Age group	11–16
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors who evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following:

- whether progress is equal for boys and girls, particularly those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities
- how far students' independent learning has developed since the previous inspection
- whether teaching is good or better
- the sustainability of leadership and management.

Inspectors gathered evidence on the day from discussions with staff, students and a governor. A range of school documentation was examined and first-hand evidence was gathered from observing students in lessons and elsewhere. Parents' views were gathered from questionnaires completed prior to the inspection. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but inspectors found no evidence to suggest that the school's own self-evaluation assessments are not justified, and these have been included in this report where appropriate.

Description of the school

This large comprehensive school has its first specialist status subject in sports and as a High Performing Specialist School, gained a second specialism in Applied Learning in 2008. The school has recently been granted permission to develop post-16 provision for sports courses from 2010. The proportion of students from backgrounds other than White British is very low, as is the number with native languages other than English. The local authority acknowledges that local policy differs from most others nationally, so the relatively low proportion of students recorded as having higher levels of learning difficulty and/or disabilities does not reflect the real picture of additional educational needs within the school. Awards held by the school include the Chartermark and the Investors in People award.

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. It maintains the many areas of excellence reported at the previous inspection. It has subsequently improved its performance highly successfully, raising standards, improving students' achievement and significantly strengthening the relatively weaker areas identified then. Key characteristics of the school are students' independence, self-confidence and excellent understanding of their own learning, all notable improvements from the previous report when these were weaker aspects. These strengths have created an outstanding level of personal development demonstrated by happy, articulate, courteous students who are proud of their school. Parents and others particularly appreciate the school's significant strengths and success in treating each of their children as an individual, and students emerge very well prepared with excellent skills to move into the next phase of their education. They fully understand how to keep safe, healthy and fit, attending regularly and enjoying enormously the rich range of opportunities which the school provides.

The headteacher's exceptional leadership has created an outstanding team of senior and middle leaders and managers who work very well together, recognising the improvements their work is generating. They and other staff are 'buzzing' with excitement about what is happening in the school. This very positive morale, coupled with excellent management across academic and pastoral networks, provides the school with outstanding capacity to improve further. New posts, for instance as School Improvement coordinators, provide more junior staff with interesting, wide-ranging opportunities to contribute to school development. All involved plan carefully and innovatively for future changes as staff move on. This approach has provided strong and sustainable management at all levels. Parents express overwhelming support for the school's academic and personal provision for their children's development. Students themselves judge the school as outstanding, valuing in particular the excellent relationships they share with leaders, teachers and other staff. The school sets high targets for its performance in all areas, so challenging academic targets have been exceeded of late, including those for specialist subjects. Leaders evaluate the school's effectiveness extremely critically, recognising strengths and accurately identifying imperfections where things could be better.

Standards on entry are somewhat above average, but cover a very wide range, with more students than usual at the top and lower ends of the ability spectrum. With its relatively low funding and shortage of space, this presents significant challenges which the school meets very successfully. Boys and girls achieve exceptionally well. Standards at Year 11 have been significantly above average for several years. Many more than usual achieve higher grades in English and mathematics amongst other high examination results. Standards in the current Year 11 are similarly high, with Year 10 better still. This is because Year 10 is the first year-group to benefit fully from successful initiatives designed to improve learning, which began when they first entered the school. All groups progress equally well, including those with high levels of learning difficulty. The school monitors the achievement of each individual very carefully, providing excellent, finely targeted guidance, support and challenge to ensure that each student does as well as they can. Achievement in information and communication technology was unsatisfactory at the last inspection but is now an area of strength, both as a subject and in its use across the curriculum.

Parents and students greatly appreciate the exceptionally rich curriculum available in lessons and well beyond. Sport contributes outstandingly well to this range, and the recent second specialism in Applied Learning now provides additional strengths in many new areas. The recent

successful bid to provide post-16 courses in a 'niche' area combining the two specialisms demonstrates some of the school's core strengths. Young apprenticeships in sports areas, the development of diplomas and other challenges form the focus of exciting new curriculum developments which are enthusing staff and many students alike. The house system provides excellent opportunities for healthy competition, fused with exceptional examples of collaboration and cooperation.

