

The Astley Cooper School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117552
Local Authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	339032
Inspection dates	16-17 September 2009
Reporting inspector	David Jones HMI

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Community
Age range of students	11-18
Gender of students	Mixed
Gender of students in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of students on the school roll	586
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	141
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Acting Chair	Mr R Tucker
Headteacher	Mrs Anne Smithers
Date of previous school inspection	7 February 2007
School address	St Agnells Lane Hemel Hempstead HP2 7HL
Telephone number	01442 394141
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Age group	11-18
Inspection date(s)	16-17 September 2009
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four additional inspectors. The inspectors visited 36 lessons, and held meetings with nominated staff, students, members of the governing body and a representative of the local authority. They observed the school's work, reviewed student, parental, and staff questionnaires, looked at documentation including improvement plans, the analysis and tracking of students' progress, records of classroom observations, attendance and exclusion data, and the minutes of governing body meetings. The school was invited to provide a nominee to join inspectors in many aspects of this work and the headteacher accepted this responsibility. Inspectors analysed the responses received from 242 parental questionnaires, 130 completed by the students and 46 issued to the staff.

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

- The quality of teaching and learning.
- Standards and achievement.
- Attendance.
- Safeguarding and care.

Information about the school

The school is smaller than average; the students' social and economic backgrounds vary. The proportion known to be eligible for free school meals is above the national average. The numbers of girls and boys in each year group varies annually. The number of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is well below the national figure and the proportion of those whose first language is not English is low.

The proportion of students registered by the school as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities is above average, although the proportion of students with a statement of special educational needs is in line with the national figure. There are a small number of looked after children in the school.

The school has been granted specialist status in the visual and performing arts, it has also received the following national accreditations: Investors in People, Artsmark Gold, Sportsmark, the Football Association Charter Standard, and the Economics, Business and Enterprise Association (EBEA) Quality Mark. The school is part of a sixth form consortium of three local 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?

3

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

3

Main findings

The school provides a satisfactory standard of education for its students; the care, welfare and guidance are good. Outcomes for individuals and groups are broadly satisfactory and on a rising trend. Standards and achievement have improved significantly and the school has exceeded the National Challenge requirements although the proportion of students obtaining the highest grades at GCSE and in the sixth form remains variable. Equality of opportunity is good; the small numbers of students from a variety of minority ethnic backgrounds do at least as well as their peers. Those students who find learning difficult generally meet their targets. Sixth form provision is satisfactory, numbers of students are rising and the educational value added is above the local authority average.

Overall, teaching is satisfactory and just over half the lessons seen were good or better; there are no significant inadequacies in particular subjects or across year groups. The monitoring and evaluation of teaching needs to be more consistent; although the school's self-evaluation of this area was more positive than that of the inspection team, the proportion of lessons judged to be good or better is clearly having an impact on the quality of learning and the improvement in standards evident in the 2009 examination results.

Behaviour has improved since the last inspection and the new behaviour management system received positive responses in the parents' and students' inspection questionnaires. Although the school has worked hard and to some effect, to improve attendance, this remains inadequate because a number of recalcitrant parents are failing to meet their legal responsibilities to ensure their child attends school on a regular basis. The care, welfare and guidance provided are good; parents and students spoke positively about the nature of the individual support available. Governance is satisfactory but nearly half of the staff responses to the inspection questionnaire expressed the view that governors could be more effective at challenging the school. The leadership team has done well to secure the improvement in standards and achievement attained in the last two years; increasingly effective support is being provided by an education improvement partnership arranged by the local authority with a high performing local school. The improvements secured in outcomes, behaviour and provision are significant and confirm the school's satisfactory capacity to improve further.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

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- Maintain the trend of improvement secured in the 2009 results by:
 - focussing teaching on learning outcomes
 - ensuring the higher achieving students secure the highest grades at both GCSE and in the sixth form.
- Improve the monitoring and evaluation of teaching by further developing the role of the senior staff team to ensure consistency of judgment.
- Strengthen the governing body's contribution to the monitoring and evaluation of the work of the school.
- Continue to improve the rate of attendance by targeting vulnerable students early and by planning a relevant range of learning opportunities.

