

School inspection report

15 to 17 October 24

Tonbridge School

High Street

Tonbridge

Kent

TN9 1JP

The Independent Schools Inspectorate is appointed by the Department for Education to inspect association independent schools in England. Our inspections report on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards and other applicable regulatory requirements are met, collectively referred to in this report as 'the Standards'.

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Summary of inspection findings

1. Through the 'only connect' approach, the school's aim of building connections between people, ideas, talents and enthusiasms is well understood by staff, pupils and parents. It is highly effective in practice.
2. Leaders have firmly established a school-wide culture of mutual respect and strong community values. This actively promotes the wellbeing of both day and boarding pupils.
3. Boarding is well managed. Leaders and governors check that systems are effective and boarders are supervised and safe at all times.
4. Governors and leaders use robust and dynamic arrangements to safeguard pupils, both day and boarding. Staff and governors receive appropriate training, and exercise skill and sensitivity in carrying out their roles. Pupils feel safe and secure in the school's caring and nurturing environment.
5. Pupils develop into very well-rounded individuals through the school's broad and extensive range of educational and recreational opportunities. Pupils discover new interests and talents. They flourish academically, socially and physically. The balance between rigorous academic studies and enriching co-curricular activities prepares pupils for future success, giving them the leadership skills and experience necessary to thrive in life beyond school.
6. Governors and leaders take effective action to improve the quality of education. They have strengthened the sixth-form curriculum by providing different pathways that incorporate academic specialisms with the enrichment and breadth of additional studies. This increased curriculum choice together with targeted academic support and effective use of data allows teachers to plan lessons and after-school programmes that address pupils' specific needs. This has led to a significant positive effect on pupils' outcomes, with an increase in the proportion of pupils achieving the highest grades in A-level examinations. This is a significant strength of the school.
7. Leaders are keen that pupils throughout the school receive a high-quality education and achieve well. Teaching staff share information, best practices and strategies to support pupils who face similar challenges. Leaders have recently introduced a system for data analysis to track pupils' progress and make sure pupils learn successfully over time. However, this system and how it is used is not fully embedded across the school.
8. Leaders understand that pupils' physical and mental health is critical for their overall success and happiness. Pupils access a strong support network that reduces stress, increases emotional resilience and allows pupils to focus on their education. By promoting emotional wellbeing, the school helps pupils manage the pressures of academic life and the many co-curricular opportunities available to them.
9. The school encourages pupils to participate in an extensive range of community outreach activities. Many of these are pupil initiated and led. This very effectively develops pupils' confidence, communication and leadership skills. This varied and dynamic programme is open to all pupils and all age groups. This is a significant strength of the school. This is recognised as such and appreciated by both pupils and parents.

The extent to which the school meets the Standards

- Standards relating to leadership and management, and governance are met.
- Standards relating to the quality of education, training and recreation are met.
- Standards relating to pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing are met.
- Standards relating to pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society are met.
- Standards relating to safeguarding are met.

Recommended next steps

Leaders should:

- check that the newly introduced system for data analysis is used consistently and effectively across the school in order to maximise pupils' academic outcomes.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

