

Balcarras School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	115759
Local Authority	Gloucestershire
Inspection number	326263
Inspection dates	25 February 2009
Reporting inspector	Peter Sanderson 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	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1281
Sixth form	281
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Barry Stagg
Headteacher	Mr Christopher Healy
Date of previous school inspection	5-6 October 2005
School address	East End Road Cheltenham Gloucestershire GL53 8QF
Telephone number	01242 515881
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Age group	11-18
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two of Her Majesty's Inspectors. They evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following:

- the variations in students' progress between subjects and in progress made by girls and boys.
- the impact of leadership and management on improving elements of provision and outcomes for students.

Evidence was gained from lesson observations, from discussions with leaders and students and from 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

Balcarras School is a large popular comprehensive school. Most students are of White British background, although the percentage of students from minority ethnic groups has increased in recent years. The number of students whose first language is not English is low for a school of this size. The percentage of students eligible for free school meals is well below the national average. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is also below average. The most commonly identified needs relate to specific (dyslexia) and moderate learning difficulties. The school obtained specialist status in technology in 1998 and became a training school in 2006. It is also an extended school and leads the local extended schools partnership.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Balcarras School provides students with an outstanding education, both in the main school and in the sixth form. It is an inclusive and vibrant school where students' achievement, personal development and behaviour are outstanding. As one parent commented, 'The school provides a caring and purposeful environment, allowing pupils to reach their full potential both academically and socially.' At the heart of the school's success is the excellent leadership of the headteacher. Parents and teachers quite rightly hold him in very high regard. He is committed to ensuring that all students achieve their best, both academically and in their personal development. He is extremely well supported by the senior leadership team, and all staff share their high expectations.

Standards are well above average and the achievement of students is outstanding. Students enter the school in Year 7 with standards that are above average. By the end of Year 11, standards are exceptionally high. The percentage of students attaining 5 or more A* to C GCSE grades including English and mathematics is well above the national average and has risen since the last inspection at a rate faster than that seen nationally. The inclusive nature of the school is also evident in the fact that all students attained at least 5 GCSE passes or their equivalent in 2008. Students make outstanding progress in most subjects, including the specialist subjects of mathematics and science. The school regularly achieves its challenging specialist school targets in these subjects and in product design. However, the school is aware that the progress made by boys, although extremely good, is not quite as strong as that made by girls. The progress made by students in individual subjects is closely monitored and effective action is taken to raise achievement in any subject area in which standards slip below the high levels expected at the school. The curriculum and teaching and learning are effectively tailored to the needs of the full ability range of students in the school. The most able students achieve extremely well, and the percentage of GCSE grades A* and A attained in 2008 was well above the national average. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities also receive very effective support and this ensures they make outstanding progress in their learning. The achievement of those students from minority ethnic groups is similar to that of their peers.

Teaching and learning that are consistently at least good and often outstanding are at the heart of the school, and enable students to achieve very well. Typically, teachers have high expectations of what students can achieve in lessons, which proceed at a fast pace and include activities that are engaging and well matched to students' ability. The school makes good use of teaching assistants to ensure that all students are supported well. Students thoroughly enjoy coming to school and attendance is well above the national average. They fully appreciate the wide range of opportunities the school provides, both during and after the school day. The school curriculum is regularly reviewed by the leadership team, and a wide range of both academic and vocational courses are available in Years 10 and 11 to meet students' needs and interests. Students participate well in a very broad range of extra-curricular activities.

The school's caring ethos ensures that students thrive. A strong pastoral team, based around a house structure, ensures that students are known as individuals. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. Students learn to care for each other and for their school and world environment through their work on the 'People and Planet' group. The provision of nutritious food and a wide range of sporting clubs and activities helps ensure students lead healthy lifestyles. In recognition of their work in this area, the school has gained the nationally recognised Sportsmark and Healthy Schools Award. Students report that they feel safe in school and incidents of bullying are very rare. When they do occur, staff take issues seriously and deal with them very well. Child protection procedures are fully in place and the school works with a wide range of professionals to safeguard and support students. Checks on staff are robust and meet government requirements.

