

Sydenham School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	100741
Local Authority	Lewisham
Inspection number	335594
Inspection dates	23–24 June 2010
Reporting inspector	Robin Hammerton 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	11–19
Gender of pupils	Girls
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1470
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	243
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Eamon Martin
Headteacher	Ms Barbara Williams
Date of previous school inspection	22 February 2007
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four additional inspectors. They observed one assembly, sports day and 38 lessons, involving 37 teachers, including two joint observations with the school's senior leaders. Discussions were held with staff, parents, students and the chair of governors. Inspectors scrutinised documents including minutes of meetings, policies, assessments, plans, evaluations and students' work. They analysed the 79 questionnaire responses from parents as well as questionnaires completed by staff and students.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at the following:

- the causes of the rising GCSE results and whether these show that students' learning and progress are good
- whether there is notable underachievement among students
- the quality and rigour of the school's self-evaluation and the contribution it makes to further improvement.

Information about the school

This large girls' school, with a few boys in its sixth form, serves a richly diverse area. Students come from a wide range of ethnic, socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds. A high proportion of students speak English as an additional language, although most speak it fluently. The school identifies an above average proportion of its students as having special educational needs and/or disabilities. It has specialisms in science, mathematics and the Raising Attainment Partnership Programme (RAPP). The school works in federation with two other local schools, sharing much sixth form provision. From September, the key sixth form partnership will be with one local boys' school.

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

This is a good school. It provides an inclusive and enjoyable education, which students and parents highly value. Attendance is high. Standards are rising with the large majority of students, from all backgrounds, making good progress and gaining worthwhile qualifications.

The attitude of the students themselves is an asset. They can be high spirited, funny and sometimes loud; but they are fully ready to focus and learn, taking responsibility within school and looking after each other. They develop good personal skills and become well prepared to move on to the next stage of education or a workplace. They understand the importance of healthy living but do not always apply this through healthy eating or significant participation in physical activity.

The school advises and cares for students exceptionally well. They are safeguarded very robustly, and consequently feel very secure. Any who are especially vulnerable are looked after really closely. Induction procedures for new students are well organised. As one girl put it, 'I was worried before I came but it doesn't feel like a big school.'

Teaching is good. Staff share their expert knowledge with clarity and lessons proceed at a good pace. However, there are some inconsistencies in the quality of lessons. Often, teachers do not use assessments to ensure that students are given work that closely matches their needs, so it may be too difficult or, for higher attainers, not challenging enough. Sometimes, marking and other feedback to students by staff is framed insufficiently precisely to help students improve their work.

The curriculum is practical and relevant, enabling students' good progress. In some subjects, especially in non-examined courses in Key Stage 3, students enjoy a rich and broad range of content but some planning lacks clear progression and challenge so that students are left with a few gaps in their knowledge, experience and skills. The school's partnership arrangements for students aged 14–19 do not currently provide enough lower level and vocational courses to meet all students' needs. This reduces the options available to some students, although they are helpfully and impartially guided onto courses with other local providers.

The school is led with determination and purpose by its senior leaders, ably supported by governors. The school has a good awareness of its strengths and areas for improvement, most particularly in respect of the quality of teaching. However, in

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a minority of areas, such as curriculum, engagement with parents and carers, partnerships, community cohesion and equalities the school graded itself too highly against Ofsted criteria, and this could reduce the impetus for further enhancements in those aspects. Nevertheless, carefully organised management systems and the ever-increasing productive involvement of middle leaders ensure that the school has good capacity to continue its already sustained improvement.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Increase further the consistency of the quality of teaching, so that the best practice in the school becomes more widespread, especially by:
 - raising the quality of marking and other feedback to students to help them improve their work
 - providing tasks which match each student's assessed needs and talents more closely.
- Improve further the curriculum, so that it:
 - includes more vocational and lower level options for students aged 14–19
 - ensures sound conceptual understanding and progressive development of skills in all subjects, especially in non-examined areas
 - improves students' healthy lifestyles.
- Ensure that school self-evaluation evidence is consistently rigorously matched to objective criteria, so that grading against Ofsted standards is fully accurate.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils**2**

Students enter with a wide range of needs and attainment levels. Most make good progress, with the overwhelming majority gaining five qualifications. There is no marked difference in the progress of different groups. In 2009, the proportion of students achieving five GCSEs at A* to C improved and matched the national average. In several subjects, such as art and design, religious education, citizenship, history, sciences and modern foreign languages, the proportion of students gaining A and A* grades is higher than average and/or improving well. Demanding targets are largely met. Some students overcome significant obstacles, with excellent support, to achieve well. Looked after children and those with complex needs are included well and indistinguishable from their peers.

