

Didcot Girls' School

Manor Crescent, Didcot, Oxfordshire, OX11 7AJ

Inspection dates

24–25 November 2015

Overall effectiveness

Outstanding

Effectiveness of leadership and management	Outstanding
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Outstanding
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Outstanding
16 to 19 study programmes	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school

- Pupils achieve very well indeed. GCSE results are considerably above the national average. Pupils make rapid progress in all subjects and year groups.
- Sixth form learners make good, but not yet outstanding, progress. They achieve good results at A level.
- Teaching is excellent in Years 7 to 11. It is interesting, inspiring and imaginative. In the sixth form, teaching is consistently good and is rapidly improving.
- The school has a very broad curriculum which meets the needs of pupils very well. Pupils have a wide choice of relevant subject options.
- The school has a very wide and inspiring range of activities outside of school hours. Many pupils, from all groups, benefit from them.
- The school has an excellent personal development programme. Pupils are very well guided about their future options and careers.
- The school is very ambitious for its pupils. When leaving the school, pupils progress to a wide range of appropriate placements in further and higher education, or employment-based routes. Many pupils progress to university.
- The school's provision for disadvantaged pupils, entitled to the support of the pupil premium, is exemplary. These pupils achieve very well.
- Pupils with special educational needs are well provided for. They achieve well. However, despite clear improvement, their progress is not yet outstanding, as it is for other pupils.
- The headteacher is an excellent leader. With her senior team, she empowers and enables staff to give of their very best. Staff have exceptional opportunities for professional development.
- Senior staff and governors have a very clear vision for the school which is being brought to fruition brilliantly. Governors challenge and support the school very effectively.
- Many pupils show leadership in the school. They help others and contribute much to making the school a caring and supportive community.
- Pupils behave excellently in lessons. They are consistently enthusiastic, self-motivated and ready to learn.
- Pupils conduct themselves very safely, politely and considerately around the school.
- Some pupils report being made upset by occasional unkind behaviour, especially name-calling, usually by older pupils.
- Most pupils and parents think that the staff deal with any poor behaviour very well. But some say that the problems have not gone away after being reported.
- A few pupils are nervous of reporting misbehaviour to the staff.
- A higher than average proportion of pupils receive fixed-term exclusions. The school does not sufficiently consider other possible ways of dealing with noncompliant behaviour.
- Pupils' attendance is improving and is in line with the national average.
- The parents who contacted inspectors are overwhelmingly delighted with the school.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the currently good provision and outcomes to the outstanding levels achieved for all other pupils, in respect of:
 - the sixth form
 - pupils with special educational needs.

- Improve some aspects of pupils' usually excellent behaviour and well-being with the aims of:
 - ensuring that no pupils are made unhappy because of name-calling or other misbehaviour
 - making all pupils confident in approaching staff to sort out any problems
 - reducing the need for fixed-term exclusions
 - improving further pupils' attendance, in partnership with families.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is outstanding