Teaching is outstanding, better than the school's relatively modest judgement. This is because the highly positive impact on students' learning has increased markedly this year, as the full effect of initiatives to involve students more effectively in the teaching and learning process has become evident. Teachers are very confident, prepared to take innovative risk in their teaching. They know that students themselves can take an increasing and proper degree of responsibility for their own learning because staff provide them with a range of 'tools' to do so. Students realise that staff 'go the extra mile', in the words of a parent, to help and support their studies and with any personal concerns. The ethos of 'no ceiling to achievement' is one which permeates the mentality of students and adults alike, so 'every person matters', as staff say, creating a school where all strive together for continuous improvement. Through their very rigorous monitoring, managers recognise that teaching is not quite consistent and provide high-quality programmes of professional development to improve individuals' effectiveness. Students are exceptionally clear about medium- and long-term targets, but some are less clear about shorter-term ones because a minority of day-to-day assessment does not always clarify these. Provision for those with additional or special needs is very effective, including that for students with very challenging requirements. It goes well beyond the concept of 'intervention' because it is personally tailored for each student, and amended through very effective, ongoing analysis and monitoring. This is so for abler students too, through the provision of AS level courses in some subjects for instance.

Parents are increasingly well involved in helping with their children's learning and the school works highly effectively with a broad range of other partners. This involves the local community in the school's work very successfully through the specialist subjects and in many others such as the arts. The promotion of community cohesion is likewise developing well at national and international levels, but the school recognises that, while it plans to do so, it does not meet the requirements for the audit and evaluation of its provision. Governance is otherwise excellent, providing valued challenge and support for all staff, highly effective evaluation of governors' own effectiveness, and sensitive concern for the development of new members and for the well-being of all individuals in the school. Excellent financial management enables the school to maintain its outstanding level of provision.

What the school should do to improve further

- Implement the planned audit and evaluation of the school's contribution to community cohesion to inform future developments in these areas.

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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
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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
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well being?	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	1
The standards ¹ reached by learners	1
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	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
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
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1

Leadership and management

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

18 June 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of The Castle School, Taunton TA1 5AU

It was a pleasure to visit your school when we came for the inspection but as we had such a very short time there, we could not visit many of your lessons or talk to many of you personally. I am writing to thank you for your welcome, however, and to tell you what we found out. In such a short inspection, we focus on investigating specific areas which we agree in advance with the school. In this case these related to the following points.

We looked at whether boys and girls, including those who have difficulties with learning, progress equally well and we found that they do. We investigated extensively how far your own understanding of learning, including the degree of independence you develop, has progressed since the last inspection, and we were very impressed with this. We found you to be self-confident, articulate students who have a very good understanding of what and how you learn. We also looked at whether the school was right in its judgement that teaching is good and found it to be better than that. We judge it to be outstanding, because of the excellent ways in which teachers and other staff create such exceptional learning. Such a high proportion of the teaching you receive is excellent or good, that your learning is significantly better than usual. We also investigated whether the exceptionally good leadership of the school is sustainable, and we found that it is. Senior staff and middle leaders are constantly thinking about future plans and how to make sure the school maintains all its strengths and improves them further.

In general we found your school to be outstanding in almost all of its work. School leaders fully realise that it is not perfect and have identified accurately what needs to be done to improve further, for instance to make all teaching as good as the very best, and have excellent plans to improve things. We found your personal development to be outstanding and were impressed by your highly positive attitudes, courtesy and maturity. As an improvement, we have asked leaders to put into practice their plans to audit and evaluate the school's contribution to community cohesion so that everything complies with requirements and to inform their future plans. You can help too by continuing with the excellent work you already do in the community.

Thank you again

Yours faithfully

Janet Simms

Lead inspector