Students learn to take responsibility and make a very good contribution to their community, for example when they take part in the school council or raise funds for charities. The school makes an outstanding contribution to community cohesion within the school, the local community and further afield. Students' understanding of other communities in Britain is extremely good. They are also developing very good awareness of the global community, for example through visits from teachers and students from other countries and through their links with a school in Africa. Students' involvement in enterprise activities, their confidence in their own capabilities, and their skills in numeracy, literacy and ICT (information and communication technology) are preparing them extremely well for future life.

Procedures for monitoring and evaluation are robust. They include monitoring of teaching and students' work by senior and middle leaders. Individual students' progress is tracked using frequent recorded assessments. The views of students are also regularly sought and play an important part in the school's self-evaluation. As a result, the leadership team are well aware of the school's strengths and they have good plans to address those areas in need of development, including a range of measures aimed at further improving boys' achievement. Governors know the school well and provide a very effective balance of support and challenge to the headteacher and senior managers. The school's specialist status has played an important part in improving standards and supporting students' outstanding personal development. It has helped the school improve its ICT resources and their subsequent use by both teachers and students to improve learning. It has had a positive impact on teaching and learning across the school and helped the school improve its pastoral and academic support for students. Standards are continuing to rise, and the school's capacity for further improvement is outstanding.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 1

In this outstanding sixth form, students flourish both academically and personally. A key to its success is the excellent leadership of the sixth form. Nearly all students take at least four AS courses in Year 12 and three A2 courses in Year 13, and very few drop out of these. Targets are carefully set for each sixth former. Their progress is tracked rigorously across the wide range of both academic and vocational courses provided by the school. Supervised private study means that time in school is not wasted and this helps ensure that students make excellent progress, attaining well above average standards by the end of Year 13. The relationship between teachers

and students is extremely good. The quality of teaching is outstanding, and teachers' subject knowledge is particularly strong. Teachers in the sixth form make very skilful use of the information gained about students' progress when planning lessons, and give students opportunities to take an active part in lessons. Students receive highly effective support and guidance through the 'Futures lessons' they all receive. Nearly all students go on to higher education, mostly university.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve the progress made by boys to the extremely high level achieved by girls.

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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/or disabilities make progress	1	

Personal development and well-being

How good are 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 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.

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 eliminated	1	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	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	

Annex B



26 February 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Balcarras School, Cheltenham GL53 8QF

Thank you for being so welcoming when we came to inspect your school recently. We both really enjoyed our day in the school. We met and talked with some of you and sat in a few of your lessons. Now that we have finished the inspection, we wanted to let you know our findings.

We judged that your school and sixth form provide you with an outstanding education. Your headteacher leads the school extremely well and he wants the very best for all of you. He is very well supported by other senior teachers in the school. Many of you told us how much you enjoy school and this is also evident in your excellent attendance. We were very impressed during our visit with your outstanding behaviour and positive attitudes to learning. Your school is a caring environment and your relationships with each other and with teachers are excellent. Your teachers and support staff look after you all extremely well.

You are taught very well and both you and teachers make very effective use of computers to help you learn. Teachers also monitor your progress very well and give you extra support when you need it. The mentoring programme in Year 11 is particularly effective. All of this ensures that you make outstanding progress in both the main school and the sixth form and attain extremely high standards in your work. The school offers you a broad range of courses to follow in Years 10 and 11 and the sixth form, including both academic and vocational choices. You also told us that you appreciated the wide range of clubs and activities that are offered to you and it was good to hear that so many of you were making the most of these opportunities.

Although your school is outstanding, we have asked senior leaders to make one improvement that we think will make it even better. Boys make extremely good progress in their learning but it is not quite as strong as the outstanding progress made by girls. We have asked the school to improve the progress of boys so that it is as good as that of the girls.

Thank you again and I wish you all good luck for the future.

Yours faithfully

Peter Sanderson
Her Majesty's Inspector