



Independent Schools Inspectorate Report

November 2010



THE
Downs School

Educating children since 1894



“Throughout the school, pupils are highly successful in their learning. From the youngest children to the oldest pupils they become articulate and confident. Their skills in literacy, numeracy and information and communications technology (ICT) are very good. They use these skills to great effect across all the other areas of their learning.”

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Foreward

It is with great pleasure and pride that I introduce our latest Independent Schools Inspection (ISI) report.

An independent, coeducational Prep School set in the beautiful North Somerset countryside, The Downs has always enjoyed a distinctive, national reputation. Our children have often been described as ‘outstanding ambassador’s of their school, they have regularly achieved exceptionally high standards in the classroom and on the sports fields and having been carefully prepared, they have very successfully moved on to their first choice senior schools.

We are delighted that this report reinforces our reputation. Simultaneously we are thrilled that it goes on to confirm that by fulfilling our aim to provide a stimulating, invigorating, first class all round education we do so much more.

Welcome to The Downs, where pupils thrive in our ‘demanding but nurturing environment’.

Marcus Gunn
Headmaster

The Downs School Inspection report for school

DfE Number	802/6001	Gender of Pupils	Mixed (165 boys; 87 girls)
Registered Charity Number	310279	Numbers by Age	3-5 (EYFS): 25 5-11: 172 11-18: 55
Address	The Downs School Charlton House Wraxall Bristol BS48 1PF	Number of Day Pupils Total:	252
Telephone Number	01275 852 008	Head of EYFS Setting	Mrs Audrey Marsden
Fax Number	01275 855 840	EYFS Gender	Mixed
Email Address	office@thedownsschool.co.uk	Inspection dates	16 Nov 2010 to 17 Nov 2010
Head Master	Mr Marcus A Gunn		
Chair of Governors	Mr Alastair M J Currie		
Age Range	4 to 13		
Total Number of Pupils	252		



Preface

This report is according to the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) schedule for INTERIM inspections. The inspection is a two-day visit with a focus on compliance with regulatory requirements. ISI inspections occur every three years and have two formats, interim and standard, which usually occur in an alternating pattern. The school's next inspection will therefore follow the standard schedule, which includes two visits totalling five days and places greater emphasis on the quality of education and care in addition to reporting on regulatory compliance. The school's previous inspection was in October 2006.

The Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) is the body approved by the Government for the purpose of inspecting schools belonging to Independent Schools Council (ISC) Associations and reporting on compliance with the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2010*.

The range of these Regulations is as follows.

- (a) Quality of education provided (curriculum)
- (b) Quality of education provided (teaching)
- (c) Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils
- (d) Welfare, health and safety of pupils
- (e) Suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors
- (f) Premises and accommodation
- (g) Provision of information
- (h) Manner in which complaints are to be handled

*These Regulations replace those first introduced on 1 September 2003.

Legislation additional to Part 3, Welfare, health and safety of pupils, is as follows.

- (i) The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA).
- (ii) Race, gender and sexual discrimination legislation.
- (iii) Corporal punishment.

The inspection was also carried out under the arrangements of the ISC Associations for the maintenance and improvement of the quality of their membership.

ISI is also approved to inspect the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), which was introduced in September 2008 and applies to all children in England from birth to 31st August following their fifth birthday. This report evaluates the extent to which the setting fulfils the requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework published by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and follows the requirements of the Childcare Act 2006 as subsequently amended.

The inspection of the school is from an educational perspective and provides limited inspection of other aspects, though inspectors will comment on any significant hazards or problems they encounter which have an adverse impact on children. The inspection does not include:

- (i) an exhaustive health and safety audit
- (ii) an in-depth examination of the structural condition of the school, its services or other physical features
- (iii) an investigation of the financial viability of the school or its accounting procedures
- (iv) an in-depth investigation of the school's compliance with employment law.

