

Sands School

Independent school inspection report

DCSF registration number	878/6042
Unique Reference Number (URN)	113619
Inspection number	344589
Inspection dates	16–17 March 2010
Reporting inspector	John Seal HMI

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Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester
M2 7LA

T: 08456 404040
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
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Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by Ofsted under Section 162A¹ of the Education Act 2002, as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005², the purpose of which is to advise the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

Information about the school

Sands School is an independent secondary day school situated in the town of Ashburton, in Devon, in a large 19th-century town house. It is registered for 81 students aged from 11 to 17. Currently, there are 68 full-time students on roll. Most of the students are White British and have English as their first language. There are two students who have statements of special educational needs. Although most places are privately funded, there are a small number funded by a charitable trust or by local authorities. This is the second Ofsted inspection since the school opened in 1987, the last inspection taking place in May 2007. The school is a charitable trust. Its aims are based on the philosophy of democratic schooling: 'which puts students' social and emotional development at the heart of learning, to equip each young person to be an effective and contributing member of a free democratic society'. Consequently, the day-to-day running of the school and key decision making processes are made by the School Meeting which consists of all staff and students currently in the school.

Evaluation of the school

Sands School provides a good quality of education with some outstanding features. The school meets all of the regulatory requirements including those for safeguarding. This is a significant improvement since the last inspection. There are good arrangements to ensure students' welfare, health and safety. Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding, as is their behaviour. The school's curriculum is good and students make good progress as a result of the good teaching and assessment.

Quality of education

The quality of education is good, as is the curriculum, which is broad and balanced. The younger students have core skills in English, mathematics, science and physical activity. By the time the students start Key Stage 4, most of them are encouraged to choose a range of GCSE subjects and the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (LAMDA) drama certificate. The school arranges for older students to receive

¹ www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2002/ukpga_20020032_en_14#pt10-ch1-pb4-l1g162

² www.opsi.gov.uk/ACTS/acts2005/ukpga_20050018_en_15#sch8

suitable careers advice and education from a visiting Connexions adviser. All subjects have clear schemes of work which are developed by different subject teachers. There are good plans to support the teaching of personal, social and health education both as a discrete subject and through other subjects. Information and communication technology (ICT) has improved since the last inspection. Students now have independent access to a recently upgraded suite to support their research and learning in addition to timetabled lessons. Basic skills of literacy and numeracy are taught very well. The curriculum is creatively enhanced, for example there are opportunities for woodwork lessons, cooking the school meals, learning French and playing musical instruments. Students can also choose from a range of less conventional classes which include yoga and Tai Chi. There are exciting and adventurous enrichment activities which include camps in Cornwall and local visits to the theatre and art exhibitions. Visitors to the school have included a blacksmith and students from European schools.

Teaching and assessment have improved since the last inspection and are now good. A high proportion of the lessons are generally good in quality, and there are examples of outstanding teaching, which include art and drama. Teachers and students plan interesting activities which aim to provide a range of opportunities for developing communication skills. As a result, students make good progress and most achieve a good range of GCSE results and LAMDA advanced passes by the time they leave. Students' motivation to learn is strong and in the best lessons, teachers tap into this through enabling students to start lessons promptly with short but informative briefings or reminders. There are good opportunities for students to discuss their learning with each other and in groups. As at the time of the last inspection, art and drama provide students with stimulating and challenging learning environments, a range of resources which support effectively the many imaginative and skilful strategies for encouraging students to produce exceptional work of very high quality. The school provides students with many opportunities during the school week to develop their learning beyond formal lesson times. For example, there are very effective arrangements in place which create space and time during the school day enabling students to work on their individual courses or particular aspects of learning on their own, with each other or with a member of staff. The teaching is less effective in the few lessons where teachers talk for too long therefore missing opportunities to encourage students to discuss and explore the key points of their learning. As a result, students' progress is hindered and they have fewer opportunities to take responsibility for their own learning when this happens.

The school has a good assessment system in place which ensures that individual students' progress is followed carefully, and used as feedback to both the student and their parents and carers. Teachers generally use this information well when planning lessons and students themselves are increasingly involved in self-assessing their progress and creating their own learning goals. All students, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, make good progress because of the effective and sensitive individual support the school provides.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the students