The good learning observed in lessons and the school's own data indicate further improvement in outcomes this year. In science lessons, students consistently enjoy practical and experimental tasks which develop their understanding well. Work is well matched to their needs, raising attainment. The school meets its specialist targets, though performance in science is better than that in mathematics, where the rate of learning in lessons is less consistent. Students progress particularly well in English language and some other subjects, including art and design. In these subjects, inspectors observed high-quality learning through hands-on activities that the students often reviewed astutely themselves.

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Students feel very safe and well protected; parents agree. Students say that bullying is uncommon and dealt with well. They enjoy school. These factors, and excellent work from the attendance officer, mean that absence rates are low and declining. Occasionally, however, students arrive slightly late to lessons. Students understand the importance of a healthy lifestyle but many feel they are not attaining it as much as they would like. Some eat less healthy food in school and only a minority choose to join regular physical activities.

A minority of students and parents expressed some concerns about behaviour. Around the school, students can be noisy and lively but this simply reflects their youthful enthusiasm; they are self-disciplined when needed. Inspectors noted that students concentrate very well in class, especially when the lessons are interesting, as most are. The exclusion rate is low, although it has risen slightly this year. Students take responsibility for each other, through evaluation of each other’s work or sensitive involvement in groups. Their good contribution to the community shows in several further ways, such as being peer mentors, school councillors, lesson observers, receptionists, participating in the Duke of Edinburgh scheme, supporting charities and working with primary children. The school encourages such endeavour very explicitly, through displays, for example. Students are often mature and reflective, with high aspirations and future aims, ready for a promising future.

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	3
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	2
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	1
The extent of pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2

How effective is the provision?

As a result of the school’s good work in developing teaching, most lessons have

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

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these strengths which together ensure that students progress well:

- teachers’ good subject knowledge leading to clear explanations and well-developed questioning
- productive relationships with students being keen to learn
- clear whole-class learning objectives and carefully constructed lesson planning, leading to well-paced and purposeful learning
- opportunities for staff and students to assess learning effectively together
- the use of interesting resources
- activities which are practical, motivating and thought provoking.

The quality of these elements is, however, inconsistent, so a minority of lessons have satisfactory rather than good or better teaching. Pupils do not always have immediate opportunities to address teachers’ verbal comments or marking, even when the feedback is very specific. Teachers do not always sufficiently adapt work in lessons to meet students’ diverse assessed needs, and too often all students do the same work. Students progress faster where lessons are stronger in this respect, for example in science.

The relevant and enjoyable curriculum promotes curiosity and teamwork. The new two-year Key Stage 3 allows for more accelerated learning and imaginative content. However, the school is aware that there are too few lower level and vocational courses for older students. The many visits out contribute well to learning and examination success. There are also popular residential activities and a very broad range of activities outside school hours, though comparatively few involve physical activity. In some areas, the curriculum is insufficiently demanding, even though it is stimulating. For example, inspectors saw only a limited range of opportunities for extended writing. Year 9 students enjoyed composing music but achieved less well than they might as the earlier curriculum had insufficiently helped them to understand some key concepts, such as musical form. However, the art and design curriculum provides an effective model of building on previous learning.

Students receive exemplary care, guidance and support, sometimes drawing on strong partnerships with external specialists. They get excellent, personalised advice about future options; few then fail to complete courses. The school promotes high attendance very successfully. Students designated as gifted and talented receive some inspiring additional provision. Students who speak English as an additional language, and those having special educational needs and/or disabilities, are assessed promptly and regularly, with parental input. Any underachievement is quickly identified. Vulnerable students and those experiencing emotional difficulties enjoy imaginative and highly personalised programmes such as ‘step by step’. Teaching assistants ensure that students needing support can participate in lessons.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	2
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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

How effective are leadership and management?

The headteacher and her senior team work together well. They are ambitious for students and communicate this plainly. The school's 'aim high' motto rings true. Management systems are dovetailed well and very effective in sustaining continuing improvement. Robust action is taken if needed to address weaknesses. Staff development is good, including through the well-established cross-departmental learning communities. All teachers belong to one of these. They help create an ethos of professional dialogue and developing practice. Individual subject leaders are held accountable for standards, quality of provision and ensuring that whole-school policies make an impact in their areas. Some departments have improved faster than others, leading to some inconsistency in students' outcomes.

Self-evaluation is carried out very systematically, so the school knows itself well. However, the school graded itself as outstanding in some aspects against Ofsted criteria, which when the evidence was analysed by inspectors proved to be good. For example, there are too few well-established procedures for parents and carers to be heavily involved in key school decisions for the school's engagement with parents and carers to be graded outstanding. In discussion, senior staff and the chair of governors understood that such over-grading could slow down some further improvements in these aspects.

