

Amersham School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	110509
Local Authority	Buckinghamshire
Inspection number	356764
Inspection dates	2–3 March 2011
Reporting inspector	Angela Corbett HMI

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

Type of school	Modern (non-selective)
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	814
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	165
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Michael Woodward
Headteacher	Sharon Jarrett
Date of previous school inspection	28 November 2007
School address	Stanley Hill Amersham, Buckinghamshire HP7 9HH
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four additional inspectors. Inspectors observed one assembly, 37 lessons taught by 36 different teachers and conducted six 'learning walks' into lessons and tutorial sessions. Meetings were held with five groups of students, staff and the Chair of the Governing Body as well as a telephone conversation with one parent. Inspectors also looked at a range of documentation including policies, data and analyses, records of the school's monitoring, minutes of governing body meetings and questionnaires completed by 55 staff, 142 students and 265 parents and carers.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at a number of key areas.

- The attainment, learning and progress of all students and their performance in different subjects, in particular in mathematics and English.
- The quality of teaching and how well assessment data are used, in particular for the more-able.
- The impact of the development of basic and enterprise skills across the curriculum on student outcomes.
- The effectiveness with which leaders and managers at all levels are monitoring and evaluating provision and so driving improvement.
- The provision provided and the outcomes attained by students in the sixth form.

Information about the school

Amersham is smaller in size than other secondary schools and has held specialist status in business and enterprise since 2005. It is located within an authority which operates a selective education system. Most students are from a White British and other White backgrounds but almost all minority ethnic groups are represented. A few speak English as an additional language but very few are in the early stages of learning English. Both the proportion of students with identified special educational needs and/or disabilities and those with statements of identified special educational needs are around the national average. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is below average. The school has achieved several awards including Healthy Schools, Artsmark and Investors in People.

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

Students are at the very heart of Amersham, a good and inclusive school that provides outstanding care, guidance and support for all. The highly committed headteacher and strong senior leadership team have worked tirelessly to facilitate and secure improvements since the last inspection, including in the sixth form. Their vision for providing the best educational experiences possible for students is shared by staff who also work hard and contribute well to students' improved outcomes across the school. Most parents and carers are positive about the school; comments included: 'the school is fantastic', 'the transition from junior school to Amersham was amazing' and 'children are given confidence to believe they can achieve their dreams.'

The curriculum has been transformed to increase choice and better match students' needs and interests with good use of the business and enterprise specialism to develop their wider or enterprise skills. This has particularly contributed to students' improved and now good achievement, both in the main school and the sixth form. Attainment has risen since the last inspection because the progress being made by students across the school has accelerated. The school has very successfully addressed the lower performance of some groups, for example that of middle ability boys, and the variations in subject performance. However, the school recognises that while the proportion of students gaining GCSE A* to C grades has significantly risen, they now need to ensure that more-able students gain their highest possible grades. Students feel exceptionally safe in school, a view which is also endorsed by parents and carers. Students, including those in the sixth form, are mature and articulate which is reflected in their good behaviour and positive attitudes to learning. They make an outstanding contribution to the life of the school and wider community, with exceptionally high numbers taking on a wide variety of leadership roles, many of which involve working with younger students.

Although teaching is now good or better in the large majority of lessons, some inconsistencies remain. For example, opportunities are missed to share and embed the most effective practices across the school. The assessment of students' progress is now both accurate and systematic but there is disparity between teachers in how effectively they use this information. As a result, there are inconsistencies in the guidance given to students on how to improve and in planning lessons to ensure that tasks and activities provide sufficient challenge for the more-able or support for those who may need additional help.

More effective monitoring and self-evaluation, which have extended to middle leaders, are ensuring more sharply focused interventions at whole-school, department and individual student level and signify the school's good capacity for sustained improvement. However, development planning does not always link the purpose of actions directly to the

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quantifiable improvements in student outcomes they seek to achieve and in some instances, evaluation and further action are not sufficiently rigorous.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve teaching and assessment so that they are consistently good and an increasing proportion is outstanding and so enabling all students to make even better progress by:
 - ensuring teachers set more teaching in contexts that are relevant to students and providing greater opportunities for creativity in lessons
 - sharing and embedding the most effective practice in the school
 - developing teachers' use of data to inform their planning so that tasks and activities match students' differing abilities to provide both appropriate challenge and support
 - providing consistent feedback to all students so they are clear in all subjects about how to improve.
- Improve leadership and management at all levels ensuring that:
 - the purpose of proposed actions is explicitly stated, linked to success criteria that are quantifiable in terms of their impact on student outcomes, and set in more precisely defined timescales
 - all actions and strategies are evaluated more rigorously in terms of their impact on improving outcomes for all students.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