- The headteacher is a visionary and inspiring leader. She lives and breathes high aspirations for the pupils and community. She is adamant in her view of what this school should be. Her spirited leadership is highly respected by her staff, as is the leadership given by the other senior leaders. Morale is very high.
- The work of the senior and middle leadership teams is very effective. All leaders are empowered to try out new ideas, make key decisions and develop the school's policies. This makes the school dynamic and innovative, much to the benefit of pupils. Leaders also learn and develop their skills very quickly in a supportive and rigorous professional environment.
- Senior leaders truly unlock the enthusiasm and potential among the staff, who give willingly of their very best. Staff feel valued and really like working in the school. Unnecessary work and bureaucracy is minimised, so that the staff can use their time efficiently and creatively in the interests of the pupils.
- The school has excellent, clear management systems. Staff work to agreed, understood standards and the impact of this on pupils is monitored and evaluated very carefully. Performance management systems work very well. Staff are held to account through them and are very effectively encouraged and enabled to improve their work further.
- The school evaluates itself accurately and thoroughly. There is a particularly sharp focus on evaluating the impact of teaching. This helps lead to further energetic improvement.
- The school has very strong and well-managed procedures for dealing with any academic or personal problems that pupils may experience. However, during the inspection, the headteacher recognised that more work is needed to ensure that all pupils are always confident that staff will help them sort out any difficulties, particularly if they involve other pupils.
- All staff benefit from excellent training and continuing professional development. They are highly reflective. This helps them to constantly improve their work. The school supports and develops its newly qualified teachers very well.
- The school has an excellent curriculum. The range of subjects, and options, provides very well for the needs of pupils. Staff in individual subject departments are thorough and creative when planning lessons over time. Pupils therefore benefit from very well-organised, progressive learning tasks. There are many exciting and successful visits out of school and equally stimulating activities on-site.
- The school's many well-organised and inspiring activities outside of school hours are heavily attended by pupils from all different years and groups.
- The school spends its pupil premium funding very thoughtfully. Senior staff make the priorities clear and carefully evaluate the impact of the expenditure on the examination outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. Similarly, the school uses Year 7 catch-up funding well. It brings secure improvement for pupils who start at the school with low attainment in literacy and numeracy.
- Support staff, including administrators, premises and cleaning staff, all contribute much to the school's success. The school's various buildings are very well looked after. They are attractively maintained and decorated. The space is used effectively.
- As the executive headteacher of Didcot Academy of Schools and a local leader of education, the headteacher supports, and learns from, other schools. The school is fully involved in the Oxfordshire teaching school alliance. These links and other networks enable many members of staff to work usefully with colleagues from other schools, including primary schools.
- **The governance of the school**
 - The governing body is well organised and astute. It fulfils its roles very effectively. Led wisely by the chair, governors have set out, and are realising, a clear vision for education in Didcot, for girls and boys. Their successful development of the local multi-academy trust is testament to this.
 - Governors challenge and support school leaders very well and in good balance. They ask sharp and insightful questions of senior leaders. They ensure that staff performance and pay progression is correctly managed. Many governors make regular visits to the school, to see it working at first hand. This helps them to understand better the context of the decisions they take. Some of these visits are, helpfully, linked specifically to actions in the school improvement plan.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Staff are regularly and well trained. Pupils are kept as safe as they can be. The school involves parents correctly when needed.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is outstanding

- The school constantly seeks to develop and improve teaching further. Teachers engage in high-quality debate together about how to keep improving their teaching. They challenge each other, supportively, to do better still. This shows clearly in the inspiring lessons that they teach.
- Teaching is first-rate right across the curriculum. In physical education, for example, pupils are expertly taught a very wide range of sports and techniques. They develop their skills and resilience indoors and out. In dance, pupils learn successfully how to work with imagination, freedom and precision. English and mathematics teaching is constantly of a high standard.
- The school has clear and very carefully considered policies about teaching which guide teachers in their work. Teachers put these policies into practice consistently, with imagination, across the school.
- One very effective policy involves bronze, silver and gold success criteria which teachers provide for pupils in almost all lessons. These ensure that pupils have a high level of challenge, whatever their ability or need. For instance, in a Year 7 history lesson about the Black Death, all pupils analysed historical evidence very well, at different levels of sophistication. Some identified how people's lives changed. Others discussed whether the Black Death, despite its terror, was universally a 'bad thing'. These pupils noted that the Black Death improved employment opportunities for some people and increased knowledge of illness and medicine.
- Teachers show excellent subject knowledge. This enables them to plan challenging lessons. They question pupils expertly to deepen the pupils' own understanding. They answer pupils' questions very proficiently.
- Lessons are carefully and very effectively planned. Nevertheless, teachers are confident to be flexible in moving away from the plan to meet pupils' needs and deepen learning. For example, in an English lesson, a pupil asked what a 'pyre' was. The teacher, in explaining, used the opportunity to draw out very helpfully the idea of 'ceremony' in the poem the class was reading.
- Pupils consistently told inspectors how much they enjoy their lessons. When they were asked about the school, this was usually the first thing they said. They explained how teachers and teaching assistants help them to learn very well. Pupils know that they are constantly challenged to aim high and improve on their previous best. They feel good about their learning and achieving their ambitious targets.
- Teachers set useful and challenging homework which pupils and parents value. GCSE and A-level pupils know their suitably challenging target grades very well.
- Staff are very aware of the needs and backgrounds of all of their pupils. They assess and provide for these very effectively. When appropriate, disadvantaged pupils are given the first opportunity to take part in particular events or initiatives. Teachers' expectations of disadvantaged pupils are high. The pupils are very well supported in meeting these expectations.
- The school teaches and supports pupils with special educational needs, and those who are lower attaining, well. For example, in a Year 10 foundation science lesson, pupils accurately measured the angle of light reflected in a mirror. They observed key scientific truths. However, the school recognises that not all work set for pupils with special educational needs is sharply and precisely targeted enough to ensure their outstanding progress.
- Teachers and teaching assistants give pupils high-quality verbal and written feedback on their work. Pupils particularly value the very helpful suggestions about how to improve their learning. Pupils also offer each other useful advice and constructive comments, often using the convenient 'stars and wishes' method.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare is good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding. Pupils are, for the most part, really happy and successful in the school. They understand the school's clear values. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is excellent.
- The school has an exceptionally good, and constantly developing, programme of personal development lessons in Years 7 to 11. Consequently, pupils know very well how to keep themselves safe and happy in relationships, when out and about, and on the internet. Pupils all visit the places of worship of different faiths. Their understanding of life in modern Britain, including the need to respect different cultures and traditions, is very strong.