10. Leaders and governors are committed to the school's continuous improvement. They reflect on what the school does best and what needs to improve. They take action to ensure pupils' needs are met and staff are appropriately trained. They systematically review and develop the academic curriculum in order to optimise pupils' achievements.
11. Academic and pastoral leaders ensure that the breadth and depth of the curriculum and co-curriculum is stimulating and challenging so as to spark pupils' curiosity and enthusiasm to learn. Pupils gain skills and experience, discover new talents, broaden their understanding and contribute to their community.
12. Pupils talk with maturity about day and boarding life in the school. They articulate thoughtful and balanced viewpoints that strongly reflect the rapport and positive relationships they enjoy with leaders, staff and each other.
13. Governors and leaders carry out a range of risk assessments to ensure pupils' wellbeing and safety. They put measures in place to minimise any risks that are identified.
14. Governors work closely with leaders. They provide challenge and support in equal measure. An effective safeguarding policy is in place that promotes the welfare and safety of pupils. Leaders work with external agencies when necessary. All policies are regularly reviewed, updated and implemented as appropriate, ensuring that standards are met and maintained.
15. There is clear commitment from leaders to meet the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 through the detailed accessibility plan. This sets out how reasonable adjustments will improve pupils' accessibility to all the school has to offer.
16. A range of information is published, provided or made available to both current and prospective parents, and the Department for Education (DfE), as appropriate. Leaders inform the appropriate local authority when pupils join or leave the school at non-standard times. The complaints policy is followed promptly by leaders in accordance with the required timeframes. Detailed records are maintained and leaders are reflective regarding any lessons to be learned.
17. The boarding houses provide a safe and secure environment in which pupils thrive as valued members of the school community. Pupils are keen to use their time to pursue academic and co-curricular achievements. Boarding accommodation is well maintained and resourced, and fit for purpose.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to leadership and management, and governance

18. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

19. Leaders have put in place well-equipped facilities that allow pupils to access a wide range of ambitious curricular and co-curricular learning opportunities across all subjects. Leaders and managers make sure that staff are suitably qualified, with secure subject knowledge to meet pupils' different learning needs, including more able pupils.
20. Most lessons are well planned, and teachers use highly effective, stimulating and challenging teaching approaches. Pupils acquire new skills, knowledge and understanding rapidly and in all subject areas. Pupils embrace the strong work ethic encouraged by the school and make the most of the learning opportunities made available to them. They respect and value their teachers and are grateful for the extra support that teachers unstintingly provide when required. Pupils make good academic progress from their different starting points.
21. External examination results at both GCSE and A level are well above the national average. Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and those pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) also make good progress and achieve well.
22. The revised sixth-form curriculum provides pupils with a flexible and personalised educational experience. The four academically rigorous and challenging curriculum pathways enable pupils to develop important workplace skills such as complex problem solving, analytical innovation, critical thinking and analysis. These curriculum changes have led to a significant improvement in pupils' academic achievements. This includes external examination results at A level, particularly at the highest level.
23. Pupils are enthusiastic learners and engage well with their lessons, which cover ambitious levels of content and skills. Pupils learn effectively on their own and with each other. Teachers have high expectations of pupils and use questions and prompts to good effect, which challenges pupils to think deeply and apply what they know to more complex work. In German, Year 11 pupils further their understanding of verb tenses and prepositions because of skilled questioning from teachers that enables pupils to extend their responses and provide more detailed explanations.
24. Pupils, especially those in the sixth-form, are articulate and express their ideas fluently to their teachers and their peers. They listen well to each other and respect others' opinions. For example, in mathematics, Year 13 pupils work together to solve complex tasks involving motion. They trust each other and readily share ideas and solutions.
25. Pupils are curious and demonstrate genuine pleasure in uncovering and discovering new insights. They are confident to apply what they know, whether it be through personal mindfulness practice, exploring co-ordinate geometry or gaining a better comprehension of rural life in the American west during the Great Depression.
26. Pupils who have SEND are well catered for within lessons with sensitive, targeted support. Pupils have access to a rich curriculum that goes beyond preparing them for external examinations. They are taught to think for themselves, take responsibility for managing their own learning and pursue personal academic interests independently, beyond the classroom.
27. Leaders check any additional needs of pupils who speak EAL when they join the school. The school allows curriculum flexibility in pupils' modern foreign languages options. Leaders and teachers put

the necessary support in place to improve pupils' higher order linguistic skills and analysis of written text if required. Pupils who speak EAL make good progress with their acquisition of and fluency in English.

