

Alcester Grammar School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	125770
Local Authority	Warwickshire
Inspection number	328400
Inspection dates	4–5 March 2009
Reporting inspector	Champak Chauhan HMI

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 under pilot arrangements; it was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	Grammar (selective)
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	943
Sixth form	487
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Ann Snowdon
Headteacher	Mr Iain Blaikie
Date of previous school inspection	22–23 March 2006
School address	Birmingham Road Alcester Warwickshire B49 5ED
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Introduction

This pilot inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three Additional Inspectors. The inspectors visited 39 lessons and held meetings with governors, staff and groups of students. They observed the school's work and looked at a wide range of school documentation, including whole-school policies, improvement plans and minutes from governing body meetings. They also analysed 313 questionnaires returned by parents.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at the following:

- what actions the school is taking to ensure that girls' progress from ages 11 to 16 improves
- whether teaching and learning are sufficiently challenging for all groups of students
- whether marking and assessment procedures help all students to maximise their progress
- the impact of the specialism in science across the school.

Information about the school

Alcester Grammar is a mixed, selective school where students' attainment at age 11 is above average. Very few students are eligible for free school meals and very few speak English as an additional language. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is well below average. There is a relatively large non-selective sixth form which makes up about half the school. The school gained specialist status in performing arts in September 2004 and a further specialism in science in April 2008. It was awarded high performing specialist school status in 2007. A substantial building programme for science has been approved and construction on a new teaching block will begin in June 2009.

Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness

1

Capacity for sustained improvement

1

Main findings

Alcester Grammar School is an outstanding school. It is a harmonious and well ordered community, steeped in high expectations and mutual respect for all. Even though it is successful, there is an unrelenting drive to make the school even better and there is a constant pursuit for excellence. As one student commented, 'This school helps you to achieve your dreams.' Standards are exceptionally high but the school also rightly focuses on ensuring that students leave as well-rounded human beings. Students participate in a wide range of enrichment activities, from helping in local primary schools to visiting places as far afield as Russia, Honduras, India, China and Mozambique. The school's international links are a significant strength. Other inspection findings are listed below.

- The outstanding quality of teaching and learning; staff work hard, are well qualified and they ensure that all students do their best.
- The curriculum is rich and varied, and it offers an excellent range of learning experiences.
- Leadership and management are outstanding. Senior leaders have an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and how it needs to develop further. This is based on rigorous systems for gathering and analysing relevant data, and taking any necessary actions.
- The school has continued to build upon its strengths over recent years and it has maintained its outstanding performance. Priorities for further improvement are appropriate and they are known and understood by all. Staff value the approaches taken by senior leaders and morale is high. They rightly believe that opportunities for professional development are outstanding. As a result of these factors, the school's capacity for sustained improvement is outstanding.
- There is some exemplary marking of students' work in some subjects but this is not consistent across departments and between teachers, especially in the main school.
- The school promotes community cohesion generally well. Its links with the local community are outstanding. However, the school has not yet adopted an explicit strategy for ensuring that it prepares all students for life in a culturally and ethnically diverse society.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality and consistency of marking at Key Stages 3 and 4 by ensuring that:
 - the exemplary practice which already exists within the school is more widely shared
 - students are regularly set written targets for improvement
 - students are routinely consulted on how the marking of their work will best help them to make even better progress.
- The school should provide further opportunities for students to appreciate the benefits of living in an ethnically and culturally diverse society by ensuring that:
 - an explicit whole-school strategy for this is developed
 - all subjects carry out an audit and identify opportunities of how they can incorporate this aspect within their work
 - there is greater learning about living and working in the urban areas of the United Kingdom.

How good is the overall outcome for individuals and groups of students?