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1. The Characteristics Of The School

- 1.1 The Downs School is a co-educational day school for pupils aged from four to thirteen. The school was founded in 1894 by Morton Luce and at that time was located on the Bristol Downs; it moved to its present site in 1927 where the school became tenants of the late Lord Wroxall until 2002. The school is divided into two sections; the pre-prep, comprising the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and Years 1 to 3, and the prep school, for Years 4 to 8. The school now owns the property and land through a charitable trust.
- 1.2 The Downs School provides education for pupils of all backgrounds and who are of suitable ability; most pupils come to the school from the area to the west of Bristol. Children are offered a place in the Reception class on a basis of first come, first served. Thereafter the school admission procedure is largely non-selective, although potential pupils are required to undertake an informal entry assessment to ensure that the school is able to provide any necessary support.
- 1.3 The school is located in a Victorian building set in 60 acres of parkland, five miles to the south of Bristol. The EYFS and Reception classes, located on the same site, have their own purpose-built facility which overlooks the Somerset countryside. At the time of the inspection there was a total of 252 pupils on roll; of these, 25 were in the EYFS. All of the latter children attend full-time and there is an almost equal number of boys and girls. In the main school there are 152 boys and 75 girls. There are no pupils for whom English is an additional language. Thirty-nine pupils have been identified as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD), and of these 23 receive specialist learning support relating to dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia. No pupil has a statement of special educational needs. The ability profile of the school is above the national average.
- 1.4 Pupils leave The Downs at the end of Year 8 and the vast majority move on to independent schools in the Bristol area and the south of England. A significant number of previous leavers have gained scholarships at their chosen schools.
- 1.5 The school seeks to provide an all-round education that is stimulating, exciting and challenging. The school's philosophy is based on traditional Christian values and morals. The school aims to nurture confidence and success in its pupils in all areas of their work and play.
- 1.6 National Curriculum nomenclature is used throughout this report to refer to year groups in the school.

2. The Success Of The School

The quality of the pupils' achievements and their learning, attitudes and basic skills

- 2.1 Throughout the school, pupils are highly successful in their learning. From the youngest children to the oldest pupils they become articulate and confident. Their skills in literacy, numeracy and information and communications technology (ICT) are very good. They use these skills to great effect across all the other areas of their learning.
- 2.2 The pupils' attainment cannot be measured in relation to average performance against national tests, but on the evidence available, it is judged to be high in relation to national age-related expectations. The pupils follow a broad and demanding curriculum and, on leaving the school, they experience considerable success in senior school entrance examinations with a significant proportion of pupils gaining scholarships. Inspection evidence confirms this judgement. This level of attainment, as judged, indicates that pupils make good progress in relation to pupils of similar ability.
- 2.3 Pupils achieve many outstanding individual and team successes in sport, often at a national or international level. Pupils achieve highly in music and drama, where the school has a growing and deserved reputation for outstanding performance.
- 2.4 The school provides a high quality academic education with a broad and balanced curriculum which supports the school's core values. Separate sciences are taught from Year 7 and pupils study two foreign languages from Year 6. The curriculum is planned well and this includes a programme of personal, social and health education that reflects the aims of the school. Provision for pupils with specific learning needs is good. Difficulties in learning are quickly identified and measures put in place to address these. Gifted and talented pupils are also provided for very well, either through the scholarship route or through the wide variety of clubs available to them. The range of extra-curricular activities which the school provides is outstanding and entirely in keeping with the school's aims to provide an all-round education that is both challenging and stimulating. Pupils indicated through discussion that they would be reluctant to leave the school but that they also feel confident to face the future.
- 2.5 Using their considerable experience and expertise teachers make an effective contribution to the academic and personal development of the pupils. The better lessons are presented with a vibrancy that engages the attention of pupils and enables them to learn more effectively. The teaching fosters diligence, application and effort, which encourages good behaviour through high expectations. A majority of lessons are well planned and it is clear that the teaching is based upon a thorough knowledge of the pupils' prior learning. The achievements of pupils are significantly enhanced by their attitudes to learning. In lessons they are eager to learn and energetic in their application. A variety of teaching styles is used by teachers and these enhance the learning of most pupils. Occasionally, a very small number of pupils will lose focus in lessons because teaching does not provide sufficient opportunity for them to interact with the subject or take part in co-operative activities. Marking of the pupils' work is of a high standard and provides good pointers to pupils as to how they might improve. The deputy head teacher monitors pupil progress using a computerised tracking system introduced since the last inspection. This system assists the staff in highlighting pupils who may be under-performing, those who may require ongoing support and those potentially gifted and talented pupils. Parents appear satisfied with the amount of work that is given for completion at home; this response closely correlates with the views of pupils about the homework they are given.