Relations with the local authority, police, other schools (some of which the school supports through its second specialism) and many other partners are successful. Worthwhile opportunities for parents and carers to connect with the school are being increasingly arranged, some through specialist school activity. Even so, some parents still back away from engaging. Communication with parents is good, using different methods to suit different lifestyles. The school is a very cohesive community. Its concerted commitment to equalities, including a very effective disability equality policy, leads to all student groups progressing well and many students receiving some carefully tailored provision.

The good governing body plays a vital strategic role. Working closely with the staff, it has ensured that safeguarding arrangements, including child protection procedures, are outstanding. Governors consider seriously options for the school's future. They support the school while challenging it to improve, although they accepted the over-optimistic self-evaluated grades.

These are the grades for leadership and management

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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	2
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	2

Sixth form

School data and evidence from observations show that students from all groups make good progress in the sixth form and reach above average standards at A level. The teaching is good, and students understand what they need to do to improve their grades. Most students complete their courses, for which they are well suited, and they say they are given good academic and personal guidance. Many progress to university. There is more emphasis on academic A levels than vocational or lower-level qualifications, which means that some students need to seek provision elsewhere. The school is changing its partnership arrangements and is aware that this provides an opportunity to address the imbalance. The sixth form is well managed, with a strong commitment to meeting the needs of each student. Sixth form students enjoy a wide range of activities out of school hours and make some contributions to the wider school community, although this aspect is underdeveloped.

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

The large majority of questionnaires returned by parents and carers show high satisfaction with the school. This was supported by the parents and carers who met with inspectors. They find the school approachable and are pleased with their

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children's progress and the enjoyable activities. However, they are less satisfied with students' healthy lifestyles, according with inspection evidence. Some expressed concerns about aspects of behaviour. While there are incidents of poor conduct by some students, these are dealt with well by the school. Overall, inspectors judge behaviour to be good, especially in lessons. A minority of parents and carers did not feel that the school takes account of their concerns and suggestions, and the school is aware that its growing systems for consulting with parents and carers may not yet reach all families equally. In their written comments, some highlighted strong provision for their children's particular needs or talents but also pointed out that these needs are not always addressed in daily lessons. Inspectors agree.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Sydenham 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 79 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 1470 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	27	34	46	58	2	3	4	5
The school keeps my child safe	32	41	41	52	3	4	2	3
The school informs me about my child's progress	38	48	37	47	4	5	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	40	51	31	39	5	6	1	1
The teaching is good at this school	25	32	49	62	3	4	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	22	28	43	54	13	16	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	13	16	40	51	16	20	2	3
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)	23	29	42	53	5	6	0	0
The school meets my child's particular needs	22	28	48	61	6	8	2	3
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	20	25	40	51	15	19	4	5
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	20	25	40	51	11	14	4	5
The school is led and managed effectively	32	41	40	51	2	3	2	3
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	37	47	34	43	3	4	4	5

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

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	51	45	0	4
Primary schools	6	41	42	10
Secondary schools	8	34	44	14
Sixth forms	10	37	50	3
Special schools	32	38	25	5
Pupil referral units	12	43	31	14
All schools	9	40	40	10

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 is for the period 1 September to 31 December 2009 and is the most recently published data available (see www.ofsted.gov.uk). Please note that the sample of schools inspected during the autumn term 2009 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. Secondary school figures include those that have sixth forms, and sixth form figures include only the data specifically for sixth form inspection judgements.

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:	<p>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.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ 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.



25 June 2010

Dear Students

Inspection of Sydenham School, London, SE26 4RD

Thank you very much for making us welcome when we came to inspect your school recently. It was a slightly unusual time for the school, with examinations, your sports day and the World Cup all happening at the same time! Nevertheless, we found out everything we needed and thank you for helping us with that.

We found that your school is a good one – of which you can be proud. It helps you to make good progress and to achieve useful qualifications. You leave the school well prepared for your next stage of education or getting a job. Any of you who need special help or support get it really quickly and helpfully. If you have particular talents, the school often provides for them. One other thing we did notice, though, is that sometimes the way you present your work can be a little untidy, even though you have been working hard. It's important to take a pride in how you present yourself and this is part of that. So do work on that.

We noticed that you mainly behave very well, especially in lessons. You also look after each other and take real responsibility. Some of you are high spirited at times – it was good to see you having fun. The main things are to keep this in check, don't go too far, watch out for others, especially those who like a quieter life, and know when to stop, which we saw that you do. It is also great that absence is so low. Well done.

We made some recommendations to help the school become better still. These are:

- to ensure all lessons are as good as the best ones, and that the work set is well matched to your different needs, with marking and feedback always showing you how to get better
- to improve the curriculum (which is already good) so that there are more options for you at ages 14 to 19, that your skills and knowledge are built up more fully in some areas and that you can live even healthier lifestyles
- to make sure that when the school is checking how well it is doing, it marks itself more strictly in order to highlight better any areas that could be improved.

Yours sincerely

Robin Hammerton
Her Majesty's Inspector

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