1

Standards in national tests and examinations are significantly above national averages. The school achieved its best ever results in the national tests at age 14 in 2008. At age 16, all students gained at least five grades A* to C at GCSE, with 70% attaining grades A* to A. In the sixth form, at AS and A level, slightly more than half the students gained grades A and B. Students enjoy their learning, their motivation is extremely high and their achievement outstanding. Other features of students' learning and performance in lessons include:

- generally excellent progress; students sustain their concentration on the activities set, they work well in groups and with adults, and have a thirst for learning
- no significant variation in the progress of boys and girls, or between different groups of students
- highly developed independent skills for learning, and excellent skills in speaking and listening
- students' high expectations of themselves and their constant desire to do even better
- students' excellent progress in the school's second specialism of science because of the high quality of teaching and learning that they experience.

These are the grades for students' outcomes

Students' attainment ¹	1
The quality of students' learning and their progress	1
The quality of learning for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and their progress	1
How well do students achieve and enjoy their learning?	1

¹ Grades for attainment are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; 4 is low

To what extent do students feel safe?	1
How well do students behave?	1
To what extent do students adopt healthy lifestyles?	1
To what extent do students contribute to the school and wider community?	1
Students' attendance	1
How well do students develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being?	1
What is the extent of students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development?	1

The quality of the school's work

The high quality of teaching and learning ensures that all students are consistently challenged and inspired. Features of the teaching and learning include the following:

- excellent subject knowledge of the teachers which extends the students' knowledge and understanding
- brisk questioning at the start of lessons which consolidates previous learning
- very good dialogue with students and excellent oral feedback
- excellent use of time with well structured and relevant activities
- teachers having realistically high expectations of the students and constantly challenging them to do their best; as one student commented, 'I love lessons – teachers get the best out of you'
- excellent relationships between staff and students, leading to an enjoyment of learning and teaching
- very good and efficient use of new technology across subjects, including the effective use of the interactive whiteboard.

The high quality of teaching and learning is also supported by:

- rigorous systems for tracking students' progress in subjects and taking rapid action in cases of underachievement
- a broad and rich range of curricular experiences for all ages; this is complemented by an outstanding range of extra-curricular experiences in which almost all students participate
- the school's specialisms in performing arts and science which have had a major impact in enhancing students' learning experiences and have led to higher standards
- the creative ethos; the performing arts pervade the school and students achieve very high standards
- the science department; it has broadened the range of courses it offers; it trains students to work in local primary schools and is training teachers across the school to improve their practice
- excellent support, guidance and care for all students; the school is acutely aware of the needs of all students through its philosophy of ensuring that no child 'becomes invisible'.

There is some exemplary marking of students' work in some subjects, for example in the sixth form, but this is not consistent across departments and between teachers,

particularly at Key Stages 3 and 4.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

High quality teaching and purposeful learning	1
Effective assessment	1
An appropriate curriculum which meets students' needs, including, where relevant, provision through partnership with other organisations	1
Support, guidance and care	1

How effective are leadership and management?

There exists a hunger for innovation and change throughout the school, grounded in the belief that all students should have a passion for learning and should learn from a wide variety of experiences. This ethos, driven by the headteacher's calm and authoritative leadership, is pervasive and shared by all. Particularly effective features of leadership and management are listed below.

- Senior leaders complement each other well and they work hard as a team; they have identified appropriate priorities after a careful and accurate evaluation of the school.
- There is a rigorous system of checking the school's work which involves all middle leaders and which regularly takes into account the views of students, parents and carers, and other partner organisations.
- Excellent procedures for safeguarding students were seen at the time of the inspection; records were well kept and other procedures, including risk assessments, were robust.

Senior leaders are aware that the progress of girls between ages 11 and 16 has lagged slightly behind that of boys in the recent past. However, they rightly believe this is no longer an issue. The school has adopted relevant policies on promoting equality of opportunity and tackling discrimination. It monitors test and examination results by ethnicity and gender, is aware of any trends in these and takes action if necessary. However, the school has not yet undertaken an evaluation of the impact of its policies on equal opportunities, as required. Similarly, there is more work to do relating to community cohesion because the school has not adopted an explicit strategy for preparing all students for life in an ethically and culturally diverse society. However, it has developed some exceptional work in promoting students' global understanding and in linking with the local community.

