

Alsager School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	111404
Local Authority	Cheshire East
Inspection number	337681
Inspection dates	23–24 September 2009
Reporting inspector	Clive Moss HMI

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	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1343
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	233
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Ian White
Headteacher	Mr D Black
Date of previous school inspection	1 October 2006
School address	Hassall Road Alsager Stoke-on-Trent ST7 2HR
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four additional inspectors. The inspectors visited 26 lessons, and held meetings with governors, staff and groups of students. They observed the school's work, and looked at school data on students' performance, records of the support provided to students and their progress, school plans, policies and procedures, including health and safety and risk assessments, 129 questionnaires completed by parents and carers, and questionnaires completed by staff and students.

- the rate of progress made by students as demonstrated in lessons, students' work and school records
- the rigour and effectiveness of the school's work to drive improvement
- the level of challenge to students in lessons
- the effectiveness of the school's support for students at risk of underachieving.

Information about the school

The school is much larger than average. The proportions of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities, and from minority ethnic groups, are very low. The school serves a relatively advantaged population with the proportion of students eligible for free school meals below the national average, although there has been a slight increase since the last inspection. A very low proportion of students enters and leaves the school at times other than the usual. The school is a specialist business and enterprise college and is designated as a high-performing specialist school. As a result, it is also designated as a training school and a 'leading edge' school. There have been significant changes at the school since the last inspection and the school now has Foundation status. It is also part of a shared trust with local primary schools.

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

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?

2

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

2

Main findings

Alsager School provides a good education for its students. It has some outstanding features. Students make good progress and reach high standards of attainment. They enjoy their learning. This is shown in their responses in lessons, the comments they made to inspectors, and in surveys carried out by the school and for the inspection. Attendance is good and levels of persistent absence are particularly low.

The quality of teaching is good. Students say that lessons are generally enjoyable. There have been significant improvements in the quality of teaching since the last inspection as a result of a determined approach to refine the use of data. As a result, teachers have a more precise view of students' performance and are using the information increasingly to provide students with an appropriate level of challenge. As the best practice in teachers' use of assessment to improve students' learning is not used consistently in all lessons, students are not always entirely clear about what they need to do to succeed.

Students are provided with good opportunities to develop skills and understanding relevant to their future economic well-being, because of the school's focus on its specialisms. The broad and balanced curriculum provided by the school is highly effective in securing students' interest, motivation and involvement. This is particularly true of the Participate, Innovate, Negotiate and Communicate (PINC) initiative and activities that underpin and influence much of the school's work, and, quite literally, colour much of the school's ways of working, as can be seen from the identification badges provided to visitors. The school has also put in place a three-year Key Stage 4 that has enabled it to meet the different needs of students very well. A range of accreditation and qualifications is offered in some subjects, along with many opportunities for extended work placements and to study partly at local colleges, to suit the needs of students with different aptitudes and abilities. The curriculum is augmented by rich and popular extra-curricular activities, but while there are, for example, longstanding links with schools in Africa, generally, students have insufficient opportunities to experience more diverse communities and cultures.

It is the school's stated mission to be 'An achieving school: a caring community'. Relationships between students at the school and with the staff are very good. Students are cared for, guided and supported very well. The school provides thorough and highly personalised support to students, particularly those who need additional help or who may be at risk of disengaging from their education, making very effective use of a wide range of external services and agencies. Students are very aware of how they can get help of any kind, if they need it, and are very confident that their needs will be met and their concerns will be responded to. As a result, they feel safe and happy at the school.

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The staff ensure that the school provides a calm and orderly environment for learning. The school's capacity for further improvement is good. The headteacher and senior staff have shown determination to bring about improvements and they enjoy the support of well-motivated staff. They have made good progress in tackling the areas for improvement reported at the last inspection. Senior leaders identify the school's strengths and the areas needing improvement accurately. Governors have played a key role in bringing about the sharper overview of students' performance at the school that is now evident and was an area for improvement at the last inspection. Initial data from the 2009 GCSE and other examinations shows that there has been a significant improvement in standards of attainment, which, although high, were lower in 2008 and the preceding year.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure more consistent use of the best practice evident at the school in assessing students' learning needs during lessons, to provide more focused and targeted approaches for students, so that they are clear about what they need to do to succeed.
- Provide more opportunities for all students to gain experience of communities that are more ethnically, religiously and socially diverse than their own, with a view to providing the first of such experiences in the current academic year.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils**2**

Examination results are typically well above average. Students are well motivated towards learning and they make good progress. There are no significant differences in the progress made by different groups of students at the school, regardless of background and including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

Students behave well in lessons and around the school, and say that the school deals with occasional misbehaviour effectively. As a result, the number of instances of misbehaviour recorded by the school is reducing. Exclusions of students are rare and the number is reducing, with only one permanent exclusion since 2007. Students are cheerful, polite, helpful to each other and confident when dealing with visitors to the school. Students say there is little bullying, although this remains a concern to a small minority of parents and carers. Students show a good awareness of and sensitivity to the needs of others. This was illustrated well during the inspection, when a young student who has recently become ill needed care and attention in the playground. That student was assisted immediately by classmates who have been trained in how to place someone in the recovery position precisely in order to be able to help the student concerned, and others who knew to call immediately for the school's medical coordinator.

