

The Cooper School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	123234
Local Authority	Oxfordshire
Inspection number	314549
Inspection dates	21 - 22 November 2007
Reporting inspector	Nigel Fletcher (HMI)

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

Type of School	Comprehensive
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11-16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	898
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr David Dunne
Headteacher	Mr Ben Baxter
Date of previous school inspection	01 December 2003
School address	Churchill Road Bicester OX26 4RS
Telephone number	01869 242121
Fax number	01869 362693

Age group	11-16
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Introduction

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

Description of the school

The Cooper School is an average sized comprehensive school serving an area with pockets of high deprivation. The proportions of students from minority ethnic groups, and who have English as an additional language, are below average. The number of students eligible for free school meals is broadly average, as is the proportion of students identified with learning difficulties and disabilities. In 2005 the school was awarded specialist status in science.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

'We feel that The Cooper School has gone from strength to strength.' This comment from a parent represents the views of many about this good school. The improvements that the school has made over the last three years enable students to make good progress in their educational and personal development. The broad curriculum meets the needs of students well, and there are many opportunities for additional education, including cultural and sporting activities, which enhance their progress and enjoyment of life at school. Standards are improving, and are now broadly average. Although attainment of the high grades in GCSE examinations is below the national average, it is the highest level that the school has ever achieved. Overall, students make good progress compared with their attainment when they start the school.

Teaching is good overall, with some examples of outstanding practice across the school. Lessons are well planned, with interesting and varied activities to provide a good atmosphere for learning. However, in a small number of lessons, when students' attention is not engaged, they easily lose concentration. Nevertheless, as one parent said, 'All teachers have the students' best interests at heart'. Parents report favourably on the good quality of care, guidance and support provided throughout the school, and the benefit these have on the progress, and growing confidence of their children. Consequently, the personal development of students is good. Students enjoy their education, and behaviour is generally good.

The strong senior leadership team, supported by well informed governors, sets a clear vision for the future of the school, which is shared and supported by all staff. The views of students and parents are much valued and school leaders have a good understanding of how the school is doing. Most middle managers have good strategies for improving their areas of responsibility, although a few do not yet evaluate performance effectively and consistently. The impact of the specialist status in science on improving learning throughout the school has contributed to the good improvement made since the last inspection. It recognises that there are still improvements to make, but well developed plans are in place and the school has good capacity to continue to improve. It manages its resources well and provides good value for money. As one parent summed up, 'I would recommend the school to any newcomers to the area.'

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise the overall quality of teaching and learning to improve attainment in GCSE examinations.
- Improve the consistency and sharpness of monitoring and evaluation by middle management in order to raise achievement.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Achievement is good and standards are broadly average. The attainment of students when they enter the school in Year 7 is around the national average, but the proportion with high standards on entry is lower than average. In Years 7 to 9, students make good progress, representing a continued improvement in performance in all three core subjects, especially English and science. Performance by the end of Year 11 has also improved due to the good quality of the teaching, and the improved resources through the school's science specialism.

Although attainment of the higher grades at GCSE is below the national average, the proportion of students gaining five or more passes at grades A* to G was significantly above average. All students achieved at least one entry level qualification. School data show that, overall, students now make good progress compared with their starting points. This was confirmed in lesson observations, and discussions with the students, during inspection. However, there is variation in achievement between subjects; the school is fully aware of what needs to be done to improve performance in those subjects, and improvements can clearly be seen. The school analyses the performance of specific groups of students and takes action to address any differences. For example, it runs additional courses for underachieving students, and to support vulnerable learners. As a result, there is little variation between the achievements of different groups.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Students enjoy school, and this is reflected in their good attendance. As one parent reported, 'My son loved Cooper from day 1, and is always happy to go to school'. The younger students are fulsome in their praise of the 'befrienders scheme' and its positive impact on their transition from primary school. Students' good spiritual, moral and cultural development is demonstrated in the respect they show towards each other and to adults, and their positive attitudes to learning; they appreciate the opportunities to reflect on the lessons of the past, through trips to the First World War battlefields, and to Auschwitz.

Students' behaviour around the school is good. In a small minority of lessons where behaviour is less than good, it is usually managed effectively. Students feel safe at school; there are few incidents of bullying and most students and parents are confident that issues are dealt with appropriately. Students make good use of the extensive range of extra-curricular physical education activities, including the well- equipped gym. The Café Scientifique offers a calm and friendly environment in which students enjoy a good range of healthy food. Students contribute well to the smooth running of the school community through the school council, and students from Year 9 enjoy being 'Bardwell Buddies' at the local special school.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Students progress well because of the good quality of teaching and learning. Relationships between teachers and students are good. Teachers show good subject knowledge, and in some lessons, such as in history, their passion for the subject is reflected by the students. The provision of information and communication technology (ICT) has improved since the last inspection, due, in part, to the school's specialist status; it is used frequently and effectively to support learning. The most successful lessons challenge and inspire students. They have clear learning objectives, proceed at a good pace, and involve varied and interesting activities adapted to the needs of all students. Direct questioning probes and extends the students' understanding. Homework is set and marked regularly, with pertinent comments to ensure that students are clear about what they need to do to improve. Consequently, students respond with enthusiasm, produce work of high quality, and make good progress. One parent commented that his children 'are well motivated and enthused by the teaching they receive'. However, in some lessons, too much understanding is assumed and there are fewer opportunities for independent learning. Activities, in these lessons, do not hold the attention of all students, who lose concentration, and homework is not set or marked consistently.