About 40% of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory may receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of students

3

Attainment on entry has varied significantly in the last five years. Standards of attainment are improving. The proportion of students obtaining five higher grade GCSE including English and mathematics is broadly in line with the national average for the first time in three years. The GCSE results secured by the girls were stronger than those obtained by the boys and the performance of students from minority ethnic backgrounds was generally more positive than that of their White British peers. Vulnerable students are increasingly successful and most of those who find learning difficult achieve or exceed their targets. Results in English and mathematics continue the trend of improvement established in 2008. The results secured in the school's specialist arts area show significant improvement in the new BTEC courses, although GCSE outcomes in some subjects were disappointing.

The students' current learning and performance in the classroom mirrors the improvements established in the most recent examination results. Lesson outcomes are strongest where there is a clear focus on what the students are expected to learn and students respond well to this challenge. In an outstanding Year 10 mathematics lesson almost all students demonstrated the ability to work at the higher GCSE levels because of the pace and challenge provided in the lesson.

Overall, the students' enjoyment and achievement is satisfactory, with strengths evident in individual achievement, English and mathematics outcomes and in the improvement noted in classroom behaviour. Inspectors found students to be positive on 'feeling safe' and observed good procedures to support their view. A good range of healthy school meals were available although a number of parents expressed concern at the cost in the current financial climate. The proportion of students engaged in sport and the school's support for healthy life styles is satisfactory. Overall, the range of work place and other skills the students develop towards their future economic well-being are satisfactory. Significant improvement has been

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secured in the students' key skills and the proportion of students who leave school to secure places in employment, further education and/or training is above average.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	3
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment ¹	3
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	3
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	3
The extent to which pupils feel safe	2
Pupils' behaviour	3
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	3
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	3
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attendance ¹	4
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	3

How effective is the provision?

The quality of teaching has improved since the last inspection. Staff subject knowledge is secure and lessons often build systematically on previous learning. As a result, students make at least satisfactory progress in almost all lessons. Appropriate learning objectives are identified and shared with students so they usually have a clear understanding of what they are learning and what they should do. Sometimes, because the end of the lesson is not used effectively, opportunities are missed to consolidate learning and confirm individual progress.

Adequate use is made of resources to support learning. Support from other adults is effectively deployed and this often enhances the progress of those who have special educational needs or who find learning more difficult than most. Teachers use the newly introduced behaviour policy effectively and emphasise the school's high expectations. Very rarely do instances of unsatisfactory behaviour affect the flow of learning.

In the best lessons, tasks and questioning are demanding and students respond positively to the pace of the lesson and the staffs' high expectations of what they can achieve. A variety of teaching methods are used which reflect the students' preferred

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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learning styles and engage their interest. In these lessons, staff use the information gained from regular and accurate assessments to plan work which meets the needs of all abilities within the class. Through good marking of students' work and effective discussion in lessons, the students are aware of what they need to do to improve. However, where there are inconsistencies in the pace and challenge of some lessons, the quality of marking is often variable as well. In these lessons, students do not always find the teachers' comments useful and higher achieving students note that their targets lack challenge.

The range of vocational courses provided continues to expand, notably in the arts specialist subjects and this is having a positive effect on standards. The school has worked hard to redress the gaps in design technology provision identified in the last report.

The care, guidance and support provided are good and the large majority of parents value the support for their children's learning. Most students believe staff care and support them effectively. Guidance and transition arrangements 14-16, are appreciated by students who value the curriculum opportunities available within the partnership schools.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	3
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	3
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	3
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	2

How effective are leadership and management?

The headteacher and her strategic leadership group have driven improvement and galvanised the ambition of staff and students to secure the enhancement of provision that has seen a notable rise in standards. The appointment of staff as progress leaders is developing into an effective strategy to focus guidance, monitor progress and support learning.

The monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning are satisfactory and improving. There is a formal cycle in place of observing lessons and evaluating students' work, which generally helps identify strengths in the classroom and key areas for improvement. This process is not sufficiently systematic because of the wide variety of staff involved and the variation in the quality of analysis provided. Lesson observations do not always record areas for improvement or show a clear emphasis on learning outcomes. However, senior staff were invited to join the inspection team in the observation of teaching and the formal evaluation of this

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process confirmed the accuracy of senior managers' judgement. Community cohesion is effective within the school and local community context but only a partial review of this issue has been completed and the wider contexts have not been considered.

Governance is broadly satisfactory although an acting chair of governors is in post; the new chair of governors will need to challenge and support senior staff more effectively. The governing body will need to be able to engage with the good educational improvement partnership to complete the transition underway at Astley Cooper.

The 14-19 partnership with two other local specialist schools has helped improve post 16 provision , however, the full range of curriculum partnership developments has yet to be explored. The promotion of equal opportunities at every level is good and safeguarding procedures meet all current government requirements. The deployment of resources and value for money secured is satisfactory.

These are the grades for leadership and management

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

Sixth form

Academic outcomes are improving and the number of students joining the sixth form is at an all-time high. Students make above average progress 16-19 and value the range of academic and vocational courses available through the sixth form partnership arrangements. However, some students expressed doubts as to whether the integration of the three sixth forms was as effective as possible. The proportion of students achieving their target grades is rising but greater precision is required in target setting and individual academic monitoring. Students appreciate the improvement in transition arrangements on entry and to further education and they value the personal support from their tutors and head of sixth form. The leadership

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of the sixth form is satisfactory, but a more rigorous evaluation of student progress is needed.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	3
Taking into account:	3
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	3
The quality of provision in the sixth form	3
Leadership and management of the sixth form	3

Views of parents and carers

Most parents are supportive of the school, although a few parents expressed some concerns about the extent to which supply staff were used during the last academic year. However, most are pleased with the improvements in behaviour and standards secured in the last year. Parents report that teachers know the students well, work to ensure they achieve their potential and that the students are happy at school.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of students registered at Astley Cooper 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 12 statements about the school.

The inspection team received 242 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 585 students registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	70	29	145	60	22	9	2	1
The school keeps my child safe	58	24	158	66	22	9	2	1
The school informs me about my child's progress	65	27	138	57	34	14	2	1
My child is making enough progress at this school	43	18	149	62	31	13	14	6
The teaching is good at this school	53	22	143	59	24	10	11	4
The school helps me to support my child's learning	45	19	135	66	41	17	12	5
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	38	16	152	63	34	14	12	5
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)	48	20	145	60	24	10	24	10
The school meets my child's particular needs	36	15	167	69	24	10	12	5
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	33	16	133	55	36	15	7	3
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	12	5	174	72	24	10	19	8
The school is led and managed effectively	25	11	172	71	9	4	17	7
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	48	20	152	63	27	12	5	2

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 all 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

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 pupils' 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.



21 September 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Astley Cooper School, Hemel Hempstead, HP2 7HL

As you know, your school was inspected recently and this letter is to tell you about the results of the inspection. Firstly, I would like to thank you for your openness, friendliness and courtesy during our visit. The inspectors enjoyed meeting you and appreciated your comments and opinions. Astley Cooper is a friendly school where staff know you well and many of you noted in the pupil questionnaire how staff care for and support you.

The inspectors found that the quality of provision was satisfactory and we agree with you that care, support and guidance are good. The standard of your work has improved in the last two years and increasing numbers of you achieve well. Overall, your standards and achievement are satisfactory.

I have asked the headteacher to:

- Maintain the trend of improvement secured in the 2009 results by:
focussing teaching on what you need to learn and by ensuring you achieve the highest grades possible at GCSE and in the sixth form.
- Improve the monitoring and evaluation of teaching.
- Strengthen the governor's role as a critical friend.
- Continue to improve the rate of attendance.

I look forward to hearing about your future success.

Yours faithfully

David Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector

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