The quality of the pupils' personal development

- 2.6 The pupils' personal development is excellent. As they progress through the school pupils become increasingly confident and have high levels of self-esteem. It is evident from the youngest children in the EYFS to those in their final year. This is the result of supportive pastoral arrangements and the extremely good relationships that exist between pupils and their teachers, as well as between pupils themselves. Pupils' personal development is supported by the strong pastoral care shown by all staff. Pupils indicated that they felt there is always someone they could turn to if they felt the need. This dedicated support for pupils is the soul of the school and enables them to flourish.
- 2.7 Pupils are very able to reflect on spiritual issues and have a well-developed sense of respect for others, irrespective of their background or religion. Pupils write outstandingly about their feelings in poetry, as well as being able to put themselves in the place of others. Original stories written by pupils testify to the quality and depth of their empathy, and art work shows the sensitivity that is common among pupils. Pupils have a significant appreciation of the world around them. Within the curriculum this appreciation comes from subjects such as geography where they learn simple things, such as the presence and effect of micro-climates. Cultural and multi-cultural awareness is developed because pupils take part in a wide range of activities, and through a developing link with a South African school. The school grounds are a rich source of learning for pupils where they develop an appreciation of the environment.
- 2.8 Pupils have a well-developed sense of right and wrong. This goes far beyond simply the keeping of the school's rules – which they do extremely well – as evidenced by pupils' support for others in the wider community through their significant charity fund-raising ventures. Pupils are unflinchingly polite and courteous. The youngest children also show a good awareness in their interactions with others.
- 2.9 Pupils are known well by all staff and this allows staff to quickly recognise when something may be amiss. Pupils thrive in this nurturing, yet at the same time, demanding environment. The house system supports the social development of pupils by ensuring that they receive the appropriate support when they need it. The pre-inspection questionnaires indicated that not all pupils felt that teachers treated them fairly. Investigation did not substantiate this and the majority of pupils were clear that they enjoy being at the school.
- 2.10 The arrangements to ensure the safety of pupils are excellent and these are effectively implemented. In addition to appropriately trained staff in matters of safeguarding, there is also a complete range of policies, including that for antibullying, which guide and reflect the practice in the school. Admission and attendance registers are completed appropriately and the school has due regard to its obligations under the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act. Safeguarding arrangements are carried out meticulously and the practices surrounding recruitment of staff are thorough and complete. These are also recorded correctly. Health and safety matters are tackled rigorously and where any deficiency might be noted this is quickly remedied. Fire safety measures are rehearsed at appropriate intervals and supporting systems such as the testing of equipment are in place. Support for pupils who may become ill is good. The daily presence of a matron and the facility of a sick room ensure that pupils are looked after well in this regard. More than the required number of staff are qualified in first aid.
- 2.11 Pupils fully understand the benefits of a healthy lifestyle. Many take part in sport and appreciate the need for a healthy and well-balanced diet. The care for pupils is further enhanced through the facility of a breakfast club; this is something that pupils appreciate, especially if they have had a longer journey to school.

