

Inspection of The Astley Cooper School

St Agnell's Lane, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire HP2 7HL

Inspection dates: 17 and 18 November 2021

Overall effectiveness **Good**

The quality of education **Good**

Behaviour and attitudes **Good**

Personal development **Good**

Leadership and management **Good**

Sixth-form provision **Good**

Previous inspection grade Good

What is it like to attend this school?

Most pupils enjoy school and get on well with each other. They know they are expected to work hard. The positive relationships they form with school staff, including in the sixth form, are a strong feature of the day-to-day life in the school. The atmosphere in lessons and around school is calm and orderly. Sometimes, a few pupils' behaviour falls short of the high standard expected. When this happens, they are supported to improve.

Pupils feel safe in school. While bullying is rare, regular reminders emphasise that bullying and other forms of abuse will not be tolerated. Pupils know the routes to follow if they are concerned and that staff will help them if they are worried.

Pupils and students in the sixth form are taught how to keep safe in different situations. They understand the importance of protecting both their physical and mental health. In taking on leadership roles, such as acting as ambassadors and mentors, they make a valuable contribution to the wider school community. Opportunities for after-school and lunchtime clubs are on offer again this year.

Pupils and students get effective support to help them to make the right choices when they leave school, for example to apprenticeships or university.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

Leaders have continued to raise aspirations for Astley Cooper pupils and for students in the sixth form. Staff have thought carefully about the things that pupils need to know to achieve well in most subjects, including in English and mathematics. Teachers are knowledgeable and typically form good working relationships with the pupils and students they teach. The focus on securing pupils' understanding of subject-specific vocabulary has been strengthened this year. More pupils are opting to continue to study subjects such as history and geography in Years 10 and 11. Work is underway to increase the proportion of pupils taking a GCSE in languages over time. The breadth of courses available to students in the sixth form is also continuing to increase.

While the planned curriculum is being implemented effectively overall, this work is less advanced in a few subject areas. In science, for example, teams are still revising plans to make sure that the curriculum is taught in the most logical order and routinely revisited, so pupils can recall more of what they have learned.

Most staff check regularly to ensure that pupils remember important knowledge so that they can apply it to new learning. The information is used effectively to correct any misconceptions and to secure any gaps in what pupils should already know.

Pupils and students in the sixth form with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are well supported to access the same curriculum as others, so they achieve well. When there is a delay in specialist external support in the local area, leaders act to mitigate any shortfall where they can.

Leaders have paid close attention to helping pupils who need to develop their reading skills to catch up. Staff have been trained effectively to support this. The love of reading is well promoted across the school. The library book stock has been updated. Pupils were excited to be involved in making some of the new choices. Consequently, more of them, including pupils with SEND, are borrowing books on a regular basis.

Leaders have high expectations for pupils' behaviour. In lessons and around the school, most pupils are polite and respectful. However, a few pupils do not live up to the high standards expected. There are some inconsistencies in how staff apply the current behaviour policy. Changes are underway to improve this, including further training and a policy review involving the contribution of staff and pupils.

While pupils feel that some bullying happens, they trust staff to help them to resolve it. Leaders remind pupils regularly that bullying is not tolerated and that there are adults they can turn to if they want to raise a concern. Ensuring pupils' easy access to the safeguarding team and pastoral leaders is a priority for the school team.

Pupils experience a range of opportunities to support their personal development, including in the sixth form. Impartial advice and guidance help pupils and students to plan effectively to take the next steps in education, employment and/or training. The personal, social and health education curriculum is thoughtfully planned and delivered, including through tutorials and well-considered themed assemblies. Leaders have ensured that there is a strong focus on pupils' mental health and well-being. Individual differences are celebrated. This ethos is promoted across the school and in the curriculum. For example, books in the library celebrate equality and diversity, and the English curriculum has been adapted to include texts that challenge prejudice.

The new leadership team has quickly won the support of most staff as they continue to improve the quality of education across the school. Teachers generally feel that their workload is considered as ongoing improvement plans are implemented. Governors share the same high aspirations as school leaders. They have a wide range of skills and are effective in holding leaders to account for the school's performance.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Staff are vigilant. They know what to do if they suspect a pupil is at risk of harm. Safeguarding training is regular and up to date. More staff are now trained at the higher level. Issues arising from the local and national safeguarding contexts are

well considered in the personal, social and health care curriculum. Pupils are taught how to stay safe and to form healthy relationships. Leaders understand the important links between pupils' attendance, behaviour and safeguarding, so they monitor this closely. Concerns are followed up quickly, including through work with external agencies. The support of a trained counsellor is available in school every day.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- The curriculum is new and still being established in a few subjects. Consequently, some pupils struggle to remember the things that they have learned previously. Leaders should ensure that all curriculum teams have the support they need to implement the planned curriculum effectively and that monitoring and review processes are secure in identifying what is working well and what needs to improve.
- A few staff do not apply the school's behaviour policy consistently. This is confusing for the minority of pupils whose behaviour falls short of expectations. Leaders should ensure that all staff are clear about expectations and appropriately trained to implement the school's revised behaviour policy as intended.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

If you are the school and you are not happy with the inspection or the report, you can [complain to Ofsted](#).

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, '[disadvantaged pupils](#)' refers to those pupils who attract government pupil premium funding: pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years and pupils in care or who left care through adoption or another formal route.

School details

Unique reference number	117552
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	10199821
Type of school	Secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	865
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	67
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governing body	Jason Lee
Headteacher	Sam Orsborne
Website	www.astleycooper.herts.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	8 and 9 June 2016, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- Astley Cooper is smaller than the average-sized secondary school. It is over-subscribed with a growing number of students in the sixth form. The building of new school premises is currently underway on the existing site.
- The headteacher and deputy headteacher were appointed in September 2021.
- Most pupils are of White British heritage.
- The proportion of pupils with SEND, including with an education, health and care plan, are around the national average. The proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language is well below the national average.
- A small number of sixth-form students attend another local school for A-level courses not currently offered in school.
- Occasionally, pupils in Years 10 and 11 take vocational courses at the Dacorum Education Support Centre.

Information about this inspection

The inspector(s) carried out this inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with school leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation.
- Inspectors met with the senior leadership team, curriculum leaders, the special educational needs coordinator, designated safeguarding leads, teachers and other school staff.
- The lead inspector also met with a group of governors, including the chair of governors, and spoke with a representative of the local authority on the telephone.
- Inspectors spoke with pupils around the school at break and lunchtimes. They met with pupils to speak about their school experiences and their work. They also visited lessons jointly with school leaders.
- Inspectors carried out in-depth reviews (deep dives) in the following subjects: science, English, history, mathematics, art, and hospitality and catering. For each deep dive, inspectors met with subject leaders, looked at curriculum plans, visited a sample of lessons, spoke with teachers and pupils and looked at work in pupils' books.
- A range of documentation was checked, including the single central record of pre-employment checks on new staff, safeguarding records and associated school policies.
- Inspectors considered 59 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including 57 free-text comments. Inspectors also took account of 59 responses to Ofsted's online staff questionnaire and 101 responses to Ofsted's pupil questionnaire.

Inspection team

Christine Dick, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Paul Lawrence	Ofsted Inspector
Hannah Stoten	Her Majesty's Inspector
Fiona Webb	Her Majesty's Inspector

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