Students take advantage of good opportunities to be involved in the life of the school and the local community. There are good links with the local Youth Council and students participate in the Alsager Fair Trade Town initiative. Students are consulted about

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improvements to the school and their views are acted upon as, for example, when a gate was erected at one entrance to the site. Students are also able to make a valuable contribution to the school and wider community, by acting as PINC advisers. PINC advisers consult with the other students and ensure that all are involved developing the PINC programme.

Students demonstrate good knowledge about how to stay safe and healthy. There is good provision to develop students' financial awareness and understanding which is valued by them. Good levels of attendance and high levels of attainment, along with the self-confidence they demonstrate, mean that students are well prepared for further study and adult life. Discussions with students revealed, however, various stereotypical views of other cultures.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	1
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment ¹	1
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	2
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	2
The extent to which pupils feel safe	2
Pupils' behaviour	2
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	2
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attendance ¹	2
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2

How effective is the provision?

In the best teaching seen at the school, teachers used data on students' performance well to provide guidance to students and help them make good progress. In these lessons, teachers captured students' interest immediately and sustained it by using a

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low.

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variety of activities and giving clear guidance to students about what they needed to do to improve their work. Such practice is not yet used consistently, however, or sufficiently in all lessons. Teachers use new technologies to aid students' learning to increasingly good effect. Teaching assistants provide good support in lessons and enable students with special educational needs and/or disabilities to make similarly good progress to their peers.

The PINC initiative makes an outstanding contribution to students' social, moral, spiritual and cultural development. Students relish opportunities to try different challenges, whether through activities such as 'The Apprentice', African drumming, 'Rock School', or the wide variety of well-supported sports activities. The three-year Key Stage 4 broadens and enriches the experience of students, increasing their enjoyment of the subjects they study and enabling them to pursue personal interests to a greater extent than previously, thereby contributing to the good progress they make. The opportunity to experience study at a college has been very successful in ensuring that those students who do so go on into further education and training. The variety offered by the curriculum has contributed to students' positive attitudes towards education and training, as demonstrated by the extremely low number of students subsequently not in education, employment or training, and to the school's ability to avoid excluding a number of students who might otherwise have been excluded.

Individual students and their needs are well known to the staff, including the headteacher. Students praised the excellent pastoral support provided by the college managers and form tutors. Teachers are provided with high-quality information about students' special educational needs and/or disabilities, of which they make good use in preparing lessons. The work of the school's Inclusion Centre is exemplary and offers excellent support for learning and behaviour to all students throughout the day. The school pays close attention to the particular needs of students at times of transition into, through and out of the school, and ensures that students make well-grounded choices, assisted by full-time, on-site support from the Connexions service.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	2
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	2
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	1
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

How effective are leadership and management?

Governors, senior leaders and middle managers have developed a clear and unequivocal ambition for the continued improvement of the school, centred on raising students' achievement. This ambition is reflected well in carefully constructed development plans,

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although the plans do not always refer directly to the ambitious targets set by the school. Senior leaders have put in place robust systems for setting targets and tracking progress towards them. Provisional data for 2009 indicates that these systems have enabled the school to reverse declines in examination results in 2007 and 2008. The systems have also contributed to improvements in teaching and learning, although the impact is not yet apparent consistently in all lessons. Governors have provided strong and robust challenge to the school to raise attainment. All regulations for safeguarding students are met and the arrangements for doing so are in line with government requirements. The arrangements for the recruitment of staff are robust.