The effectiveness of governance, leadership and management

- 2.12 The governance of the school is excellent and through the work done by this body the aims of the school are upheld. The work undertaken by the governing body, as well as the individual roles performed by governors, assures the high standards that the school reaches across the range of its work. The governing body, through its three committees and the work done by these, fully supports the educational direction of the school. Formal arrangements are in place to ensure that the school meets all its legal responsibilities in the areas of safeguarding, welfare, health and safety. Regular visits by governors enable them to have a very good understanding of the standards that prevail in the school. These visits are supplemented by detailed reports received from the head master and bursar. The detail of these reports enables the governors to make informed decisions about the strategic development of the school. Financial planning is meticulous and this ensures that all appropriate resources are in place to provide for the needs of pupils. The school development plan is a most thorough document that provides a clear view of the future development of the school.
- 2.13 The leadership and management of the school are outstanding. The vision provided by the head master is fully shared and implemented by the senior leadership team. Senior staff have their roles clearly defined and they efficiently carry them out. Improvements in teaching and curriculum planning are attributable to the work of the senior management. This team works as a cohesive unit to support the work undertaken by all staff. Particularly strong features include the provision of continuing professional development of teachers and the pastoral support for pupils. These strengths play a large part in the educational development of the school and the academic and personal achievement of pupils.
- 2.14 The school has a robust system in place to ensure the suitability of staff and governors. An appropriate centralised register is maintained of all the checks carried out prior to the confirmation of appointments.
- 2.15 The school sits in its own grounds of some 60 acres and these are maintained to a high standard; they are also used extensively to very effectively enhance the curriculum and sporting activities of the school. The buildings are maintained well and, while all teaching areas enable effective learning, the accommodation for the EYFS is outstanding. The whole school environment is a vibrant one where the pupils' work is displayed along with their achievements in sport and the arts.
- 2.16 The school has very effective links with its parents. It works hard to ensure that parents and prospective pupils have the most up-to-date information. In their responses to the questionnaire, parents indicated their wholehearted support for the work of the school and what it does on behalf of their children. The questionnaire returns also indicated that a substantial majority of parents feel that the school is managed well and that any concerns or complaints they may have are also handled well. Informative reports about their children are sent to parents three times each year and further supported by an annual parents' evening. The reports helpfully include targets for further improvement. Similar evenings are held termly for parents of younger children. Almost all parents feel that their children make good progress at the school and that standards of behaviour are high. A majority also express confidence in the governance and management of the school. A small minority disagreed that the school makes appropriate provision for pupils who have learning difficulties or who are gifted and talented. The inspection team could find no evidence to substantiate this view. The school does however actively encourage parents to make contact with the school, and there are clear procedures in place by which they can do this. The questionnaire responses also confirm that most parents believe the school has responded well to any concerns they might have.

3. Action Points

(i) Compliance with regulatory requirements

(The range of the Independent School Standards Regulations is given in the Preface)

3.1 The school meets all the requirements of the Independent School Standards Regulations 2010.

(ii) Recommendations for further improvement

3.2 The school is advised to make the following improvements.

1. Ensure that existing good practice in providing opportunities for all pupils to take a full part in lessons is extended to all teaching.
2. In the EYFS, achieve a more even balance between periods of teaching, learning, and break times.
3. Ensure that sufficient opportunities are provided in the EYFS for children to investigate and solve problems.

4. The Effectiveness Of The Early Years Foundation Stage

4.(a) The overall effectiveness of the early years provision – how well the school meets the needs of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage

- 4.1 The overall effectiveness of the setting is outstanding, and it successfully achieves its aim to provide an invigorating all-round education that is stimulating, challenging and exciting and where every child is valued as an integral part of the school community. Children's needs are very well met through a broad range of activities. The careful attention given to the implementation of safeguarding procedures ensures that children are safe and secure.
- 4.2 The setting has good capacity for improvement, as is demonstrated by the review procedures that are in place and the highly effective partnerships with parents that have been established. The excellent relationships add to the knowledge adults have of the children in the setting.

