

Dartford Grammar School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	118878
Local Authority	Kent
Inspection number	313129
Inspection date	21 May 2008
Reporting inspector	Patricia Metham HMI

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

Type of school	Grammar (selective)
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Boys
Number on roll	
School	1258
6th form	496
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	John Field
Headteacher	Anthony Smith
Date of previous school inspection	20 September 2004
School address	West Hill Dartford DA1 2HW
Telephone number	01322 223039
Fax number	01322 291426

Age group	11-18
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one Additional Inspector.

The inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following aspects: achievement and standards; teaching and learning; leadership and management; inclusion; curriculum; and the school's specialist status. Evidence was gained from lesson observations, from discussions with leaders, teachers and students and from the evaluation of a range of documentation. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail but the inspectors found no evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments, as given in its self-evaluation, were not justified. These have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

Dartford Grammar School is an oversubscribed school with a co-educational sixth form. Entry to the sixth form is dependent upon achievement of at least seven A* to B GCSE grades or equivalent. While the school does offer AS and A-level courses in the sixth form, the greater proportion of students follows the International Baccalaureate (IB) programme. The IB pathway through Years 7 to 11, known as the Middle Years Programme (MYP) is being established up through the main school, and has now reached Year 10. There is a specialist unit within the school to support students with visual impairment. The school has specialist status as a language college and is a mentor school in the Raising Achievement Transforming Learning (RATL) programme. It has been an International Language College since 1995.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Dartford Grammar is an outstanding school, aptly described by a governor as 'high achieving, with enormous corporate pride at every level, where everybody is valued'. The school combines strengths traditionally associated with grammar schools – such as high aspirations and academic challenge – with an unusually well developed flair for innovation and enterprise and with active care for the wider community. The executive headteacher, spoken of by colleagues as 'the visionary here', has most successfully led the school's development as a centre for excellence in modern foreign languages, with great benefits for adult learners and primary schools in the local community as well as for his own students and their parents. The school's leadership team has considerable skill in recognising and developing potential amongst academic, administrative and support staff, providing demonstrable equality of opportunity and making the school highly cost effective in its deployment of staff and resources.

Academic selection for entry and strong competition for places ensure that students are very able and strongly motivated. Standards attained throughout the school are exceptionally high. To ensure that students do not lose momentum and to increase opportunities for breadth of study in the following years, national tests that are more usually taken at the end of Year 9 are now taken here a year early. Results are significantly above national averages and reflect excellent progress. This pattern continues across Years 9 to 11, with students taking some GCSEs early, such as double award science, a modern foreign language and an information and communication technology (ICT) qualification. All students make similar rates of progress. A very thorough system of assessment and data analysis quickly and accurately identifies underachievement. Action is then prompt and effective. Interventions include one-to-one mentoring, booster classes and use of the school's flexible and well designed ICT resources. GCSE results are excellent, with particular strengths in history, French and religious studies.

Students in every year group are emphatic that they are happy and that the pressure to achieve high standards is no more than they expect and can manage. Attendance rates are well above average. Students have an excellent understanding of the need to establish a healthy lifestyle; their participation in sports and activities is very strong. They treat each other and adults with cheerful consideration and say they feel very safe in school, confident that any problems will be quickly and effectively dealt with. They respond sensibly to opportunities to make their views heard and to participate in important events such as the appointment of a new assistant headteacher. They greatly value leadership opportunities offered by the house system, by team sports and by community service. The Creativity, Activity and Service (CAS) element of the International Baccalaureate (IB) is well embedded throughout the school. Students' personal, spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding, supported through the curriculum, school assemblies, a broad range of visits, including overseas exchanges, and the pervasive ethos of respect for the individual. Excellent communication, numeracy and ICT skills and a good grounding in work-related learning equip these students extremely well for life beyond school.

Students recognise how much they benefit from outstanding care, guidance and support. One young student spoke of the 'amazingly constructive criticism' he was given by his teachers in writing and through discussion. A parent's response reflects the views of many: 'My son is constantly stretched but he is not stressed because help is always available to him and us, his parents, if and when required.' Students begin to make important subject choices at the end of Year 8 and speak with great confidence about the guidance they and their parents receive.

As the range of choice extends over subsequent years, including that between AS and A-level courses and the IB programme in the sixth form, the reliability and timeliness of academic and careers guidance contribute hugely to students' excellent results and to the high numbers who complete their courses. Academic and pastoral support complement each other very effectively, with external agencies involved whenever appropriate. The school's provision for visually impaired students is impressive. Safeguarding systems are very robust and child protection issues well understood. This is a strongly inclusive and cohesive community.

Despite difficulties locally in recruiting staff, the school has a very strong team of subject specialists with the confident subject knowledge, skills and verve needed to engage students and to respond to changes in content and approach associated with the school's introduction of the IB. Through debate, group work, investigation and experiment, students are encouraged to be curious, analytical and creative. Evaluation of teaching and learning is frequent and rigorous and shapes the school's extensive programme of continuing professional development. There is excellent practice across the curriculum, with well directed support for those members of staff who, while highly competent, do not consistently strike the most effective balance between a more traditional, teacher-led approach and one that encourages independent enquiry through new technologies and an evolving curriculum. Students are keen to learn; they respond with enthusiasm and confidence to expanding opportunities for independent learning as well as to the academic disciplines they are encouraged to develop. They value the variety of teaching methods used to support their individual learning styles and the essential contribution to their achievement made by engaging teaching, which was summed up by the head of an extremely successful department: 'That first spark you can't get from a book. You need someone to light your imagination.'