- The school provides excellent and impartial guidance about future education and career options. The pupils really value this. They all undertake well-organised work experience. They have clear views about what they need to do to achieve their aspirations. Pupils enjoyed the recent 'takeover' day, when many of them took over the jobs of school staff.
- The school shows its ambition by arranging motivational visits from successful people in various walks of life. Pupil questionnaires suggested that it might be useful to hear about a wider range of jobs: the ground-level work of a sales assistant as well as the head of a business.
- Pupils are taught leadership, and other life skills, very effectively. As one parent wrote, 'my daughter is encouraged to show leadership skills and work her way up the leadership ladder. She is encouraged to adopt a growth mindset and is taught that she can achieve anything.'
- In a lunchtime activity, pupils from Years 7 to 11 learned about Uganda. They raised funds to support education in that country. This session was led effectively by the pupils themselves.
- The school has recently won many awards, including a local business and community award, 'stop the stigma'. Pupils presented convincingly to an audience about issues in mental health. As a result, staff decided they should follow the pupils' leadership and become trained in mindfulness. This is to help reduce pupils' stress at examination times. It has become part of the personal development curriculum.
- There are strong systems for supporting pupils pastorally, especially if they may become particularly vulnerable. Staff work together very well to care for pupils, often involving parents supportively.
- The school has the county council's gold standard for looking after young carers. These pupils are very well supported.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good and improving. The very positive ethos in the school, and the well understood reward and sanction systems, are bearing fruit.
- Pupils, in all year groups, behave really excellently in lessons. They are consistently hard working, happy and determined to succeed. This applies across all different types of activity. Pupils work cheerfully and diligently in individual tasks, as well as group activities. Their concentration is just as intense when the teacher is not looking. When working with others, pupils are constantly very supportive and helpful. They want to learn and help others to learn.
- In a Year 11 GCSE drama lesson, pupils worked with great commitment and enthusiasm in small groups to create highly effective scenes. They showed excellent attitudes, whether they were writing stage directions, rehearsing and acting or discussing how to improve their high-quality work even further. They paid great attention to detail. For example, in part of one scene involving a fierce argument, the pupils had decided to reach out and grip each other's hands to very poignant dramatic effect. They had planned this touch with great care.
- Pupils show real pride. Their writing, designs, artwork, sketches, and all other examples of their work are consistently well presented. Pupils wear their school uniforms and physical education kits smartly and with very evident self-respect. They are punctual to school and lessons.
- Pupils, for the most part, feel very safe. They are kind and very considerate of others. Bullying is very rare and the school generally prevents it and deals with it exceptionally well. The school council recently led 'no bystander' assemblies to encourage reporting of bullying.
- However, some pupils and parents report that occasionally pupils call others by inappropriate and unpleasant names. This is unusual but is nevertheless frightening or upsetting, especially to some younger pupils.
- The school sorts out most reported instances of name-calling, or any other unpleasant behaviour, quickly and very effectively. However, inspectors found that, in some circumstances, the nasty behaviour continues after it has been reported. A few pupils feel it is pointless, or even counter-productive, to report incidents to the staff. The school has not been quite sensitive enough to these problems.
- Pupils' attendance is improving. The school has introduced robust and effective systems for reducing absence. These include an 'attendance pyramid', which is well known to pupils and parents. It shows graphically how well each pupil attends. The headteacher recognises the importance of bringing parents and families on board with these recent changes.
- The rate of fixed-term exclusion is reducing considerably but remains high. This is because the school sustains a no-tolerance policy for certain offences, which automatically lead to exclusion. These include