2

Students work well with each other, build good relationships with staff and want to achieve well and their enjoyment of school is apparent both in classrooms and around school. The quality of learning in most lessons is good because teaching is purposeful and enables the very large majority of students to increase their knowledge, skills and understanding effectively. In the most effective lessons, activities are practical and varied, students are involved in peer assessment or tasks set in contexts that they can relate to. Such approaches are particularly evident in Years 7, 8 and 9. For example, in a Year 8 geography lesson students quickly learnt the difference between climate and weather through a range of practical activities including writing scripts to describe the weather outside their classroom. Students enter with levels of attainment that are slightly below average with few at the higher levels. While there was a small dip in attainment in 2010, this represented satisfactory progress overall with good progress in subjects such as mathematics, a specialist subject, and single sciences. Inspection evidence and the school's own data show that the school has addressed most areas of lower performance and currently most students in Years 10 and 11 are making good progress towards much more challenging targets. Students in Year 10 are on track to take their GCSEs a year early with both Years 10 and 11 set to exceed the national averages in 2010. Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities are also making good progress, with those known to be school action plus or have a statement of identified need making the best progress.

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Students' understanding of healthy lifestyles is promoted well by the curriculum with many participating in sporting or other leisure activities. Students have a high awareness of how to adopt safe practices and say they are extremely well supported, that bullying is rare and they are confident of help should they have any concerns. Students' outstanding contribution to the school and wider community is further illustrated through their work with pupils from local primary schools, fund-raising for charity, and their strong student voice which includes direct involvement in evaluating learning and developing school policy. Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good, although the breadth of their cultural understanding is weaker. Students develop an excellent range of enterprise, work-related, social and basic skills which help prepare them well for the future. However, while they are punctual and few are persistently absent, attendance remains average although improving.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	2
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment ¹	3
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	1
Pupils' behaviour	2
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	1
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	3
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2

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

How effective is the provision?

The quality of teaching is good overall but while some is outstanding some satisfactory teaching remains. Teachers are enthusiastic, have good subject knowledge, use information and communication technology (ICT) well, make effective use of questioning and provide students with an engaging range of tasks and activities in vibrant classrooms. All teachers incorporate the development of at least one of the six enterprise skills, such as communication and research, in every lesson; these in turn help students to develop

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independence and confidence in their learning. These factors, together with most teachers making good use of the longer lesson times, enable the very large majority of students to learn and progress well. However, in some lessons opportunities are missed for students to be creative or for activities to be set in relevant contexts so that learning is more exciting. In a small minority of lessons students are not sufficiently challenged or well supported in their learning because teachers do not effectively use assessment information to inform their lesson planning. Similarly, not all students receive clear guidance on how to improve because the quality of marking is inconsistent.

The quality of the curriculum is good. Since the last inspection it has been re-designed to better accommodate students' varying needs, interests and accelerate their progress. Students have access to a good range of academic and vocational courses, including GCSEs, work-related courses at a skills centre and a new diploma in business, administration and finance. With the exception of English, students complete Key Stage 3 in Year 8 and examination courses start in Year 9 with completion in Year 10 and access to a range of extension or alternative courses in Year 11. This was not the case for the current Year 11. Basic skill development is a high priority with most students successfully completing an ICT qualification and numerous and highly effective literacy intervention strategies across all year groups. A wide range of trips and visits, including overseas travel, visiting speakers and extra-curricular activities further enhance provision. Whole-school business and enterprise days provide students with memorable learning experiences by giving them unique opportunities to broaden and apply their learning.

The outstanding care, guidance and support students receive are major factors in developing students' self-esteem and confidence, their strong social development, and their largely effective learning and progress. Pastoral support is excellent at all levels and features personalised tutoring for each student. New systems to improve attendance are already having a positive impact. Progress and well-being are closely tracked, so that every student, including those deemed more vulnerable, feel secure and are given the support they need both from school staff, such as the school counsellor, or in conjunction with a number of external agencies. Transition arrangements into the school are excellent, and high-quality advice and guidance continue as students move through the school. Consequently, all students progress into education, employment or training at the end of Year 11.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	2
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	2
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

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How effective are leadership and management?

The inspirational headteacher is respected by parents and carers, staff and students and provides clear drive and ambition to improve the school. The senior and extended leadership team has clear and active roles in promoting school improvement, in particular in empowering middle leaders to take increasing responsibility of their own areas. Targets have been skilfully used to raise students' achievement through steady increase in their challenge; however, they are not always quantified sufficiently in development planning so that their impact can be rigorously analysed and leaders fully held to account. The quality of teaching and learning has been improved through systemic quality assurance. However, while the school has a very accurate view of its strengths and areas for development, actions for improvement are not always followed through with sufficient rigour. Significant improvements have been made to the school's student progress tracking systems, so that any underperformance both for individuals or groups of students is identified early and acted on swiftly. As a result, the very large majority of students are now achieving their challenging targets.

A good range of partnerships enhance students' learning and well-being effectively, including local schools, agencies, organisations and businesses; many of these are linked to the business and enterprise specialism. The school's good promotion of equality and tackling discrimination is reflected in its active approach to ensuring the appropriate learning and support for all students. Safeguarding procedures are outstanding because close attention to detail is paid to ensuring the safety of students through: precision in record keeping; thorough risk assessments; close work with external agencies and parents and carers; rigorous recruitment procedures and excellent training for staff and school visitors.