These are the grades for leadership and management

Communicating ambition and driving improvement	1
Promoting equality of opportunity and tackling discrimination	2
Ensuring that safeguarding procedures are effective	1
Ensuring that the governing body provides effective challenge and support so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities are met	2

Promoting the school's relationship with parents and carers, including their involvement in decision-making about matters relating to learning and well-being	1
Developing partnerships with other providers, organisations and services	1
Ensuring the school contributes to community cohesion	2
Deploying resources to achieve value for money	1

Sixth form

- Standards are exceptionally and consistently high in almost all subjects.
- Students make excellent progress in lessons. Current school data indicate that students are exceeding the targets set for them.
- Retention rates are excellent and almost all students complete their courses.
- Sixth formers are mature young adults and play an important part in the life of the school, for example by supporting younger students.
- Teaching and learning are of high quality. The curriculum is broad and offers an excellent range of learning experiences. Careful timetabling ensures that any student can study almost any combination of subjects.
- A new and dynamic sixth form team is driving forward ambitious plans for further improvement. Careful analysis of need has led to well targeted action, for example on improving students' progress through rigorous monitoring and improving communal facilities, both of which are valued by the students.
- There are strong links with other partners and parents.

Outcomes for students in the sixth form	1
The quality of provision in the sixth form	1
Leadership and management of the sixth form	1
The overall effectiveness of the sixth form	1

Views of parents and carers

An overwhelming majority of parents are very supportive of the school and all it does for their children. One parent commented, 'I am grateful for all that the school and staff do to help the pupils develop into independent young men and women.' Another stated, 'I am delighted with the all-round education provided by the school. Pastoral care is exemplary.' A few parents were not happy with some aspects of school. These included limited choices for healthy eating in the canteen, not enough help for parents to support their children's learning and a lack of information on students' progress, especially at Key Stage 3. Inspectors did not find evidence to support these views.

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. In 2007/8, 15% of schools were judged to be outstanding.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well. In 2007/8, 49% of schools were judged good.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils. In 2007/8, 32% of schools were judged satisfactory.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves. In 2007/8, 5% of schools were judged inadequate.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.
Achievement:	an overall measure of the pupils' success in their academic learning. The term combines attainment and progress. Pupils might make good progress, for example, but if their attainment remains low, inspectors may judge that their achievement is only satisfactory.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.



6 March 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Alcester Grammar School, Alcester, B49 5ED

Thank you for your warm welcome when we visited your school. We were particularly impressed by your kindness and offering to help us without being asked. Thank you for the time and trouble you took to talk with us. Below is a summary of what we thought of your school.

- Alcester Grammar School is an outstanding school.
- You are taught exceptionally well by hard-working staff and you achieve standards that are outstanding.
- Many of you and your parents said that you enjoy coming to school. This is reflected in your high rates of attendance. You are well developed as mature young adults, with a strong sense of right and wrong. Your attitudes and behaviour are outstanding.
- The curriculum is excellent and you are offered a rich and rewarding range of learning experiences, both within and outside the school.
- The support, guidance and care you are given are outstanding.
- The leadership and management of the school are outstanding. Senior leaders and other staff are constantly striving to make the school an even better place for you.
- There is some excellent marking by some teachers but this practice needs to be more widely shared. Please continue to discuss your work with your teachers so that the marking will help you make even better progress.
- Even though you are offered excellent opportunities to broaden your learning, the school needs to do more to ensure that you learn about living and working in our ethnically and culturally diverse society.

I hope many of you will read the full inspection report. Once again, many thanks for the warmth of your welcome to us.

I wish you all the best for your future.

Mr C Chauhan
Her Majesty's Inspector

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