

Ashlyns School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117578
Local Authority	HERTFORDSHIRE
Inspection number	290879
Inspection dates	21–22 March 2007
Reporting inspector	David Jones HMI

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

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	13–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	827
6th form	231
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Garrick Stevens
Headteacher	Mr Richard Dalziel
Date of previous school inspection	11 March 2002
School address	Chesham Road Berkhamsted Hertfordshire HP4 3AH
Telephone number	01442 863605
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and three Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

The school is smaller than average. Key Stage 3 provision is shared with two middle schools who teach Years 7 and 8; sixth form provision is part of the local consortium. The local community displays a number of social and economic advantages. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals, and of those from minority ethnic groups, is below average. The number of pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities is average, although the number with a statement of special educational needs is low. Attainment on entry has been above average for a number of years.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 4

In accordance with section 13 (3) of the Education Act 2005, HMCI is of the opinion that this school requires significant improvement, because it is performing significantly less well than in all the circumstances it could be reasonably expected to perform. The school is therefore given a Notice to Improve. Significant improvement is required in relation to the pupils' progress and achievement in Key Stage 4.

The results of public examinations in 2006 were close to the national average; however, pupil progress was inadequate in Years 10 and 11 and has been since 2005. Standards were above average in Key Stage 3 and achievement was good, reflecting the pupils' ability on entry. The pupils' inconsistent progress is a consequence of teaching that in some instances fails to challenge pupils.

Although some lessons were well focused and engaged the pupils' attention, a significant proportion lacked pace and imagination. In these lessons, expectations of what the pupils should achieve were too low and tasks were mundane. As a result the disengagement and frustration, noted by many parents in their responses to the inspection questionnaire, featured in too many lessons. Although pupils' behaviour is satisfactory in the majority of instances, some pupils' behaviour is inadequate when presented with ineffective teaching. The weaknesses in pupil progress at GCSE are a constraint on their future economic well-being.

General targets are sound and exist for all pupils. The school has developed a range of assessment information, although it has yet to coordinate its application in the classroom. The pupil data presented to inspectors by some teachers included evidence of regression in pupils' performance. Pupils with learning difficulties make similar progress to that of other pupils although those who receive targeted support in lessons do better than this; however, some struggle when tasks fail to match their learning needs.

The curriculum is satisfactory with some vocational opportunities emerging. The pupils' personal development is satisfactory. Their satisfactory understanding of how to keep healthy is supported by positive action on healthy eating. They have an adequate knowledge of keeping safe and the school's procedures to maintain the pupils' safety meet current government requirements. Pupils enjoy most of their education but note the inconsistencies of engagement in their own learning. Community contributions are satisfactory.

Leadership and management are adequate. Senior managers have begun to redress the long-standing complacency in some areas of provision. However, the capacity of middle management to improve provision is inconsistent. Governors have given insufficient attention to their role of a critical friend. A significant parental response to the inspection questionnaire expressed concerns regarding home-school communication, weaknesses in behaviour management and in pupil achievement. Inspectors found evidence to support these concerns.

Self-evaluation is satisfactory. Senior managers have a sound understanding of the areas of weakness noted in this report; assistance has been sought from the local authority (LA). The school has made adequate progress against the key issues requiring improvement at the last inspection, but has not been effective in raising standards. The school's capacity to improve is satisfactory.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 3

The school believes the sixth form to be satisfactory with some emerging strengths; inspectors agree. Pupils noted the strength of community spirit in the sixth form and were pleased with the range of subjects available. Standards are average in the majority of subjects with some good achievement in art, drama and general studies. Standards in modern foreign languages, the school's specialist area, are below average.

Personal development and well-being are good; pupils respond well to the opportunities for independent study and are developing a healthy approach to life and learning. Positive relationships are in evidence and sixth formers are growing into mature, responsible citizens who effectively contribute to their school and local communities. Many go onto university to further their qualifications.

Teaching and learning are satisfactory with some examples of good practice seen. Pupils comment that teachers are knowledgeable and the most effective use a range of techniques to make learning interesting. Inspectors found that where teaching was only satisfactory, the range of techniques utilised was more limited leading to insufficient new learning.

