

The Astley Cooper School

St Agnell's Lane, Hemel Hempstead HP2 7HL

Inspection dates	8–9 June 2016
Overall effectiveness	Good
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Require improvement
16 to 19 study programmes	Require improvement
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- Governors have an accurate view of the school's performance. They use this understanding to challenge leaders to make necessary improvements to the quality of teaching and pupils' achievement.
- Subject leaders are steering improvements effectively by strengthening teaching.
- Teachers have responded to the increased expectations of them and to the support they have been given to improve the quality of their work. As a result, the quality of teaching across a range of subjects is now good.
- Pupils' starting points are often below those expected. In Year 7, they are well supported to make the progress needed to catch up with age-related expectations.
- In key stages 3 and 4, improved teaching is resulting in pupils making more rapid progress. An increasing proportion of pupils are on track to reach expected standards at the end of the year.
- The gap between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and other pupils at the school is closing quickly.
- Pupils with special educational needs or disability are well provided for and their progress is accelerating.
- Relationships between pupils and teachers are positive. Pupils are well supported by teachers who understand their individual learning needs well.
- Pupils behave well and have positive attitudes to learning. They show increasing determination to achieve and are proud of their school.
- Parents, staff and pupils recognise that leaders have increased their expectations. They have confidence that the school is improving.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Despite better results in 2015, standards are not yet high enough.
- Outcomes in the sixth form have been in demise since the last inspection. Learners in the sixth form do not make enough progress.
- There is not enough teaching that is consistently good or outstanding to stretch pupils, or learners in the sixth form, so that they can make up lost ground.
- Although the levels of pupils' absence have been markedly reduced, a small number of pupils do not attend well enough.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Make better provision for learners in the sixth form, so that they are able to achieve their academic potential at school and are well placed to further their education and training when they leave.
- Raise standards in key stage 3 and key stage 4 by:
 - improving teaching so that pupils make enough progress to overcome their low starting points
 - making sure that lessons engage and challenge all pupils
 - making better use of the new assessment system in key stage 3 to steer improvement and progress.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is good

- Since the previous inspection, the headteacher has worked hard to recruit dedicated leaders who have the skills necessary to rapidly improve provision. This committed team of both senior and middle leaders is making significant improvements to pupils' behaviour and to the quality of teaching. Expectations of both staff and pupils are now high. Pupils appreciate the positive changes to their school. Responses to the staff and parent questionnaires show they recognise and support the improvements being made.
- Leaders and governors know the school well, and through their analysis they accurately identify priorities for further improvement. Leaders responded quickly to the dip in English GCSE results in 2014, for example, by revising what was being taught to pupils so attainment is improving for all groups of pupils.
- The school has effective systems in place for monitoring and managing the behaviour of pupils. Pupils told inspectors that teachers apply the rewards and sanctions system fairly and consistently. School records show that incidents of poor behaviour are declining and fewer pupils are being excluded from school. The behaviour and progress of the few pupils who attend alternative provision are carefully tracked by senior leaders.
- Senior leaders monitor carefully the quality of teaching and intervene to support and challenge staff when teaching is not good enough. Appropriate, well-planned support is in place for teachers who still need to improve or develop their teaching. Judgements of teacher effectiveness take account of the progress pupils make in their lessons.
- Senior and middle leaders have improved the systems for recording how well pupils are doing and these are now used to carefully track the progress of all groups of pupils. This information is used to pick up any underachievement so that support can be put into place. Pupils' needs are met very much on an individual basis and this has had a clear impact on the progress of all groups of pupils at the school.
- Support for disadvantaged pupils is effective. The pupil premium funding has been used to provide a wide variety of extra opportunities. These include the Saturday revision sessions for Year 11 pupils and individual support for those who still need to fill gaps in their understanding and skills created by the weaker teaching they received in the past. Bespoke one-to-one tuition is also provided for identified pupils in all year groups who need to catch up in English and mathematics.
- Subject leaders are held to account for the progress pupils make and the quality of teaching in their departments. New leaders in mathematics, English and science quickly identified that the curriculum was not engaging pupils or enabling them to make good progress. They have worked tirelessly with their teams to change this and to introduce new topics and courses to better engage and stretch pupils in key stage 3 and key stage 4.
- The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils is good. Through assemblies, form time and philosophy and religious education lessons, pupils are being well prepared to be the next generation of adults in modern Britain. For example, in a Year 7 lesson, pupils were given the opportunity to debate the controversial issue of human versus animal rights. They showed great tolerance and respect for the views of all members of the group.
- Leaders have created a broad and balanced curriculum, and pupils are given useful guidance on how to make suitable choices when deciding on which courses and subjects to pursue. Year 9 pupils spoke enthusiastically of an 'aim higher day' they had attended where they were given the opportunity to experience university-style learning. This has encouraged some who had not previously thought about university to think about going on to higher education after school.
- The school provides a variety of clubs, extra tuition, trips and experiences for students. A well-attended breakfast club begins the school day and pupils are able to stay to complete their homework after school in the well-resourced library. Disadvantaged pupils are supported effectively to access these wider opportunities.
- The local authority has arranged and funded a range of support for the school. The educational partnership with a local outstanding school, specific subject support and the school improvement partner have all contributed to the strengthening of leadership and teaching and learning that has led to improving outcomes for pupils.
- **The governance of the school**
 - Membership of the governing body has been strengthened since the previous inspection. Governors