4.(b) The effectiveness of the leadership and management of the Early Years Foundation Stage

- 4.3 Leadership and management are outstanding. The dedicated management team have high aspirations for the best quality of provision through ongoing improvement and a strong commitment to equality and diversity. Safeguarding arrangements are robust and implemented effectively. Appropriate risk assessments and safeguarding procedures are in place.
- 4.4 A clear knowledge and understanding of the EYFS requirements is reflected in good classroom practice and in the information provided for parents. Adults who manage the day-to-day organisation of the setting ensure that all children, whatever their individual needs, are able to thrive and succeed. However, a small imbalance in the timing and length of morning sessions results in less effective use of the available teaching time. The final session of the morning is particularly short.
- 4.5 Communication with parents is outstanding, with a range of information made available through the website, letters, meetings and home-school liaison books. Parents are very happy with the provision and actively support the school. The questionnaire returns showed unanimous support for the work undertaken by staff. Parents were in particular agreement about the range of activities provided for their children and the ease of communication they have with the setting.
- 4.6 Self-evaluation is effective in identifying strengths and weaknesses of the provision. Policies and procedures are in place and implemented consistently. The adults have a good knowledge of the EYFS and work hard to provide opportunities for learning and development through detailed planning. Staff work together to provide a range of activities; they identify what they intend the children to learn and use assessment to target the next steps in learning.
- 4.7 Children have access to a range of high quality resources which they use effectively. The external areas are used very well to enhance the experiences of the children.

4.(c) The quality of the provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage

- 4.8 The quality of provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage is good, with significant strengths. The setting is very successful in providing a welcoming and stimulating environment appropriate to every child. Rooms are well organised and presented attractively; the children make frequent use of the outdoor play area, which continues to be developed to extend learning opportunities throughout the day.
- 4.9 Good quality planning creates activities that involve children in their own learning, but teaching does not consistently provide children with sufficient time to ensure achievement through investigation and problem-solving. Activities, both indoor and outside, engage and absorb children, leading them to explore and play imaginatively; the activities, both child-initiated and adult-led, expand and enhance their experience. There are opportunities for children to demonstrate their creativity; they are encouraged to make suggestions and offer ideas.
- 4.10 Children's welfare has a high profile, and their emotional and social needs are well supported by adults who provide safe and clear routines and give them a good range of learning experiences. Staff carefully observe and record children's learning and are then able to plan the next steps for every individual. Many succinct and informative assessments are made while observing child-initiated play. Information from focused assessment procedures is used by teachers to give an overview of progress that informs future teaching.

4.(d) Outcomes for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage

- 4.11 Children make excellent progress in relation to their individual starting points. Basic skills in literacy and numeracy are taught thoroughly and imaginatively. Children achieve well; all children reach and most exceed the early learning goals by the end of their Reception year.
- 4.12 Children greatly enjoy their time in school; they are enthusiastic and active learners. They show high levels of independence, imagination and concentration. The children relate well to the adults in the setting; they are good listeners and try hard to please their teachers. Their social and communication skills are good, they are keen to use their knowledge to write, they express a growing knowledge of the world and are able to count and use numbers for different purposes.
- 4.13 The children understand safety and hazards; they know about keeping themselves clean and how to lead a healthy lifestyle. They are energetic and enjoy being active.

Section 3 includes what the Early Years Foundation Stage should do to improve its provision.

Inspection Evidence

The inspectors observed a sample of lessons, conducted formal interviews with pupils and examined samples of pupils' work. They held discussions with senior members of staff and with the chair of governors, observed a sample of the extra-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection period, and attended registration sessions and assemblies. The responses of parents and pupils to pre-inspection questionnaires were analysed, and the inspectors examined regulatory documentation made available by the school.

Inspectors

Mr Tom Fisher-Smith	Reporting Inspector
Mr Dougal Philips	Head Master, IAPS School
Mrs Catherine Lake	Co-ordinating Inspector, Early Years



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