The curriculum provides a satisfactory range of academic subjects and effective links have been established with other providers. The range of enrichment activities is good although the vocational opportunities provided are more limited. Academic support and guidance varies between subjects. Pupils commented that some teachers provide very good levels of one-to-one support and that others 'listen to our concerns and are prepared to adapt lessons' to help individuals. Procedures for the assessment and monitoring of pupil progress are satisfactory and targets are regularly set. Leadership and management are satisfactory overall; the transition period before the new head of sixth form takes up post is being managed well.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve standards and pupils' achievement in Key Stage 4.
- Raise expectations and improve the quality of learning in the majority of lessons.
- Improve results in modern foreign languages at GCSE and Advanced Level and develop language college status more actively across the curriculum.
- Address the parental concerns about home-school communication and behaviour management in those lessons where learning is unsatisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 4

Grade for sixth form: 3

In the 2006 national tests at age 14, standards were above average and achievement was good. However, GCSE results, although close to the national figures, were below the target set by governors and below the LA average. Nearly half of the pupils achieved five or more A* to C grades at GCSE that included English and mathematics. When the school compared these results with the pupils' prior attainment in national tests, senior managers found achievement to be inadequate; Inspectors confirm these findings.

Pupils make inconsistent progress against targets, and these do not always relate to their prior attainment. Pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds and those with learning difficulties and

disabilities progress as well as the majority, although this is not always the case for those lower achieving pupils who do not receive individual support.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

Most pupils enjoy coming to school; they are generally courteous, sociable and get on well with each other. However, whilst the majority behave well in class and around the school, and have a good attitude to their studies, a few do not. This is particularly true when teachers do not engage pupils' interest or provide sufficiently stimulating activities. Parents have expressed concerns that behaviour problems are not dealt with robustly enough by the school and that some teachers do not manage inappropriate behaviour well.

Pupils feel safe and secure and there are appropriate areas for them to go, should they feel unhappy or distressed. They are encouraged to eat healthily, despite the school's current catering difficulties. The school provides numerous extra-curricular sports clubs and activities to promote healthy lifestyles that are well attended.

Pupils are developing an awareness of the world of work and their role as responsible citizens in society through personal, social and health education (PSHE), citizenship and work experience programmes. Whilst the school makes good use of outside agencies, links with local businesses are not extensive. Support is provided for modern foreign languages in the feeder middle schools and older pupils contribute to community projects.

Pupils' social, moral, spiritual and cultural development is satisfactory, although many opportunities to promote this are missed in tutor time, assemblies and during lessons. Pupils show concern for others, and contribute generously to charitable activities. Although attendance rates are marginally below average, few pupils take unauthorised absence.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

In the main school, teaching and learning are satisfactory; the inspection team saw the majority of staff teach. One outstanding lesson was seen; there were some good, satisfactory and unsatisfactory lessons. This is not a strong profile for the school's central activity. In four out of ten lessons effective teaching displayed good subject knowledge, organisation and good relationships with their pupils. Questions and tasks supported learning, made good use of technology and the time available. At the moment, teaching and learning are not strong enough to raise GCSE performance, which is the school's most pressing goal.

Too often lessons lacked the higher level challenge or failed to set the pupils clear or imaginative tasks. Some lessons missed opportunities to involve pupils sufficiently in group work or discussion and others failed to secure their attention. Other lessons failed to develop the pupils' learning skills sufficiently and weak responses hindered progress. When not challenged, some pupils pay minimal attention in class. They chat to each other and oblige the teacher to divert attention and energy to behaviour management. The time lost limits progress and pupils lose interest.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

The curriculum is satisfactory and the school now meets the statutory requirements for religious education, information and communication technology (ICT) and physical education in Year 10. The adjustments required to extend this provision into Year 11 by September 2007 are in place. The limited curriculum offer at Key Stage 4 was a concern raised by parents and the improvements in this area provide more flexibility and a greater breadth of study. The school has introduced a range of vocational courses that reflect both pupils' particular interests and employment opportunities. The PSHE programme provides appropriate advice on relationships and social issues. However, the current Year 11 programme is not delivered effectively and many pupils perceive these lessons as either repetitive and uninspiring or as opportunities to misbehave.