bring a wealth of experience, such as finance and education, to their roles. The new chair of the governing body holds the headteacher to account for the quality of teaching and the progress of all pupils. Governors are knowledgeable and have taken action to enable them to support and challenge the headteacher and the senior team effectively. They know how well the performance of different groups of pupils compares to other schools nationally and scrutinise carefully the way that extra funding for disadvantaged pupils is used to improve outcomes.

- Governors are ambitious for the school and are determined that achievement will continue to rise. They support the improvement of teaching and learning by rewarding good teachers and challenging underperformance through pay reviews.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Staff and governor training is regular and up to date. The assistant headteacher, who acts as the designated safeguarding lead, and the inclusion team, support the more vulnerable pupils and their families well. The school works effectively with outside agencies to provide extra support when necessary.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good

- The overall quality of teaching is good and improving. Effective teaching was seen throughout the school across different year groups and subjects. In English, mathematics and science in particular, the impact of this is evident in the improving rates of progress for all groups of pupils across year groups.
- Teachers plan carefully to improve pupils' learning using a variety of activities and tasks to make lessons interesting and to meet the needs of different learners. Some teachers offer pupils the opportunity to choose from a range of tasks and this works best where teachers steer them towards work that offers the right level of challenge for their ability.
- Teachers have high expectations of pupils. Most manage behaviour in their classes well, creating a positive environment for learning. When pupils are suitably challenged by tasks, they become enthusiastic and absorbed in their learning and so make good progress. For example, in a Year 7 mathematics lesson, pupils were having an animated debate about how to solve a problem they had been set by the teacher. The teacher's withholding of the 'right' answer increased their motivation and they had to apply reasoning and logic to find the solution for themselves.
- Teachers work closely together, and with colleagues from other local schools, to ensure that their assessments of how well pupils are doing are accurate. Information on pupils' progress is collected regularly and used to help teachers identify those pupils who need extra support. Teachers are increasingly using assessment information effectively to help them monitor how well pupils have understood topics and adjust their planning accordingly.
- Some pupils' literacy skills are low when they start at the school and a common focus on improving their vocabulary is in place across subjects. Most teachers insist that pupils use the correct subject-specific language when they speak and when they write. In a Year 8 dance lesson, the teacher's expectation that pupils use correct dance terminology to review their own performances improved the quality of their evaluations. Spellings are also routinely corrected in books.
- Teachers encourage pupils to read at every opportunity, and role model good reading habits by displaying the titles of the books they are currently reading on their classroom doors. Regular 'drop everything and read' sessions are enjoyed by the pupils and ensure that they get the opportunity to read books of their own choice for pleasure. Pupils told inspectors that they appreciate having this time when the whole school is focused on one activity as it helps them to concentrate and 'really get into' their books.
- Pupils have been encouraged to take more pride in their work. Their books reflect this and their work is usually well presented. The school's marking policy is used consistently by teachers and is understood by students. Older pupils were able to tell inspectors how well they were doing in their subjects and what they needed to do to improve their work. A new assessment system, introduced in Year 7, to match the new curriculum, is not yet well understood by all pupils or their parents. This means that key stage 3 pupils do not always have a clear idea of how well they are doing.
- In some lessons, where teaching has not improved to be securely good, activities do not give pupils the opportunity to apply their learning and solve problems for themselves. In these lessons, pupils do not develop the ability to learn from their mistakes and build resilience, so they give up too easily.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare is good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Pupils and their parents are very positive about the welfare support provided by the school. They feel that the teachers know each pupil as an individual and that the school is a place where young people can develop their own personalities which 'creates interesting people'.
- Relationships between staff and students are good. Pupils speak highly of the care they receive from their form tutors and the help teachers give them with their learning.
- Some pupils showed an initial lack of confidence when talking to inspectors but all spoke enthusiastically about their school and emphasised the community feel that it has. Pupils from all year groups are voted on to the active school council, which develops their understanding of democratic values and gives them a way of feeding back pupils' views to senior leaders.
- Pupils told inspectors that there is very little bullying in school but that, when it happens, they are confident that it will be dealt with promptly and effectively by teachers. Pupils feel safe in school and know how to keep themselves safe outside it. The curriculum provides opportunities to help them to avoid risks, including work on healthy eating and exercise, relationships and the consequences that their actions can have.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- The vast majority of pupils meet the high expectations set by the school and move around the school site sensibly and considerately.
- Pupils are able to use the whole school site freely during breaks and they respect this privilege by taking good care of their environment; for example there was very little litter. The atmosphere in both the dining hall and outside is calm. When pupils were not participating in lunchtime activities they spent the time quietly socialising with friends.
- Lessons are calm and purposeful and most pupils want to do well. Even when activities do not spark their curiosity or sense of discovery, most pupils still dutifully complete the tasks their teachers give them. However, a few do lose motivation and concentration because they do not feel challenged or interested by the work.
- Attendance, particularly that of pupils with special educational needs and disadvantaged pupils, is rapidly improving but is still just below the national average for 2015. The value of good attendance is now understood by pupils, and increasingly by their parents. All pupils who were asked could tell inspectors what their current attendance rate is and were proud if this had improved over the year. Senior leaders are working hard, using a number of different tactics, to bring down the absence levels of pupils who do not attend well. For example, the school minibus picks some pupils up from home to support them getting to school on time.

