

Abbs Cross School and Arts College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	102352
Local Authority	Havering
Inspection number	307981
Inspection dates	26-27 March 2008
Reporting inspector	Stephen Abbott (HMI)

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

Type of School	Comprehensive
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11-16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	840
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr G Burchell
Headteacher	Mr G Mayoh
Date of previous school inspection	08 November 2004
School address	Abbs Cross Lane Hornchurch RM12 4YB
Telephone number	01708 440304
Fax number	01708 620360

Age group	11-16
Inspection Date(s)	26-27 March 2008
Inspection Number	307981

(c) Crown copyright 2008

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Further copies of this report are obtainable from the school. Under the Education Act 2005, the school must provide a copy of this report free of charge to certain categories of people. A charge not exceeding the full cost of reproduction may be made for any other copies supplied.

Introduction

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

Description of the school

Abbs Cross School and Arts College specialises in the performing arts. It is an 'extended school' and has a substantial sports centre with shared community use. The proportion of students entitled to free school meals is below average. However, in the districts where most students live, Elm Park, St Andrews and Hacton, fewer than one in ten adults have had experience of higher education, compared to one in five nationally. For its size, and compared to the average school, Abbs Cross has fewer students with a learning difficulty or a disability, but more with a statement of special educational needs. At present there are slightly more boys than girls in the school. The proportion of students who have minority ethnic heritage is below average and very few students are at an early stage of learning English. The school has Artsmark Gold, Activemark, Healthy Schools and Investors in People status.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Abbs Cross School and Arts College is an outstandingly effective school that provides excellent value for money. One of the most striking features is the exceptional way that performing arts is used to enhance students' personal and academic development. Parents and students agree that Abbs Cross is an exceptional school.

Students' behaviour and attendance are excellent. They respond positively in lessons and contribute well to the school. For example, three sets of traffic lights signal the 'state of the environment': if a light goes to amber, students take action to tidy the area concerned; if the lights stay green, students are rewarded. In addition, 'student voice' groups drew up the school's classroom behaviour expectations and lesson guidelines for teachers that are posted throughout the school. Abbs Cross places a high priority on developing students' ability to present themselves with confidence, show leadership and work together. Students of all ages and aptitudes take part in music, dance and drama, contributing strongly to the community through their performances and their work in local primary schools. The school and community sports centre gives student sports provision a strong basis and helps students keep physically fit and active. The outstanding curriculum meets students' needs very well and it is being developed further to provide more personalisation and flexibility. The effective personal, health and social education programme helps students to live healthy lifestyles, remain safe and act safely.

Leadership is outstanding. The governing body provides excellent support and challenge and plays an active role in the school's subject review process. The headteacher is highly admired by students, parents and staff. His vision is one of a 'world class' school which is rooted in its community, working in collaboration with other schools and colleges but having links with a global reach. The very strong senior and middle leadership teams share this vision. They monitor and evaluate effectively, so they are well aware of the school's strengths and weaknesses. They know that the best assessment is exemplary, but marking quality is variable and teachers' use of informal assessment to plan or adapt their teaching is inconsistent. Senior leaders use statistical information well to evaluate examination results, but do not exploit its full potential because, in contrast to the 'traffic light' indicator for school environment, information is collected but not always processed to aid interpretation. For example, all lesson observations are recorded, but the proportion of good and outstanding lessons is not calculated. Also, records of the current working levels of Year 11 students are analysed in terms of A*-C pass rates, but not in terms of average points scores.

Most teaching and learning is good or better, partly explaining students' outstanding progress. There are several other reasons. Students make good progress in terms of examination results, going from a little above average at age 11 to well above average at age 16. They receive good care, guidance and support, with intervention for those at risk of underachieving. Students in the lower school are taught how to learn effectively and this bears fruit with stronger progress in the last two years. Students' mature attitudes and the school's learning ethos mean that progress in lessons is sometimes better than the quality of the teaching warrants. The school's specialist status is a critical factor in students' outstanding achievement. It has a big impact on students' personal development so they achieve additional skills of independence and initiative that set them up well for their future lives. For example, drama helps students with emotional and behavioural difficulties and those with speech and language difficulties to make exceptional progress. The school meets the challenging targets associated with its specialist status.