The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the students is outstanding. The school's successful philosophical approach to developing trusting and respectful relationships between all members of the school community encourages a highly reflective and positive ethos where nearly all students thoroughly enjoy their school life. Their behaviour both around the school, and especially in lessons, is outstanding. Most students' attendance is good but there are a significant minority of vulnerable students whose attendance is low. Although the school works closely and sensitively with those particular students and their families, this means, because of the small size of the school, that attendance overall is broadly average. Students make an exceptional and exemplary contribution to the school community. They have a key role in the School Meeting, alongside staff, with regard to how the school operates. It works closely with the school council, a smaller group of students who consider how to challenge fellow students to maintain their responsibilities in terms of the daily and weekly duties and especially in promoting positive relationships through their influential voice in the consequences of their peers following the infrequent episodes of unacceptable behaviour. Students are very active in the wider community, for example their recent drama production won an award at a local festival. Students are encouraged to become involved and lead charity events such as the Tsunami project in Sri Lanka. They also were involved in the organising panel for the European Democratic Education Conference. Students have a wide range of exciting opportunities which support their cultural development from the 'world food' project in the kitchen, to discussions in general studies about different ethnic groups and religions. The school's overriding approach to democracy ensures that all students have a healthy and vigorous interest in public institutions in England. The school's strong focus on developing students' skills and attitudes towards working with each other, tolerating difference and becoming involved in community events provides a rich and rewarding range of experiences which prepare them very well for their adult lives and economic well-being.

Welfare, health and safety of the students

The overall promotion of students' welfare, health and safety is good. The school has worked hard to ensure that all the regulations in this area of its work are now met, which is an improvement since the last inspection. Policy and procedures are in place which support child protection and the secure safeguarding of students. Students and staff work together harmoniously and productively. In both discussions and questionnaires, students say that they feel safe in the school. They consider that there are very effective anti-bullying procedures in place based on the school's philosophy of involving the school council in the informal and formal strategies employed to resolve the very rare incidents that occur. The school promotes students' understanding of how to live a healthy lifestyle very well. It provides healthy and nutritious, mainly organic, vegetarian meals every day and arranges a range of options for physical activity including rock climbing, swimming in a local pool during the summer months, and access to a local community sports hall. The

school has a robust approach to carrying out risk assessments for all activities both in and out of school. Fire procedures are comprehensive and thorough and there is a high standard of provision for first aid. The school has in place an appropriate plan and provision to meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 2002.

Suitability of the proprietor and staff

The school carries out appropriate checks on the medical fitness and identity of staff prior to their appointment. Criminal Records Bureau checks have been made on the proprietor, staff and volunteers who work in the school, and the single central register is securely in place in an accessible and legible form. This is an improvement since the last inspection.

School's premises and accommodation

The building and grounds provide a safe, exciting and interesting environment for learning and play. Since the last inspection, there has been an ongoing programme of improvements and refurbishments to many areas of the school. The school has suitable plans to continue the upgrading and maintenance of the ageing building. There is now a suitable room for students who are ill and sufficient numbers of toilets for the number of students, which are both improvements since the last inspection. There are suitably equipped and furnished administration rooms and an adequate number of classrooms, including specialist rooms for science, art, ICT, drama and music. There is a well-equipped kitchen and dining area which is the heart of the school, where students and staff congregate for the home-made meals, snacks and socialising. The generous grounds outside provide grassed and hard surfaces for creative play, sports and learning. Landmark features near the main entrance include a nearly full-sized elephant and rhinoceros constructed by the art department.

Provision of information for parents, carers and others

The school meets all the regulations in this area, which is an improvement since the last inspection. It provides parents and carers with a wide range of clear and accurate information, including a detailed prospectus, newsletters, notice boards and a recently up-dated website. There are verbal and written reports to parents and carers about their children's progress in alternating terms. A very high proportion of the parents' and carers' responses to the inspection questionnaire were extremely positive and complimentary about the school.

Procedures for handling complaints

The school has improved its policy and procedure for handling complaints since the last inspection and now meets all the regulatory requirements.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school meets all of the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2003 as amended January 2005.

What the school could do to improve further

While not required by regulations, the school might wish to consider the following point for development:

- ensure that all lessons increase the opportunities for students to engage actively in their learning by reducing the amount of talk by teachers to the whole class.

Inspection judgement recording form

outstanding	good	satisfactory	inadequate
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The quality of education

Overall quality of education		✓		
How well the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of		✓		
How effective teaching and assessment are in meeting the full range of students' needs		✓		
How well students make progress in their learning		✓		

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development

Quality of provision for students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	✓			
The behaviour of students	✓			

Welfare, health and safety of students

The overall welfare, health and safety of students		✓		
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School details

Name of school	Sands School		
DCSF number	878/6042		
Unique reference number (URN)	113619		
Type of school	Secondary democratic day school		
Status	Independent		
Date school opened	1987		
Age range of students	11–17		
Gender of students	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time students)	Boys: 28	Girls: 40	Total: 68
Number on roll (part-time students)	Boys: 0	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Number of students with a statement of special educational need	Boys: 1	Girls: 1	Total: 2
Annual fees (day students)	£7,905		
Address of school	48 East Street Ashburton Newton Abbot Devon TQ13 7AX		
Telephone number	01364 653666		
Fax number	N/A		
Email address	enquiry@sandsschool.demon.co.uk		
Headteacher	Mr S Bellamy		
Proprietor	Sands School Ltd		
Reporting inspector	John Seal HMI		
Dates of inspection	16–17 March 2010		