The school provides an outstanding and dynamic curriculum, complemented by an ambitious and very popular activities programme. In Year 7, the 'Learning to Learn' strand helps students develop a range of skills, such as collaborative problem-solving, alongside National Curriculum subjects. Concentrating three years' curriculum into Years 7 and 8 allows greater breadth of study in Years 9 to 11. The emphasis on language acquisition and intercultural understanding promoted by the IB Middle Years Programme, now established in Year 10, strongly supports the school's languages specialism. The range of languages taught is impressive, including Japanese. There are opportunities for early GCSE entry and a programme of enrichment activities to challenge the most able. Gifted musicians benefit from a joint scholarship scheme that gives free access to the Junior Department of Trinity College of Music.

With enthusiastic but carefully considered support from governors, the executive head and senior team have developed a clear and exciting vision for the school. They are balancing with great skill and persuasiveness the responsibility to provide an outstanding quality of education for their own students with the two-way benefits of becoming a widely recognised and influential centre of excellence for languages and a lead school in raising attainment and improving teaching and learning more widely. It is evidence of effective distributed leadership and secure planning that the executive head's part-time secondment as mentor to a school in difficulties has not inhibited Dartford Grammar School's steady development. Leadership and management at all levels use challenging targets to improve teaching and learning and to enhance students' achievement. Capacity to improve is outstanding: the school's self-evaluation is realistic; the commitment to excellence is firmly embedded; financial management is sound; and the requisite skills and resources are in place. There is an exceptionally constructive partnership between academic, administrative and support staff, with mutual respect and equality of opportunity promoting high morale and a shared sense of purpose.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 1

The success of the sixth form is underpinned by extremely effective leadership and management, using challenging targets and very close monitoring of teaching and learning to ensure that all students do as well as they can. High achieving students make outstanding progress on challenging courses that deepen and broaden their skills and understanding. They leave the school with excellent qualifications that enable them to fulfil their potential in universities with very competitive entry, and with attributes and attitudes that will enable them to make a positive contribution to the community. Students have a choice between a broad range of AS and A-level courses, including applied or vocational subjects, and the IB programme. In this way, the school very effectively supports those whose strengths and interests are concentrated within one part of the academic spectrum as well as those who relish the breadth and style of study required by the IB programme. Students speak enthusiastically about the guidance they receive in making this choice and in deciding their future pathways. Girls who join Dartford Grammar School's sixth form settle quickly, are made to feel they belong and, like their male contemporaries, make excellent progress to achieve outstanding results.

Many of those not choosing the IB route take on the IB's requirement for 150 hours' Creativity, Activity and Service, which they value for its focus on self-discipline, enterprise, personal organisation and self-review. They take full advantage of opportunities to make a positive contribution both within school and in the wider community, for example working with primary children on the languages programme, and participate enthusiastically in a broad range of activities, including exchange visits with students in several European countries. They exemplify the school's vision of 'a learning community developing global citizens'.

What the school should do to improve further

Ensure that the high quality of teaching is entirely consistent across the school.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaints about school inspection', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Annex A

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	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?	1	1
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	1	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1	1

Achievement and standards

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

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1	
How well learners enjoy their education	1	
The attendance of learners	1	
The behaviour of learners	1	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	1	1
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1	1

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?	1	1
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	1	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	1	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1	1
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	1	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1	
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?	No	

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

23 May 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Dartford Grammar School, Dartford, DA1 2HW

As you know, we visited your school recently to see how effectively it is enabling you to fulfil your potential. We greatly appreciated the cheerful courtesy and openness with which you spoke about your experiences at school, which are clearly overwhelmingly positive.

We agree with you that Dartford Grammar is an outstanding school. Well-directed care, guidance and support, teaching that challenges and supports you and a wealth of opportunities beyond the classroom ensure that your individual strengths and your needs are responded to exceptionally well. Within a culture that a parent described as 'both caring and challenging', you develop very impressive levels of confidence, independent thinking, communication skills and problem-solving ability, which will serve you well in later life. It was good to hear that you do not feel under undue pressure, although you and your school expect high standards, and to know that you trust each other and those with responsibility for you to ensure that any problems are quickly resolved. You take full advantage of the school's outstanding provision for modern foreign languages and of its engagement with the local community.

To ensure that Dartford Grammar School continues to be a centre of excellence, we have asked the governors and senior leadership team to ensure that the high quality of teaching is entirely consistent throughout the school, so that changes in the school's curriculum and the ability of new technology to support independent learning are fully exploited.

Your school most successfully builds a forward-looking and civilised community out of the great variety of talents, interests and backgrounds that you represent.

With good wishes,

Patricia Metham Her Majesty's Inspector