The school demonstrates a particularly strong commitment to working in partnership with other schools and colleges, locally and more widely, as well as with a variety of other services and agencies. A particularly noteworthy example is a link with a special school to provide support for a student at Alsager who has complex needs. These partnerships make a strong contribution to students' learning and well-being. The school works well to promote equal opportunities for students and has, for example, reduced differences in the achievement of different groups. Partnerships are also at the centre of the school's ambition to place itself at the heart of its local community. The school is itself a very cohesive community and has strong links with the immediate area, but there are currently not sufficient opportunities for all students to gain experience of more diverse communities. The school pays close attention to the views of parents and carers, and students, and undertakes detailed, independent surveys of their views.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	2
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	2
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	2
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	2
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	2
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	3
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	2
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	2

Sixth form

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

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Students make satisfactory progress from their differing starting points in the sixth form and reach broadly average standards of attainment. The school's data on provisional results for 2009 indicate improved attainment compared with previous years. A very high proportion of students complete their chosen courses and all go on to further education, training or employment, many into higher education. The personal development and well-being of students is good. They comport themselves as mature and reflective young people, with a balanced approach to life and the world around them. A programme of additional activities and citizenship studies supports students in developing a good understanding of how to live healthily and stay safe. Students make a good contribution to the school community, taking on a variety of responsibilities, including acting as 'study buddies' for younger students with special educational needs and/or disabilities, and more broadly, for example through charitable acts.

Data on students' progress has been used well to bring improvements in the quality of teaching, which is good overall. The best lessons seen in the sixth form provided a good level of challenge to students but this was not consistent across all lessons. The curriculum is adapted well to the needs of those students who join the sixth form. A broad range of additional activities contributes well both to students' personal development and their enjoyment of life at the sixth form. Regular monitoring and evaluation of students' progress leads to effective interventions with students who may be underachieving. Staff responsible for leadership and management of the sixth form are focused on ensuring that students remain on track to succeed. They ensure smooth transitions for students into the sixth form and that they continue to receive good advice and support.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	2
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	2
The quality of provision in the sixth form	2
Leadership and management of the sixth form	2

Views of parents and carers

Parents and carers are very supportive of the school and are happy with their children's experience. Most think that their children enjoy school, their children are kept safe and the teaching is good. A minority of parents and carers think that the school does not do enough to help them support their children's learning and that the school does not help their children to live a healthy lifestyle, although inspectors found that students had a good awareness of how to do so and many take part in physical and sporting activities.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at The Armthorpe School to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school.

The inspection team received 129 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 1343 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	122	43	156	54	2	1	3	1
The school keeps my child safe	93	32	182	63	10	3	0	0
The school informs me about my child's progress	75	26	169	60	27	10	4	1
My child is making enough progress at this school	111	40	144	51	14	5	2	1
The teaching is good at this school	100	36	159	57	8	3	2	1
The school helps me to support my child's learning	65	23	152	55	47	17	7	3
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	49	17	168	59	56	20	4	1
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	81	31	146	56	10	4	0	0
The school meets my child's particular needs	86	31	172	61	10	4	3	1
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	77	28	144	53	23	8	6	2
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	53	20	160	61	24	9	3	1
The school is led and managed effectively	87	31	164	59	19	7	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	117	41	143	51	16	6	0	0

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
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.

Overall effectiveness of schools inspected between September 2007 and July 2008

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	39	58	3	0
Primary schools	13	50	33	4
Secondary schools	17	40	34	9
Sixth forms	18	43	37	2
Special schools	26	54	18	2
Pupil referral units	7	55	30	7
All schools	15	49	32	5

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above were reported in The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2007/08.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100. Secondary school figures include those that have sixth forms, and sixth form figures include only the data specifically for sixth form inspection judgements.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
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.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement. ■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils. ■ The quality of teaching. ■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupil's needs, including where relevant, through partnerships. ■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
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.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



Inspection of Alsager School, Alsager, ST7 2HR

Thank you for talking to my colleagues and me and making us welcome when we visited your school recently. We spoke with you in lessons, around the school and in groups, looked at your work, read the results of questionnaires filled in by you, and your parents and carers, and spoke with some of your teachers. Here is a summary of our main findings, which I hope will be of interest to you.

- Alsager School provides you with a good education.
- You make good progress from your starting points when you join the school and the standards you reach by the end of Key Stage 4 are high.
- Your attendance is good.
- You behave well and you told us that there is little bullying. You told us also that you think bullying and other misbehaviour is dealt with by the school well.
- Most of your parents and carers support the school and many think it is doing a good job, but some of them would like to get more information from the school to help support you with your learning.
- The school provides a very wide range of subjects for you to study and other activities that you find very interesting and are helping you to learn.
- The school provides you with excellent care, support and guidance, including those of you who need additional help. You told us how much you value the help you get from the college managers and your form tutors.
- The headteacher and the staff at the school have a good understanding of what needs to be done to make things even better.

I have asked the headteacher and the staff to make sure all lessons provide you with a clear understanding of how well you are doing and what is needed to help you do better. I have asked them also to provide you with more opportunities to experience and understand different communities to your own. Many of you, I know, already make a very important contribution to the school and I am sure all of you will want to do everything you can to support the staff in making Alsager School better still.

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