What the school should do to improve further

- Make more systematic use of information from lesson observations and work scrutiny to improve teaching and learning and to ensure that assessment and marking is consistently good.
- Sharpen the school's self-evaluation and improvement planning by identifying a 'control panel' of indicators that give a summary of the 'state of the school'.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

When Year 10 and 11 students joined the school in Year 7, their standards were a little above average. They made good progress in English, and satisfactory progress in mathematics and science, so at age 14, standards were above expectations in English, but average in mathematics and science. Taking core subjects together, test results have risen over the last few years, though not as fast as national results. The school considers progress made by age 16 to be the priority and, in Years 7 to 9, prefers to lay solid foundations for future learning rather than trying to boost its Key Stage 3 test results. Nevertheless, standards in Years 7 to 9 are currently above average, reflecting the improving standards on entry.

In the three years since the last inspection, standards at age 16 have been well above average. Almost 57% of students have passed five or more GCSE subjects, including English and mathematics, at grade C or above, and nearly all have passed five or more at grade G or better. Abbs Cross students consistently make better progress than students with similar backgrounds and starting points in other schools. This includes those with learning difficulties or disabilities, who are supported well.

Taken on their own, these results might indicate good achievement, but there are three further points to consider. One is that current Year 11 students are working at a higher level than their predecessors, particularly in science, mathematics and English literature, despite a lower starting point when they were in Year 7. A second point is that students with speech and language difficulties make exceptional progress because of the excellent work they do in drama and English that raises their confidence and self-esteem. The third is the outstanding impact of the performing arts on students' wider achievement, helping them to develop mature attitudes, team-working skills and valuable personal qualities such as determination and perseverance, that employers value. Taking all these factors into consideration, achievement is outstanding.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Students are helpful to visitors, confident, polite and friendly, showing respect for each other and adults. They are proud of their school and enjoy the excellent range of opportunities provided. The school's emphasis on performing arts, its efforts to raise aspirations and its fine sporting facilities all contribute significantly to students' outstanding personal development. Their desire for learning and thirst for success are reflected in their excellent behaviour and very high and improving attendance and punctuality. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. Students demonstrate healthy lifestyles: they participate in sports and dance, and make greater use of the canteen since healthier food was provided. They move around the school safely and sensibly, demonstrate very safe practices in lessons and excellent awareness of risks outside school. They feel safe because bullying is nearly always stopped quickly and racist incidents are very rare. Students make an outstanding contribution to community life, especially through the

performing arts and the 'student voice' consultations. The latter have led to three charters, displayed throughout the school, on behaviour management, the learning environment and teaching styles. Students have good basic skills and the excellent curricular and extra-curricular activities teach them teamwork, and the benefits of application, preparing them extremely well for the next stages in their education and later life.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teaching and learning are effective and contribute strongly to students' outstanding achievement and improving standards. The most successful lessons are well paced with clear learning objectives. Teachers often explain to students how to assess their work for themselves. They challenge and inspire students through a variety of interesting activities and students respond enthusiastically. For example, an outstanding Year 10 English lesson used Wilfred Owen's war poetry to identify how language influences meaning. Working together after the teachers' well judged introduction, students were engrossed in their learning, respecting each other's ideas and opinions. The teacher circulated to check that all were progressing in their understanding. As a result, students could explain their work well to the inspector. In a minority of lessons, however, teachers spend too much time giving information and not enough on observing and intervening with students to find out how to help them learn better. Consequently, some students' learning needs are not identified well enough. More generally, the quality of marking across the school is variable. The best exemplifies good practice, but not all teachers mark students' work regularly and in a few cases, marking reveals low expectations. Staff development and training is improving the quality of teaching and learning.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The curriculum meets the needs and aspirations of students outstandingly well. A good range of vocational and academic courses, including entry-level courses, ensures that the vast majority are motivated to succeed. Pathways into further education and employment are excellent. Students are encouraged to broaden their horizons through the exceptional extra-curricular provision, which ranges from swimming to salsa. Programmes for work-related learning, citizenship and personal, social, health education contribute to their mature and confident approach to school. Students' views play a significant role in the development of teaching and learning across the school. From September 2008, Year 7 students will follow a 'learning to learn' programme that exemplifies the school's emphasis on laying strong foundations for later progress.