Outcomes for pupils require improvement

- Standards are rising, but are not yet high enough. In 2015, more pupils than previously gained five or more GCSE passes at A* to C grades including English and mathematics. However, this proportion remained below the national figure. In 2015, more pupils made expected progress from their respective starting points in mathematics than other pupils nationally. However, too few pupils made expected progress in English. Pupils join the school with prior attainment that is significantly below that expected. In key stage 3, pupils are currently making more rapid progress in English, mathematics and science and so are catching up with their peers nationally. This is because of better teaching and a more relevant curriculum.
- Inspection evidence supports the school's view that pupils' progress is improving and that standards are rising across all year groups.
- The new English leader responded robustly to the 2015 results by changing the course that Year 11 pupils were studying. Almost half the Year 11 cohort has already achieved a GCSE grade C or above in English through entry in November 2015. This success has given a boost to the confidence of not only the pupils who have gained the qualification but also their peers who went on to sit the examination in May 2016.

- Disadvantaged pupils made as much progress as other pupils in the school in 2015. Gaps between the progress and attainment of disadvantaged pupils and other pupils in the school are narrowing. Current school information, and the evidence seen during the inspection, confirm that this group of pupils is now making better progress. This is because of more effective teaching, the early identification of pupils' needs and the intensive interventions that are then put in place. This is particularly true for younger pupils, and pupils who are looked after by the local authority, who quickly benefit from this improved provision.
- Pupils who are looked after by the local authority benefit from this extra support and make progress in their learning. The extra tuition and care they receive enables them to access and succeed in subjects that particularly interest them.
- Teachers use regular assessments to identify weaknesses in skills and knowledge. Classwork is then tailored to specifically address the pupils' needs. Gaps in knowledge are being filled and so pupils' progress is improving.
- Provision for pupils with special educational needs or disabilities is improving as needs are identified earlier than previously and targeted support is then provided for those who need it. Pupils with special educational needs in Year 7, for example, have made similar progress to, or in some cases even better progress than, other pupils.
- The aspirations of the most able pupils are rising as teachers expect more of them. Information provided by the school shows that a higher proportion of the most able pupils in Year 11 will make good progress in English and mathematics this year than has been the case previously. The improving curriculum at key stage 3 is providing more challenge to enable pupils of all abilities to reach their potential.
- Advice and guidance given to pupils and their parents as they make decisions about GCSE subjects, post-16 options and further education applications is comprehensive and means that the majority of pupils and learners make appropriate choices as they move on to the next phase of their education or career. Senior leaders work hard to ensure that all of their Year 11, 12 and 13 leavers move on successfully to further education, training or employment.
- Small numbers of learners in the sixth form mean that achievement in both vocational and academic subjects varies from year to year. However, although most learners make some progress from their different starting points, overall progress is just below the national average and has declined in recent years. The success rate for learners who try to improve their grades in English and mathematics GCSE is low.