28. Pupils' academic progress is gathered and monitored to assure leaders that pupils learn successfully over time. This includes pupils who have SEND and those who speak EAL. However, a better co-ordinated approach is needed in relation to the school's new system for data analysis so that the performance data is used consistently and effectively to further benefit pupils' academic progress.
29. Pupils are frequently encouraged to reflect on their own academic achievements and progress in order to develop self-awareness and grow as scholars. Teachers regularly check that pupils have remembered what they have been taught. They use this information to adapt their teaching and plan pupils' next steps. Teachers provide constant feedback so pupils know where they have been successful and understand how to improve their work.
30. Teachers provide parents with regular updates and reports about their child's progress and achievements. This is particularly the case for parents of pupils who have SEND and those who speak EAL. Pupils are given many opportunities to reflect on their progress using the reports and grades issued by teachers, including through discussions with their housemasters.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to the quality of education, training and recreation

- 31. All the relevant Standards are met.**

Section 3: Pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing

32. Leaders provide a range of support systems for pupils' physical and mental wellbeing. Pupils understand that much of this support requires them to use their initiative but readily acknowledge that the house system, for both day pupils and those who board, offers a close-knit support network and that staff readily check on their wellbeing. Pupils have access to counsellors and there is an independent listener for boarders. The pupil-led anti-bullying council (ABC) is effective in preventing and resolving bullying incidents. Pupils feel safe and supported emotionally.
33. During lessons, pupils' behaviour and attitudes to learning are overwhelmingly respectful, focused and constructive. Pupils engage readily with a full range of activities, and willingly take responsibility for themselves and others. Their positive behaviour consistently extends beyond the classroom throughout the school day and in the boarding environments.
34. Leaders ensure the school's behaviour and anti-bullying policies are implemented effectively. Pupils understand these policies and appreciate that they promote good behaviour in pupils and support their wellbeing across the school. The very few issues that do arise are dealt with promptly and appropriately. Pupils are confident that house staff and the ABC members quickly and effectively resolve any problems. This is reflected in leaders' detailed incident logs and their follow-up actions.
35. Leaders have developed a broad and extensive pastoral education programme which encompasses relationships and sex education (RSE), citizenship and personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education. Leaders choose for this to be taught in small groups by specialist teachers. Pupils take part in open, honest and safe discussions on such matters as consent, which is viewed as being of particular importance for teenage boys. Pupils recognise the importance of learning about emotional self-regulation and healthy mental attitudes. The programme is continually updated to ensure it is relevant and meets pupils' needs.
36. Pupils visit the chapel and welcome the opportunity this provides for quiet reflection during their very busy school lives. Pupils' physical health is promoted through the wide range of competitive sports and leisure activities available and their independent use of the swimming pool and gym.
37. There are many curricular and co-curricular commitments and opportunities available to all pupils during their time in school. For many pupils, this is a major part of why they enjoy studying and living at the school. However, some pupils, particularly in Year 9, express concerns over their work-life balance with, occasionally, an overly enthusiastic commitment of their time.
38. Sixth-form pupils mentor younger pupils new to the school. This boosts their self-esteem and sense of purpose and contributes to the mental wellbeing of both groups.
39. Pupils welcome and fully embrace the wide variety of leadership opportunities available both during the school day and in the boarding houses. Roles such as heads of school, prefects, house and sports captains, ABC members and mentors enable pupils to develop their resilience, self-confidence and self-esteem. Older pupils play a significant part in modelling positive behaviour and attitudes for younger pupils to aspire to.

40. Pupils benefit from an experienced staff team and robust systems for health and safety, risk assessments and first aid. Fire drills and evacuation procedures are practised frequently during the school day and boarding time, with appropriate logging of such exercises. Facilities are good and premises are well maintained. Pupils are well supervised during the school day and in the boarding houses.
41. The admission and attendance registers are well kept. Leaders make sure that the recent government guidance for correct codes is used. There is an appropriate in-house system to track registration and ensure pupils' regular attendance in full-time education. Absences are followed up and investigated, as are the destinations of pupils who leave school during the academic year.
42. Boarding provides a safe and happy environment where pupils thrive socially and emotionally. Boarding accommodation is well furnished, warm and tidy, and has all required facilities. Houses have common rooms, study areas, kitchens, quiet areas and plenty of shared space for recreation indoors and outdoors. Boys can voice their opinions through formal systems such as house councils, suggestion books and the anonymous concern reporting system and informally with a variety of resident and non-resident house staff. As such, boarders feel listened to. New pupils settle rapidly into the house and school through a carefully planned and delivered induction programme. All meals are served in individual houses and are ample and nutritious. Boarders have access to a full range of medical services. Boarding house staff follow strict procedures in dealing with boarders who present as unwell. The professionally staffed medical centre is always available to accommodate pupils overnight if required.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing

- 43. All the relevant Standards are met.**

Section 4: Pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society

44. Both pupils and parents highly regard the school's co-curricular and community outreach programme. Pupils benefit a great deal from their interactions with the local community and this is reciprocated. The community initiatives align with the school's aim to 'connect' by fostering a strong sense of social responsibility and community involvement amongst pupils. Leaders ensure pupils understand the importance of giving back to the local community and wider society.
45. An innovative aspect of service to the community is the programme of learning mentors, where Year 9 and Year 10 pupils are supported to work with local primary school pupils on literacy and numeracy skills. This enhances pupils' self-esteem and self-confidence and enables their communication skills to be strengthened too.
46. Sixth form pupils involve members of the local asylum seekers community in their co-curricular sporting activities. Pupils display respect for those from different cultural backgrounds. They show empathy and sensitivity to those whose circumstances are quite different from their own.
47. Leaders plan and support pupils' economic education. Pupils in their separate houses, day and boarding, lead the strategic planning, organisation and implementation of events that raise considerable sums of money for charity. This increases pupils' understanding of these important life skills.
48. Pupils are thoughtful, independent and respectful. They have the self-confidence to be individuals who understand their responsibilities towards creating a culture of acceptance and understanding towards all. They establish committees and societies that support pupils who identify as lesbian, gay and bisexual, and transgender (LGBT), and for pupils from minority ethnic groups. Pupils can be themselves, with no pressure to fit in with a particular 'norm'. Pupils are fully aware of the importance of promoting tolerance, equality, diversity and inclusion of those who are different. They do this very well.
49. Pupils are respectful of each other's views. Pupils from all backgrounds and cultures integrate happily together during lessons and social times. Positive relationships and considerate interactions take place when pupils discuss and debate to distinguish right from wrong. For example, in A-level politics, pupils explore different political systems. They display fair and balanced viewpoints in their discussions regarding far-right views and political interest groups.
50. Pupils' understanding of British values is strengthened and actively promoted through the school's pastoral programme. Year 9 pupils explore neurodiversity and gender identity. Year 10 pupils tackle issues surrounding racial discrimination and the Equality Act 2010. Year 11 pupils focus on how the United Kingdom is structured in terms of laws, political parties, rights and responsibilities, alongside how to effect change. This enables pupils to understand the fundamental features of democracy and law and order, preparing them very well for life in modern British society.
51. Sixth-form pupils engage with maturity in courses that develop their life skills. These include mindfulness, personal finance and financial literacy, geopolitics and cooking. The cooking lessons teach and reinforce core skills such as cutting, chopping and following a recipe. These transferable life skills enable pupils to navigate the challenges of financing university, make considered choices

and build successful relationships. Pupils receive impartial and comprehensive careers advice and support. This is appropriate and up to date, enabling pupils to make informed decisions about their futures, which are predominately university-based. Sixth-form pupils are fully prepared for life beyond school, empowered to take control of their futures and achieve their ambitions.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society