The school's specialist status has improved extra-curricular opportunities for pupils to develop their foreign language skills and experience of other cultures through a range of visits. The development of ICT is seen as a priority, and current provision has improved since the school gained specialist status. However, the impact of the language specialism in other curriculum areas is limited. The school provides language teaching for the feeder middle schools and the first schools in the town as part of its specialist language school responsibilities.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Care, guidance and support for pupils are satisfactory. Where available, the in-class support for those with learning and behavioural needs is effective; support staff are well managed and effectively deployed. As a result, lower achieving pupils progress at the same variable rate as their peers. Those who receive individual support make good progress, particularly in literacy.

The tracking of pupils' academic progress is developing well; the school can now identify those at risk of underachieving. Support and guidance are stronger in some subjects than others and in some cases individual mentors work with pupils to agree priorities for improvement. The full impact of this work is yet to be realised. The use of data to inform and guide teaching and provide appropriate and targeted learning opportunities for pupils of all abilities has yet to be consistently applied in all subject areas. Most pupils know their target grades; however, not all teachers mark work consistently.

Parents have complained that communication with the school is sometimes difficult and issues brought to its notice are not always dealt with promptly.

The school's recently revised rewards system is providing appropriate incentives for younger pupils. Careers guidance is good in Key Stage 4. However, both parents and Year 11 pupils feel that advice concerning sixth form choices is confusing.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

The leadership and management of the school are satisfactory. Self-evaluation has formed a realistic view of the issues requiring improvement. However, the school development plan lacks sufficient focus on matters pertaining to the quality of learning and lesson outcomes.

Senior managers were invited to conduct joint observations of teaching with inspectors; the views they expressed concurred with the judgements given by inspectors. Monitoring procedures are satisfactory; however, the evaluation of teaching by senior staff previously reported to governors was significantly more positive than found by the inspection. The languages specialist school status achieved in 2003 has yet to impact on standards and achievement. Middle management is satisfactory overall, but there is not a consistent drive to raise standards and improve achievement.

The leadership and management of the learning support centre for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are good. Senior managers promote the well-being of learners through satisfactory care, guidance and support. The governance of the school is satisfactory and keen to maintain the school's traditions; however, insufficient attention is given to pupil progress. Resource management is good and the school runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis. Financial management is satisfactory.

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Annex A

Inspection judgements

<i>Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate</i>	School Overall	16-19
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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?	4	3
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	3	3
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3	3
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	3	3
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	No	Yes

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	4	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	4	3
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	4	

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	3	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	3	
The behaviour of learners	3	
The attendance of learners	3	
How well learners enjoy their education	3	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	3	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	3	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	3	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	3	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	3	3
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	3	3

¹ Grade 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.

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	3	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3	
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets	3	
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	3	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	3	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	3	
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No	
Does this school require a notice to improve?	Yes	

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

23 March 2007

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Ashlyns School, Chesham Road, Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire, HP4 3AH

As you will remember, an inspection team visited your school just before Easter this year. Thank you for contributing to the inspection; we spoke with many of you in class, around the school and as part of key interviews. I was pleased to receive the many letters and telephone calls from your parents. Although I was unable to speak to all of them, I have tried to address their comments in the report, so please give them my thanks.

Sixth form provision is satisfactory and students commented positively on their lessons. However, inspectors felt that the lessons in Years 10 and 11 need to require more from the majority of you. Too often the tasks were not sufficiently challenging to enable you to make the progress of which you have proved to be capable. You need to play your part in this process by focusing on your work, meeting coursework deadlines and presenting your work for staff to mark.

In discussion with the headteacher and the governing body, I have asked them to: raise expectations and improve the quality of learning in the majority of lessons, develop the language college provision more actively across the curriculum, and address your parents' concerns about behaviour management.

I look forward to hearing about your future successes.

David Jones

Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools