
Standard Inspection of Beaconhurst School Bridge of Allan

1. Introduction

Beaconhurst School is a coeducational independent day school situated in Bridge of Allan, Stirling. At the time of the inspection, the roll of the Junior School (P1-P6) was 116 and the roll of the Senior School (Transition-S6) was also 116. There were 29 children in the school's nursery class.

The inspection took place in October 1998 as part of a national sample of nursery, primary and secondary education. It evaluated how well pupils were performing, the effectiveness of the school and how well the school was managed.

HM Inspectors assessed the school's processes for self-evaluation and development planning. They evaluated learning and teaching across all subjects and stages, examined pupils' work and interviewed staff and pupils.

The results of a questionnaire sent to a sample of parents were taken into account during the inspection. Members of the inspection team also met the Chairman of the school's Board of Governors.

2. How well are pupils performing?

In the nursery, children were making good progress in their learning.

- In *emotional, personal and social development* children were confident and familiar with the daily routines. They co-operated well and readily shared toys and equipment.
- In *communication and language* children asked good questions during discussions and displayed a keen enjoyment of books, stories and rhymes. Most could recognise and write their first names.
- In *knowledge and understanding of the world* most children could identify colours and simple shapes and were developing effective skills in counting, sorting and matching.
- In *expressive and aesthetic development* children took part enthusiastically in singing, music-making, painting and craft activities.

- In *physical development and movement* children were developing good hand and body control using games, play equipment, scissors, jigsaws and puzzles.

Pupils' attainment in the Junior School and in Transition-S2 was as follows.

- Pupils in J2 had made a good start in *listening, talking, reading and writing*.
- Pupils at all stages were particularly skilled in listening to their teachers and other pupils.
- In group discussion, pupils at S1-S2 were skilled in responding appropriately to the views of others and took good account of the needs of their audience in talking.
- Pupils in J5-S2 had developed a range of skills in reading and most read willingly for enjoyment.
- The majority of pupils in S1-S2 could comment on simpler aspects of the writer's craft.
- Although the majority of pupils in J5-S2 wrote effectively, many continued to have problems in structuring and paragraphing their work.
- A minority of pupils from J5-S2 had considerable difficulties in spelling, punctuation and handwriting.

Almost all pupils in J3 and J4 were attaining appropriate national targets in all aspects of English language. At Transition-S2, most pupils were attaining national targets in listening, talking and reading and the majority in writing. Their skills in structuring and paragraphing written work required further development.

Most pupils in J1-S2 were achieving good standards overall in mathematics. Some pupils in S1-S2 were making progress beyond expected levels and had a very secure grasp of all the work covered.

- Pupils at J1-Transition showed sound understanding of concepts in *number, money and measurement and shape, position and movement*, but their understanding and presentation skills in information handling needed to be further developed.
- Pupils in the Junior School and in Transition-S2 were developing sound strategies for *problem-solving and enquiry*, but Junior School pupils needed to give more attention to describing and recording their approaches.
- A number of S1-S2 pupils' understanding of place value needed to be improved.
- There were some weaknesses in the use of calculators to work with decimals at S1-S2.

Almost all pupils at J3-J4 and most at J5-S2 were meeting appropriate national targets in mathematics.

In religious and moral education, pupils throughout the Junior School were reaching good standards overall. They showed a sound knowledge and recall of the recent stories and topics they had studied. They were developing their understanding of aspects of *Christianity* and *other world religions*, including the study of Islam. They were able to discuss and reflect on the areas of religion they had studied as part of *personal search*.

Classwork

All pupils in the Junior and Senior School were developing confidence and skill in using information and communications technology (ICT). Some S3-S5 pupils were successfully contributing to their own electronic Records of Achievement as part of the school's guidance programme. Opportunities for pupils to develop study skills using ICT in other subjects varied across departments and needed to be further developed.

Pupils' attainment in S3-S6 was as follows.

Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)

At Standard Grade, the percentage of pupils in S4 gaining 5 or more Credit awards was consistently high. General awards were around the national average.

The small numbers of pupils in S4 meant that numbers of presentations in each subject were also small. As a result,

caution is required in drawing conclusions about relative performance in different subjects.

Features of performance were as follows:

- in English, results were consistently good;
- pupils had performed well in German, physics, chemistry and history in 1998;
- presentations were high in German (writing) but numbers of credit awards over the last 3 years were relatively low and no pupils had gained an award at grade 1; and
- relatively few credit awards had been obtained by pupils in mathematics and physical education in 1998.
- the number of pupils obtaining credit awards in French and biology had been steadily improving over the last few years, from a relatively low base.

Overall, performance at Higher Grade was good and the proportion of pupils in S5/S6 gaining 3 or more awards at bands A-C was above the national average. Features of performance at Higher Grade in individual subjects were as follows:

- pupils' performance in English were consistently good;
- pupils had performed well in classical studies, geography, German and history in 1998; and

- performance in physics, mathematics and computing studies was weak in 1998.

Good numbers of pupils in S3/S4 successfully completed short courses in creative and aesthetic subjects.

The small number of presentations at Certificate of Sixth Year Studies (CSYS) had resulted in good awards for pupils.

3. How effective is the school?

Parents' views

Approximately two-thirds of parents sampled by questionnaire responded. Returns indicated a very high level of parental satisfaction with almost all aspects of the school's work.

Almost all felt that:

- the school was well led;
- the school had a good reputation in the community;
- pupils were encouraged to work to the best of their ability; and
- pupils were happy and well-behaved at school.

Several parents mentioned that the school had been able to respond very positively to the needs of children who had been unhappy in their previous school, and who were now very well settled.

A small number of parents felt that they wanted more information about:

- The extent to which the school explained its work to parents and the part they were asked to play in their children's education; and
- The information provided by the school on their child's progress in schoolwork.

Parents also indicated that they would like earlier parents' evenings in S1/S2, following the issue of reports.

Ethos

The ethos of the school was very good and there was a friendly, family atmosphere. Staff had high expectations of pupils' attendance, behaviour and discipline. The house and buddy systems allowed pupils of different ages to know and care for one another. The Pupil Council offered pupils the opportunity to have their views heard, but older pupils felt that they could be given more responsibility as prefects and in decision-making in the school.

The school offered a very good range of extra-curricular activities and pupils were given the opportunity to suggest additions. The school held regular assemblies for Junior and Senior pupils, with contributions from staff and pupils. Assemblies offered good opportunities for religious observance and for pupils to consider personal, social and moral issues.

School and community

The school had established effective means of communicating information to parents, including clearly written newsletters, notices, and web page and items in the school magazine. Parents had been consulted about their views through a recent questionnaire.

There was good information for parents about their children's progress, including:

- clear and well written reports;
- very good contacts with guidance staff and 'settling in' reports at key points of transition for pupils;
- meetings with teachers twice each session;
- well-organised curriculum and workshop evenings;
- very good opportunities for involvement in their children's course choices.

An active Parents' Association gave good support through fund raising and social events. There were some links with the local community including good arrangements for work shadowing for senior pupils and productive contacts with Stirling University. The school had some interesting initiatives to build up pupils' understanding of European culture. They experienced links with other schools in France and Germany through pupil exchanges, trips and correspondence.

The Board of Governors was well-organised and effective in managing the school's finance, marketing and overall curriculum arrangements. The Board had good links with other independent schools and local further and higher education establishments. Links with parents should be reviewed to ensure that they understand and share the Board's priorities for future developments.

Accommodation

Overall, the quality of the school's accommodation and facilities was good.

- Classroom accommodation for the Junior School and most subjects in the Senior School was modern, comfortable and well-appointed.
- Very good use was made of access to facilities for physical education at Stirling University.
- Plans were in hand to replace the cramped hutted units used for the expressive arts with purpose-built accommodation.
- The school should keep arrangements for security and access to the nursery, Junior School and 'Younger' buildings under review.
- A number of health and safety issues in the nursery play area and school grounds were brought to the attention of the Headmaster.

Staffing and resources

The Nursery, Junior School and Senior School were very well staffed. There was a good range of experience amongst teachers. Class sizes were small and the school was able to give a very good allocation of teachers' time to pastoral care and curricular and vocational guidance.

The provision and quality of resources was good throughout the school. Areas requiring further attention were as follows:

- additional resources should be provided for outdoor play and large scale construction in the nursery;
- some further resources were required for practical mathematics in the junior school and for religious and moral education in Transition-S2; and
- suitable subject software would be required for use with new computer equipment planned for 1999.

There was very effective financial planning for the school by the Governors' Finance Committee. Procedures for involving staff in ordering resources were well-organised and effective. They were given appropriate flexibility to manage budgets, within agreed constraints.

Curriculum

The overall curriculum in the nursery class provided good coverage of key aspects of children's development and learning.

- The programme for emotional, personal and social development was very good.

Staff provided regular opportunities for the children to come together in small groups for organised activities.

- The programme for communication and language was very good, providing well-judged opportunities for children to develop early reading and language skills. Staff made effective use of questioning and encouraged children's interest in stories and books.
- The programme for knowledge and understanding of the world was good. Staff made good use of the immediate and wider environment to extend children's learning and experience.
- The programme for aesthetic and expressive development was fair. Children took part in a range of singing, music-making, role play and art and craft activities, but more opportunities should be provided to allow for individual expression.
- The programme for physical development and movement was good. Regular opportunities were provided for energetic play using the gym hall and outdoor play areas, and for using small tools in art and craft.

In the Junior School, the English language programme was broadly structured to cover all aspects outlined in national guidance. Pupils' reading skills received thorough attention but greater emphasis was required on developing pupils' sense of purpose and audience in their writing.

The programme for mathematics in the Junior School covered all the aspects set out in national guidance. However, teachers should give more emphasis to the development of pupils' problem-solving strategies.

The programme for J1-J6 in religious and moral education was very good and took full account of national guidance. The programme was well co-ordinated across the Junior School.

The curriculum in Transition-S2 was broadly in line with national recommendations. There should be opportunities to study significant aspects of technology.

Although the small size of the school placed some limitation on choice, S3/S4 pupils had a broad curriculum of 8 Standard Grades. All pupils also had core provision in expressive arts, physical education and games, ICT and personal, social and health education. The school should provide religious and moral education at this stage.

For the size of the school there was a good range of courses at Higher Grade and CSYS levels for S5/S6 pupils. The school also continued the expressive arts provision from S3/S4, and offered other interesting courses such as a Diploma of Achievement. In S5, courses were too restricted for pupils who were less capable of taking a full timetable of Higher Grade subjects. Some pupils had too many study periods. The school was aware that the better pathways from S4-S6 offered under

Higher Still would help to broaden its provision.

Learning and teaching

The quality of lessons was good or very good in almost all classes observed throughout the school.

Teachers in the Junior and Senior schools planned lessons carefully. Most interacted well with pupils. Staff in the Senior School were particularly good at exploring ideas and encouraging pupils to provide explanations.

- In the nursery, the planning format should be reviewed to identify what children were expected to learn from each activity and to ensure a good balance between free play and structured activities.
- In the Junior School and Transition, arrangements for medium-term planning should be reviewed so as to avoid some repetition of work.

Throughout the nursery and school, pupils were enthusiastic and well-motivated, concentrating well during activities and lessons.

- Pupils were keen to contribute and showed good recall of previous work.
- In the Junior School, pupils needed more opportunities to interact with one another and to reflect on their own work.

- In the Senior School pupils interacted well with one another, showing sensitivity and maturity in discussion of contemporary issues and in evaluating their own and others' contributions.

Teachers' support for individual pupils' learning was good overall, particularly in certificate classes and through learning support provision.

- From J1 to S2, the emphasis on following published course materials in English and mathematics meant that for some pupils, the pace of learning was too fast or too slow.
- From S3 to S6, teachers were generally skilled at adapting materials and teaching approaches to meet pupils' individual needs.
- In the Senior School, teachers needed to expect higher and more consistent standards of presentation in written work in all subjects.

Teachers had a very good knowledge of their pupils' progress through classroom assessment. They gave helpful feedback to pupils and to other staff involved in monitoring pupils' progress. However, a number of steps needed to be taken to ensure better consistency in assessment and recording practice across the school.

- In the nursery, teachers' observations of children should relate to the five key aspects of learning and should be used

to identify next steps in the learning process.

- Teachers in the Junior School and from Transition to S2 should ensure that there is evidence that pupils have reached attainment targets in all aspects of the work at a Level before using National Tests.
- Assessment records should be used more systematically by teachers to identify next steps in learning for pupils and to evaluate their teaching programmes.

Support for pupils

Overall, the school gave very good support for pupils' pastoral, curricular and vocational needs.

In the nursery, staff were caring and responsive to individual children's needs. The Head of the Junior School and her staff knew the pupils well. The school's learning support staff were developing a very effective programme to help individual pupils with a range of specific learning needs.

Almost all teaching staff were involved in guidance as tutors and in teaching personal, social and health education. The tutor system as well as the size of school meant that staff knew pupils very well and regularly shared knowledge of pupils' progress in academic areas and in personal and social qualities.

Good steps were being taken to develop a computerised record system which included pupils' contribution to a Record of Achievement. Pupils' self monitoring would be improved by including in the record a sharper focus on next steps to improve attainment, and agreed personal targets.

Programmes for personal, social and health education were in place throughout the school and gave good attention to key aspects of healthy and safe living in contemporary society. The junior school programme was well established and staff had access to a range of effective resources and informative teaching guides. The Senior School programme needed clearer definition of the outcomes of the knowledge and skills pupils would gain, to avoid repetition and ensure that pupils made steady progress.

4. How well is the school managed?

Staff management and leadership

The Headmaster managed the school very well. He provided clear and effective leadership and was appreciated by staff for his firm, inclusive style of management and promotion of teamwork in the school community. He and his Depute had brought considerable educational and management skills to successfully developing a new nursery, primary and secondary school from the original preparatory school. The systems and structures they had introduced provided a firm basis for future development.

The Head of Junior School had introduced a number of changes in management procedures during her time in post. She was well organised and had worked hard to build up the department. She related well to her staff and had succeeded in building an effective Junior School team, but her role in the management team, particularly in relation to the nursery, needed to be clarified. The recently appointed Senior Tutor had started to identify appropriate priorities and was well placed to make an effective contribution to the work of the school.

Heads of departments managed their subjects effectively and most provided a good quality of advice, plans and records for staff.

Aims and policy making

The school had produced a set of broad aims but they did not provide a sufficiently explicit basis for evaluating the work of the school and should be reviewed. The nursery and Junior School had separate written statements of aims but they were also too general and needed to be reviewed.

- The school had a good committee structure which enabled all staff to contribute to the review and development of policy.
- Some staff review groups needed clearer remits and identified outcomes and action plans to follow-up their work.

- The school as a whole needed to produce a clear framework of concise written guidance for key areas of its work such as teaching and learning, assessment, discipline and the health and safety of pupils, in line with advice in *How Good Is Our School*, to ensure consistent practice throughout the school.
- The nursery needed to take full account of recent national guidance.
- In the Junior School a comprehensive range of policies offered good guidance to staff on all aspects of their work.

Quality assurance

The school had made a good start to evaluating its performance. A number of measures were already in place.

- A detailed analysis of exam results in standard and higher grade had been conducted and areas of strength and weakness in subject performance identified.
- Pupil progress was closely monitored through the tutor system.
- An ethos questionnaire had been completed by staff, pupils and parents with key issues being identified and acted upon.
- Regular staff meetings were held to encourage effective communication and evaluation of aspects of the school's work.

- The Headmaster and Depute regularly observed classroom teaching across the school and monitored the quality of department handbooks and plans.

A Health and Safety Committee chaired by the Headmaster responded to issues raised by staff and reported regularly to the Board of Governors. However, it lacked systematic procedures for monitoring safety around the school, to ensure prompt and effective action as required.

School development planning

Development planning was well established in the school and the school had a comprehensive and well-structured plan.

At Junior School staff had contributed to a very good development plan which identified an appropriate range of priorities. The department was well on the way to reaching its current targets. A separate section for the nursery should be included in the plan for the Junior School.

Each department in the Senior School produced a handbook and annually updated development plan. In most cases priorities were appropriately identified but some of the plans needed more clearly defined and measurable objectives.

The Headmaster produced an annual review of the school's development plan, but as yet it lacked clear indicators to show how successful the school had been in meeting its development targets.

Staff development and review

The school provided very good support for staff through training and review. Staff development was given high priority, was well planned and related to the priorities in the school's development plan. The school offered practical and financial support to individual teachers for their professional development. Very good support was offered to new staff.

The management team reviewed the work of all staff on an annual basis and teachers found the feedback they received positive and helpful.

5. Key strengths of the school

The school had a number of important strengths:

- a very positive and supportive atmosphere, building on small classes, very good relationships and teachers' good knowledge and care of individual pupils;
- a very well organised and effective system of guidance and support for pupils;
- the Headmaster's very good leadership and the sound basis he had provided for the management of the school;
- the conscientious and committed school staff;

- very good systems for evaluating the work of the school; and
- very effective staff development and review procedures.

6. Main points for action

The school and Board of Governors should act on the following recommendations:

- they should produce a clear set of specific aims, to be shared with staff, pupils and parents;
- they should review the scope and content of the curriculum, to take account of the recommendations in this report, in line with national guidance;
- they should agree common policy and procedures for assessment and recording and for using the information collected to monitor pupils' progress, courses, and teaching approaches;
- they should produce succinct and practical guidance for staff on key aspects of the school's provision, including teaching and learning approaches, guidance, and pupils' health and welfare;
- in partnership with parents, they should develop fuller advice and information for parents on key aspects of the work of the school and ways in which parents can contribute.

HM Inspectors will return between one and two years after the publication of this report to assess progress in meeting these recommendations.

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Copies of this report have been sent to the headteacher and school staff, the Director of Education, local councillors and the Member of Parliament. Subject to availability, further copies may be obtained free of charge from the office at the address below.

If you want to make a complaint about any aspect of the inspection or about this report, you should write in the first instance to the HM Chief Inspector whose address is given below. If you are unhappy with the response, you will be told in writing what further steps you may take.

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on behalf of HM Chief Inspector of Schools
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Appendix

HM Inspectors use indicators of quality when making judgements about the work of a school. These indicators have been published so that schools can use them to evaluate their own work.

This appendix summarises some of the findings contained in this report about the effectiveness of the school and how well it is managed. It also summarises HM Inspectors' evaluations of the quality of the lessons observed.

very good there were major strengths

good on balance, strengths outweighed any weaknesses

fair while there were some strengths, there were some important weaknesses

unsatisfactory there were major weaknesses

Curriculum, resources and management

We judged the following to be *very good*

- The school's ethos
- Provision of staff, their qualifications and experience
- The school's management of devolved finances
- Quality of curricular and vocational guidance
- Effectiveness of leadership of the school
- The school's approach to evaluating its own work
- Implementing the school development plan
- The school's arrangements for development and appraisal of its staff

We judged the following to be *good*

- Communication with parents
- Partnership with parents and the School Board
- Provision of accommodation and facilities
- Provision of materials and equipment
- The structure of the curriculum
- Effectiveness of the learning support
- Effectiveness of promoted staff and senior teachers
- The school development plan

We judged the following to be *fair*

- No aspects were found to be in this category

We judged the following to be *unsatisfactory*

- No aspects were found to be in this category

HMI also evaluated the quality of the lessons observed. The overall quality of lessons was very good in 37% of cases, good in 56% and fair in 7%. There were no unsatisfactory lessons