Members of the governing body are well informed, make good use of their wide range of expertise and provide appropriate challenge. The school is proactive in engaging with parents and carers through a variety of ways, including the website, regular newsletters, sessions on how to support their children's learning, parents' evenings, academic mentoring days and regular reports. Parents' and carers' views are sought through surveys and a parent forum, which includes governor representation. A basic plan is in place to develop community cohesion. This aspect of the school's work is most successful within school which is a highly cohesive community and in the local area. However, the school recognises that the national and global dimensions are less well developed and that evaluation lacks rigour.

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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	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	2
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	3
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	2

Sixth form

The sixth form is growing with more students joining both from within school and outside and most remain until the end of their courses. Attainment on entry to the sixth form is lower than that found nationally but attainment, as in the main school, is rising. Students following BTEC courses make consistently good progress although there is some variation in performance in other subjects. This is being tackled rigorously and is narrowing and so overall progress is good. The focus on developing enterprise skills across the curriculum supports their good learning well and, in particular, their ability to be independent learners.

Students enjoy sixth form life and this is reflected in their good attendance. They benefit from teachers' good subject knowledge but teaching, while good overall, varies from satisfactory to outstanding. The curriculum has been significantly expanded to provide a good range of both academic and vocational courses at different levels to meet the needs of all students. They are all expected to follow one of a wide range of enrichment opportunities, which includes Young Enterprise and Community Sports Leader. All students make particularly strong contributions to the school and wider community. For example: in school, as prefects or school leadership council members; locally, as ambassadors for sixth form sport in their own and nearby schools and globally, by participating in volunteer work in an African mission.

Students receive good care, guidance and support. Their progress is carefully tracked and they value highly the regular mentoring sessions with their tutors which provide them with effective academic and pastoral support. The school's guidance system provides good support both into and out of the sixth form and progression to university is rising. Sixth form leadership is good. However, while self-evaluation is accurate, actions in development planning are not sufficiently linked to quantifiable student outcomes for improving provision and further raising achievement.

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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

A significantly higher than average proportion of parents and carers returned the Ofsted questionnaires. Most of these were very positive about the school and highly supportive of the leadership and management. A small minority raised concerns about the variations in teaching quality, whether students are sufficiently challenged and how well the school helps students to adopt healthy lifestyles. Inspectors investigated these issues and their judgements are reflected in the report main findings and appropriate sections.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Amersham 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 265 questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 814 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	89	34	161	61	6	2	4	2
The school keeps my child safe	114	43	143	54	5	2	1	0
My school informs me about my child's progress	105	40	142	54	14	5	1	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	86	32	142	54	29	11	3	1
The teaching is good at this school	66	25	168	63	21	8	1	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	71	27	159	60	22	8	1	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	55	21	166	63	32	12	1	0
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)	76	29	147	55	11	4	3	1
The school meets my child's particular needs	84	32	143	54	22	8	3	1
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	90	34	143	54	22	8	6	2
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	70	26	143	54	24	9	3	1
The school is led and managed effectively	132	50	119	45	10	4	2	1
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	115	43	128	48	15	6	3	1

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

	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
Type of school	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	59	35	3	3
Primary schools	9	44	39	7
Secondary schools	13	36	41	11
Sixth forms	15	39	43	3
Special schools	35	43	17	5
Pupil referral units	21	42	29	9
All schools	13	43	37	8

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 are for the period 1 September 2009 to 31 August 2010 and are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2009/10 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100.

Sixth form figures reflect the judgements made for the overall effectiveness of the sixth form in secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units.

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:	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. ■ 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.



4 March 2011

Dear Students

Inspection of Amersham School, Amersham HP7 9HH

On behalf of the inspection team, I would like to let you know that we enjoyed the time we spent with you on our recent visit. Thank you for making us feel so welcome and sharing your views with us in meetings, lessons and around the school. We found Amersham to be a good school and here is a summary of our main inspection findings.

You enjoy all aspects of school life, take pride in your school and are keen to learn and achieve.

Most of you are making good progress and as a result your attainment is moving above the national averages.

In the sixth form, you make good progress because of the good teaching, curriculum and care that are provided for you.

The quality of teaching is good in most lessons, particularly when learning is practical, relevant and you are actively involved.

Your curriculum is good and you particularly enjoy the special enterprise days.

You are mature, articulate, get on well together and behave well.

You make an outstanding contribution to school life and the wider community, through your leadership roles, school council and links with local schools.

You feel very safe because you are all exceptionally well cared for and supported.

Your highly committed headteacher and senior leaders have worked hard to improve the school and, together with all the other staff in the school, are keen to improve it further. To help them with this, we have said that senior leaders should:

Improve teaching and assessment so that it is consistently good with more that is outstanding and so enables you all to make even better progress.

Improve development planning so that all actions and strategies are linked to improving your outcomes and their impact can be evaluated more rigorously.

You can help by maintaining your positive and mature attitudes to learning, making the most of the opportunities offered to you and in improving your currently average attendance.

Yours sincerely

Angela Corbett

Her Majesty's Inspector

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