Performing arts are at the heart of the school's creative response to national initiatives, community projects and subject development. Their impact makes the curriculum outstanding. Students testify to the impact of the specialism, evident in the many extension activities such as theatre workshops, productions and overseas concert tours. The performing arts faculty provides innovative focus days and joint curriculum projects with other departments, supports the teaching of performing arts in many local schools and runs adult education courses. The school contributes well to community cohesion through projects such as 'Arts Week', 'HAbbIT shed' (a local inclusive theatre group) and dance band visits to a centre for adults with learning difficulties. The school has international links with others in Chile, India, Siberia, and Togo.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Strong pastoral care and individual support has a significant impact on students' security and personal development. Parents are fully involved and they receive regular high quality information about their child's progress. Several parents remarked on the smooth transition from primary to secondary school. The integrated system of care ensures that there is excellent communication within the school and with some outside agencies. Students, including the most vulnerable, know that their views are valued and that someone will listen if they need to talk about personal problems. As one said 'You feel better about yourself; it gives you more confidence.'

Risk assessments and child protection procedures are very thorough. Attendance rates have improved following a sustained campaign to promote regular, prompt attendance. Students helped to design the rewards and behaviour management systems, which are generally seen as fair and consistently applied. The support for students with learning difficulties and disabilities and those with gifts and talents is good. Performing arts lessons help students who have difficulty in managing their emotions or behaviour. Students with learning difficulties or disabilities, such as speech and language, hearing or visual impairment and dyslexia, are cared for well. However, learning support documentation is not always as strong as the practice.

Systems for tracking students' progress towards targets are good, but until recently the targets have not been set consistently well across subjects. Senior leaders are phasing in a statistical forecasting system based on national progression data that allows them to control the level of challenge incorporated in the targets.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Leadership and management are outstanding. The well-led performing arts specialism makes an extremely valuable contribution to involving all students in the life of the school. The headteacher's vision and passion to improve standards are complemented by his exceptional drive, determination, commitment and enthusiasm. His willingness to embrace change has ensured the school looks outward and to the future. The senior leadership team shows equal commitment to making a reality of the head's mantra 'from good to outstanding to world class.' The governing body is outstandingly effective. Governors are strongly supportive of all the work undertaken but also act effectively as 'critical friends', ensuring that resources are deployed well. School leaders and governors have an accurate view about the school's strengths and its areas for development. For example, senior staff have introduced a statistical forecasting system that allows them to control the level of challenge incorporated in targets set for students. They are also moving to a mixed-age tutor group system to strengthen academic monitoring. However, lesson observations undertaken for different purposes, such as departmental review and performance management are not coordinated to give a single overview.

Senior leaders trust middle leaders and allow them considerable autonomy. They build leadership capacity by delegating certain tasks to those wishing to gain experience. Staff appreciate the genuine care shown them by the headteacher and senior team. This translates visibly to the way staff and students respect each other's skills and talents. It is particularly evident in the work of the 'student voice' school leaders who have a genuine say in the running of the school.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaining about inspections', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Annex A

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall
---	-------------------

Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	1
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?	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

Achievement and standards

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

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1
How well learners enjoy their education	2
The attendance of learners	1
The behaviour of learners	1
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interest of learners?	1
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?	1
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	1
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	1
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes
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.

21 April 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Abbs Cross School and Arts College, Hornchurch, RM12 4YB

I am writing to tell you about your school's recent inspection. Before I do that, I would like to thank you, on behalf of the inspection team, for your helpfulness in answering our questions and guiding us around the school. You and your parents told us that Abbs Cross is an exceptional school. We were really impressed and we agree that it is outstanding. The performing arts specialism helps you to develop excellent personal and academic skills.

Your behaviour and attendance are excellent. You respond positively in lessons and contribute well to the school. For example, 'student voice' groups drew up the school's classroom behaviour expectations and lesson guidelines for teachers that are posted throughout the school. You are taught to present yourselves with confidence, show leadership and work together. You contribute strongly to the community through your performances and work in local primary schools. You make good progress in terms of examination results and receive good care, guidance and support. The school's specialist status is a critical factor in your outstanding achievement. It also has a big impact on your personal development giving you skills that set you up well for your future lives.

Mr Mayoh is highly admired by students, parents and staff. He and his senior team work with the governors to provide very strong leadership for the school. His vision is one of a 'world class' school which is rooted in its community, working with other schools and colleges but having links with a global reach. Senior staff are well aware of the schools' strengths and weaknesses. They know that some teachers are better than others at marking or assessing your answers in class to decide how best to get the ideas across. We have asked the school to improve assessment and to ensure that all lessons are good ones. We have also recommended that the senior staff should create a summary of the vast amount of information they have about the school, and use it as a 'control panel' to show how well the school is working, rather like the traffic lights that tell you about the state of the school environment.

I wish you all the best for the future.

Stephen Abbott HMI,
Lead Inspector