disrupting lessons or swearing. Leaders believe, with justification, that this has served the school well by establishing clear expectations. However, they give too little consideration to whether other more effective interventions with some pupils might better prevent persistent misbehaviour. Too often pupils are excluded more than once, although the school is working hard to address this.

- The rate of permanent exclusion is very low.

Outcomes for pupils

are outstanding

- In 2015, the school sustained the very strong GCSE results achieved in 2014. About three quarters of pupils gained at least five good GCSE passes, including English and mathematics. This is well above the national average for all pupils and for girls.
- Whether or not they achieve this headline outcome, pupils in all year groups make outstanding levels of progress from their starting points. They all achieve valuable qualifications. At age 16, almost all pupils progress either into the school's own sixth form, or to other highly appropriate education or training.
- Learners achieve well in the rapidly improving sixth form. Across subjects, learners achieve many good grades at A level and reach their ambitions for future study or employment.
- Parents are delighted with how well their daughters achieve. One said, for example, 'my child is growing into a very well educated, clever, versatile and happy young individual'. Another wrote, 'I feel incredibly fortunate that my daughter attends (the school) and was completely in awe of her achievements at GCSE. She ... has hopes to go to Oxford University!' The inspection evidence supports these, and many similar, comments made by parents.
- The Year 7 pupils who read to an inspector did so confidently and accurately. They showed strong and growing comprehension skills and 'sounded out' difficult words correctly. They really appreciate the school's library provision. They benefit greatly from the extra reading support which is available, supported by older pupils.
- Disadvantaged pupils, entitled to the support of the pupil premium funding, achieve excellently across the school. Their attainment is above that of all pupils nationally. The gap with other pupils in the school is small and continues to reduce.
- Pupils with special educational needs make good, rather than outstanding, progress. Their achievement is, however, improving clearly. The school provides well for these pupils' needs and evaluates this provision robustly. Staff recognise that this work needs to develop still further to ensure that the pupils concerned make the same outstanding progress as do other pupils.
- The most-able pupils make excellent progress across all the subjects and attain very well at GCSE. Their needs are superbly met in lessons. Other activities help too. The Ulysses group in Key Stage 4, for example, helps higher-attaining pupils to raise their aspiration through an excellent programme of mentoring and guidance about future options. Sixth formers assist very usefully with this programme, sharing their experiences with their younger counterparts.
- Pupils achieve high levels of sporting and artistic success in local, and sometimes national, events.
- Pupils clearly understand, and can explain, fundamental British values. These include tolerance and democracy. The school recently won an award from the British Youth Council and the Department for Education, 'delivering democracy'. One aspect of this was holding an effective mock election across the school.