There are robust systems in place for tracking and monitoring students' progress. However, a few teachers do not make the best use of the information available from assessment in planning tasks to meet learners' individual needs.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The school provides a broad and balanced curriculum, enabling students to make good progress at a pace suited to their individual needs and aspirations. It includes a wide range of vocational options, as well as accelerated programmes of study. The specialist science status has made a significant impact in improving resources across the curriculum, with links being developed between science and other subjects.

The school has good partnerships with local schools, and the local college. However, links with employers have not yet been developed. Its involvement in a partnership for the 14-19 diplomas is well established, and offers an exciting opportunity to extend further the curriculum. The wide range of enrichment events such as trips, and visits, adds value to the students' cultural and educational awareness, and their enjoyment of school. The extra-curricular sporting and exercise activities contribute to their physical well-being. Lessons on 'learning to learn' greatly enhance the personal development and academic progress of younger students.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

The school is a very caring community that has the welfare, health and safety of its students at heart. Many parents agree that, 'when concerns have arisen, they have been handled efficiently, and positive action taken'. Students appreciate the way that teachers and other staff are approachable and helpful. Reports to parents are valued for identifying their children's progress, and their improvement targets, in each subject.

Good support is given to students who need help with their learning, or with personal issues. This enables them to make as good progress as that of their peers. However, the effectiveness of learning assistants in lessons is inconsistent. Procedures for ensuring students' protection and safety are well established, and all statutory checks are in place.

The school works well with parents. They greatly value the 'Cooper Parent Voice', which has been instrumental in, for example, the provision of a maths workshop, and advice guides for parents. Support for students moving from primary school is strong. Students in Year 7 appreciate the high level of support they receive from the well trained 'befrienders' from Year 11, who are attached to their tutor groups.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The headteacher sets a clear direction for developing and improving the work of the school. With good support from the senior leadership team, he has succeeded in establishing a strong and collective sense of purpose among staff. Parents comment on the improvement in standards, accommodation and resources over the past two years, which have raised the status of the school. There is a rigorous lesson observation scheme, and good opportunities for staff development. However, whilst the school's views of the quality of teaching are accurate, lesson observations do not place sufficient

focus on the progress that students make. Nevertheless, the quality of teaching and learning is improving, standards are rising, and students now achieve well. Consequently, the school has good capacity for further improvement.

Effective self-evaluation has led to the identification of further areas for development, although there is insufficient reference to development of the school's science specialism. Most middle managers show a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of their areas of responsibility, and have developed good strategies for improvement. However, some are unsure about how to use data for effective evaluation, although, with support, they set realistic and challenging targets aimed at improving performance. Learning coordinators analyse students' progress to identify areas of underachievement, and where extra support is required. However, impact and deployment of learning support assistants in the classroom are not monitored, or evaluated, on a regular basis. Consequently, in a few lessons, not all students receive the extra support they need. Governors are well informed. They provide appropriate challenge and support to school leaders in helping the school to improve. The school manages its budget well and provides good value for money.

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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
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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?	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	2

Personal development and well-being

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

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interest of learners?	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2

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.

All white boxes must be completed. The grey boxes are used wherever the inspection team has sufficient evidence to come to a secure judgement.

² IE - denotes that insufficient evidence was available to inspectors for a judgement to be made.

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	2
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	2
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No

Annex B



Letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection.

3 December 2007

Dear Students

Inspection of The Cooper School, Bicester, OX26 4RS

Thank you for the warm welcome you gave us when we visited your school. We enjoyed meeting you, talking to your teachers and other staff and visiting lessons. Many of you and your parents told us how the good relationships, between you and the staff, meant that you enjoyed school and felt that you were progressing well.

You told us that your school provided a good education. We fully agree with this view and are satisfied that the school leaders have a clear view of the school's strengths and weaknesses. The school has many strengths, and we were particularly impressed by:

- the way the school is led by senior staff and the commitment of its staff
- courses and other activities that the school provides to ensure that you have the best opportunities to make good progress in your academic and personal development
- the way the school looks after you and provides good support for those students having difficulties
- your attitude to learning and healthy living, and the way you treat each other with respect.

To make your school even better we have recommended that it:

- raises the overall quality of teaching and learning to enable you to improve your results in GCSE examinations
- provides support for some middle managers so that their skills are as good as the best managers so that they can help you do even better.

The senior staff and governors know what needs to be done to improve the school and have plans to do it. We believe that if you behave well and work hard in lessons, and help the school put these plans in place, then standards will rise further. On behalf of the inspection team, thank you for making our visit so enjoyable and we wish you every success for the future.

Nigel Fletcher HMI
Lead Inspector