16 to 19 study programmes

require improvement

- The sixth form requires improvement because progress in both academic and vocational subjects has seen a slow decline from 2013, although it remains close to national expectations.
- Learners who start in the sixth form without GCSE grades of a C or above in English or mathematics are not supported well enough to catch up to this level.
- The proportion of learners going on to higher education is, at present, declining. Senior leaders are working to raise the aspirations of learners by providing them with opportunities to attend, for example a day at East Anglia University. Ex-pupils who have gone on to higher education are also invited back to talk about their university experiences.
- Senior leaders have created a small sixth form that is able to tailor its provision to meet the needs of the learners who choose to stay on in any particular year. This means that the numbers taking particular subjects at AS and A level or opting for vocational subjects varies greatly. On occasion, there has been only one learner on a course; frequently there is only a very small number studying a subject. Because of this, year-on-year comparison of retention rates and attainment is unhelpful.
- School leaders and governors have recognised that running such a small provision is no longer effective and does not always provide the challenge to ensure that all learners make good progress. From September 2016, the sixth form will become part of a joint post-16 offer with another local school. As the achievement of Year 11 pupils rises, entry requirements for the sixth form are also beginning to rise.
- The teaching of some subjects in the sixth form is already shared with other schools in the East Dacorum Co-operative Learning Trust. There is rigorous monitoring across the consortium to ensure that attendance is tracked and any underperformance identified early and support put in place. During the inspection, inspectors saw very little sixth form teaching as learners were in the middle of AS and A level examinations.

- The quality of the guidance and advice offered to individuals as they make choices about their future is a strength of the sixth form. All learners have mentors and all individuals who left the sixth form in 2015 went on to further education, employment or training.
- Study programmes meet the needs of learners effectively because they can be designed on an individual basis due to the small numbers involved. However, the very small groups do not always provide learners with the stimulation and challenge from their peers they need to develop perseverance and resilience as they learn. When appropriate, learners are given opportunities for work experience or longer-term work placements at local companies to prepare them for further training or employment.
- Learners feel safe and are happy at school. They told inspectors that, 'you come to school to learn' and 'being at Astley Cooper is about doing the very best you can do'. Sixth form learners recognise that the school has improved during their time there and appreciate the opportunities they have had. To give something back to the school, many of them volunteer to mentor younger pupils who may be experiencing difficulties. The sixth formers are excellent role models for the rest of the school.

School details

Unique reference number	117552
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	10011836
This inspection was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.	
Type of school	Secondary comprehensive
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in 16 to 19 study programmes	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	410
Of which, number on roll in 16 to 19 study programmes	37
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Oliver Cochran
Headteacher	Edward Gaynor
Telephone number	01442 394 141
Website	www.astleycooper.herts.sch.uk
Email address	admin@astleycooper.herts.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	15–16 May 2014

Information about this school

- Astley Cooper School is a smaller than average-sized secondary school with a small sixth form.
- Most pupils are from White British backgrounds and speak English as their first language.
- The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for the pupil premium (government funding to support disadvantaged pupils) is above average.
- The proportion of pupils who have special educational needs or disability is above average.
- The school shares sixth form provision with another local school in the East Dacorum Co-operative Learning Trust.
- The school is in its final year of an educational partnership with a local outstanding school.
- A small number of pupils attend off-site provision from the Dacorum Education Support Centre.
- The school meets the government floor standards, which set minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress.
- The school meets requirements on the publication of specified information on its website.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 30 lessons or parts of lessons. A number of joint observations were carried out with the school's senior leaders. Inspectors also attended an assembly.
- Meetings were held with senior and middle leaders, governors, pupils and the local authority.
- Pupils' views were sought between classes, during lessons and at breaktimes. Inspectors also scrutinised work in pupils' books from a variety of subjects and year groups.
- Inspectors considered the views of parents expressed in the 65 responses to Parent View, the online survey provided to parents by Ofsted, and 60 responses to staff questionnaires.
- The inspection team scrutinised documents which included the school's self-evaluation and action planning documents, records of the way teachers' performance is managed, the school's own assessment information, safeguarding records and school policies and procedures.

Inspection team

Lesley Daniel, lead inspector	Ofsted Inspector
Sally Pemberton	Ofsted Inspector
Bruce Clark	Ofsted Inspector

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