16 to 19 study programmes

are good

- Sixth form provision and outcomes are improving rapidly. Learners attain well and achieve good A-level grades. The school monitors their progress tightly. Learners achieve well from their starting points. This is as a result of the strong leadership in the whole school and the sixth form.
- The quality of sixth form teaching is consistently good. It benefits from the same inspiring culture of constant improvement as in the younger age groups. The gold, silver and bronze success criteria are used effectively. However, teachers have not always fully grasped the particular need at A level for learners to be increasingly analytical in their thinking. In some lessons, therefore, learners are not challenged as much as they could be.
- The sixth form director is working very effectively with the subject departments in the girls' and boys'

schools. He ensures that the above special features needed in sixth form teaching, and the examination specifications, are better understood and applied by staff. This is bringing further improvement.

- Learners are well prepared for their future. The sixth form ensures they acquire good skills needed for employability and further study. There is a strong emphasis on learners becoming leaders.
- Staff guide learners effectively about their future careers. There are high and appropriate aspirations. Many pupils proceed to university, including those in the Russell Group.
- Sixth form learners are very supportive of each other and of younger pupils. They conduct themselves well. They are closely involved in the life of the school, often as leaders. For example, sixth formers mentor higher-attaining Year 8 pupils in different subjects including art and history. This is purposeful, fun, stimulating and challenging to the younger pupils. The sixth formers report helpfully to parents on the Year 8 pupils' progress.
- Pupils feel well supported and safe. The school offers them valuable guidance on issues such as relationships and finance. Pupils believe they are becoming confident, strong, caring young women.

School details

Unique reference number	138490
Local authority	Oxfordshire
Inspection number	10005569

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	Secondary comprehensive
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Girls
Gender of pupils in 16 to 19 study programmes	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1,212
Of which, number on roll in 16 to 19 study programmes	207 girls (336 including boys in the joint sixth form)
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Marcus Gover
Headteacher	Rachael Warwick
Telephone number	01235 812092
Website	www.didcotgirls.oxon.sch.uk
Email address	head.4139@didcotgirls.oxon.sch.uk

Information about this school

- This is a slightly larger than average sized girls' secondary school. Since it was last inspected, it has converted to become an academy. It is now part of the Didcot Academy of Schools Multi-Academy Trust.
- The school shares its large sixth form, known as Didcot Sixth Form College, with the nearby boys' school, St Birinus School. That school is inspected separately. In this inspection, inspectors took account only of the outcomes for the girls in the sixth form.
- The headteacher is a local leader of education. She works as a mentor through the Oxfordshire teaching school alliance.
- The school does not use any alternative provision, based on other sites.
- The school meets the government's minimum standard for pupils' progress and attainment, known as the floor standard.
- The proportion of disadvantaged pupils, eligible for pupil premium funding, is below average.
- The proportion of pupils with disabilities and special educational needs is about average.
- Almost all pupils speak English as their first language.
- Most pupils are White British. There are small numbers of pupils from other ethnic backgrounds.

Information about this inspection

- This inspection was originally a short, one-day, inspection, with two of Her Majesty’s Inspectors. The predecessor school had been graded as good at its last inspection. The inspection converted to a full inspection with five extra inspectors attending on the second day. This was because the school was showing improvement.
- Inspectors observed lessons across many subjects and in all year groups. They scrutinised samples of pupils’ work and attended an assembly. They heard pupils in Year 7 read.
- They held meetings with the headteacher, staff, governors and parents. They had many discussions with pupils. They also considered the views of staff from the 61 confidential online questionnaires returned. They took account of 31 online questionnaires returned by pupils.
- Inspectors evaluated documentation including the school’s self-evaluation, development plan, policies and minutes of meetings.
- They took account of the views of parents from 174 responses to Parent View, Ofsted’s online questionnaire. The school also provided summaries of its own parental consultations to the inspection team.

Inspection team

Robin Hammerton, lead inspector	Her Majesty’s Inspector
Alan Taylor-Bennett	Her Majesty’s Inspector
Mark Bagust	Ofsted Inspector
Francois Walker	Ofsted Inspector
Susan Willman	Ofsted Inspector
Nicholas Phillips	Ofsted Inspector
Susan Child	Ofsted Inspector

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