52. All the relevant Standards are met.

Safeguarding

53. Governors and leaders prioritise pupils' safety and welfare. Staff are trained to understand and implement the school's comprehensive safeguarding policies and systems. This supports pupils' emotional and pastoral needs, ensuring that they develop and learn in this safe, secure and caring school. The strong nurturing ethos that exists throughout the school plays an important part in keeping pupils happy and safe.
54. Leaders' and governors' diligent oversight ensures that any safeguarding concerns about pupils are identified and managed quickly by staff in accordance with the school's systems and local procedures. Leaders have forged appropriate links with external agencies who are promptly and appropriately contacted and involved when necessary.
55. Incidents of child-on-child abuse, sexual harassment and violence, racial and gender-related issues and low-level concerns about adults are very rare. When they do occur, incidents are very robustly and swiftly recorded and acted upon. The school's comprehensive and detailed logging of all safeguarding concerns enables leaders to identify any trends and patterns. This enables leaders to provide specific staff training if required and amend curriculum content so that pupils are taught how to keep themselves safe in different situations.
56. The safeguarding of boarders is equally rigorous and effective. Boarding staff are familiar with safeguarding procedures and act promptly if they are concerned about a pupil's safety and wellbeing. Boarding staff share and record information promptly with leaders and parents as appropriate. Suitable actions are taken in a timely manner. Boarding pupils appreciate the key role of matrons in monitoring and supporting their wellbeing. Boarders know where to go for help. They feel listened to and safe in their houses.
57. Leaders review the school's filtering and monitoring systems daily to monitor pupils' online activity and follow up any causes for concern. Across the school, pupils are taught how to stay safe online and recognise the dangers of inappropriate website searches.
58. Governors and leaders understand and follow all aspects of safer recruitment protocols. Governors regularly scrutinise the school's record of staff appointments to make sure that all required checks are completed prior to staff working at the school.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

- 59. All the relevant Standards are met.**

School details

School	Tonbridge School
Department for Education number	886/6020
Registered charity number	1097977
Address	Tonbridge School High Street Tonbridge Kent TN9 1JP
Phone number	01732 365555
Email address	enquiries@tonbridge-school.org
Website	www.tonbridge-school.co.uk
Proprietor	The Worshipful Company of Skinners
Chair	Mr Gavin Rochussen
Headteacher	Mr James Priory
Age range	13 to 18
Number of pupils	807
Number of boarding pupils	462
Date of previous inspection	14 November 2023

Information about the school

60. Tonbridge School is an independent boarding and day school for male pupils. Founded in 1553, it achieved charitable company status in 2003 with the majority of the board of governors appointed by the Worshipful Company of Skinners. The school is organised into a senior school for pupils aged 13 to 16, and a sixth form.
61. Boarding is provided in seven boarding houses located on the school site.
62. The school has identified 171 pupils as having SEND. At the time of the inspection, no pupils in the school had an education, health and care (EHC) plan.
63. English is an additional language for 151 pupils.
64. The school states its aims are to provide a caring and enlightened environment where the talents of each individual flourish; an environment that enables boys to be creative, tolerant and to strive for academic, sporting and cultural excellence, with respect for tradition and an openness to innovation being equally valued. It aims to ensure that each boy fulfils his potential and is able to make a significant contribution in his chosen fields both at school and in the adult world, where many will become leaders.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

15 to 17 October 2024

65. A team of nine inspectors visited the school for two and a half days.

66. Inspection activities included:

- observation of lessons, some in conjunction with school leaders
- observation of registration periods and assemblies
- observation of a sample of co-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection
- discussions with the chair and other governors
- discussions with the head, school leaders, managers and other members of staff
- discussions with pupils
- visits to the learning support area and facilities for physical education
- visits to boarding houses accompanied by pupils and staff
- scrutiny of samples of pupils' work
- scrutiny of a range of policies, documentation and records provided by the school.

67. The inspection team considered the views of pupils, members of staff and parents who responded to ISI's pre-inspection surveys.

How are association independent schools in England inspected?

- The Department for Education is the regulator for independent schools in England.
- ISI is approved by the Secretary of State for Education to inspect independent schools in England, which are members of associations in membership of the Independent Schools Council.
- ISI inspections report to the Department for Education on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards, the EYFS statutory framework requirements, the National Minimum Standards for boarding schools and any other relevant standards are met.
- For more information, please visit **www.isi.net**.

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For more information, please visit isi.net