

School inspection report

13 to 15 February 2024

Bedford Girls' School

Cardington Road

Bedford

Bedfordshire

MK42 0BX

The Independent Schools Inspectorate is appointed by the Department for Education to inspect association independent schools in England. Our inspections report on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards and other applicable regulatory requirements are met, collectively referred to in this report as 'the Standards'.

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Summary of inspection findings

1. Leaders at all levels create a vibrant school in which the wellbeing of pupils is integral to decision making. The curriculum is varied, forward-looking and adaptive to the needs of pupils.
2. Leaders clearly articulate the school's vision, aims and ethos and use methodical self-evaluation to inform detailed school development plans.
3. Pupils thrive and make progress in an atmosphere of high expectation and participation. Pupils are highly motivated and use their embedded literacy and listening skills to collaborate readily with their peers. Technology is effectively embedded throughout the curriculum and pupils are adept at using a range of tools to enhance their learning.
4. Leaders ensure that the needs of pupils are identified and staff adjust and provide support where it is needed. There is an effective framework for assessment and pupils know the next steps in their learning. The curriculum is appropriately adapted to meet the needs of pupils, including those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and those who speak English as an additional language (EAL).
5. Leaders provide a wide range of co-curricular and academic activities and opportunities through which pupils develop a broad palette of skills and attributes. Pupils know their strengths and are proud of their achievements in and out of the classroom.
6. Some teachers in the senior school do not consistently monitor behaviour in classrooms or make their expectations clear. As a result, in some lessons, pupil engagement varies and learning is disrupted.
7. Leaders value the input of pupil voice and pupils are proud of the impact they have on school life, particularly in the areas of diversity and inclusion. The personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education curriculum is adaptive and meets the needs of pupils. As a result, pupils develop their self-awareness and consistently show respect for each other and other cultures, preparing them for life in modern Britain.
8. Through the effective implementation of the anti-bullying strategy, leaders continue to work with pupils to help them to develop strategies to deal with friendship issues. This supports pupils to be mutually supportive of each other.
9. High-quality careers provision guides pupils effectively through the school. As a result, pupils are aware of their strengths and are ambitious in their plans. Younger pupils look up to the examples set by the pupil leadership group who act as role models. Pupils in the sixth form are confident with high levels of self-esteem and go on to study a broad range of university courses, or pursue apprenticeships and careers in a variety of fields.
10. Leaders have effective oversight of arrangements for safeguarding and use the proprietorial and governance structure to benchmark performance and ensure best practice in the Trust is shared effectively. Pupils feel safe in school.

The extent to which the school meets the Standards

- Standards relating to leadership and management, and governance are met.
- Standards relating to the quality of education, training and recreation are met.
- Standards relating to pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing are met.
- Standards relating to pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society are met.
- Standards relating to safeguarding are met.

Recommended next steps

Leaders should:

- ensure that the positive behaviour policy is consistently implemented by staff in the senior school so that learning during lessons is maximised
- ensure that planned actions identified through leaders' effective self-evaluation are taken within an appropriate timeline.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

11. Through regular meetings at Trust and governor level, and ‘policy in practice’ visits to school, governors maintain an effective oversight of school development and ensure that leaders promote a culture of safeguarding. Governors have a systematic and considered approach to risk and support leaders to ensure that the aims and ethos of the school are rooted in pupil wellbeing, for example, by making further improvements to site security following an audit.
12. The regular lines of reporting between senior leaders, the governing body and the Harpur Trust support governors to ensure that leaders have the required skills and knowledge to perform their roles effectively.
13. Leaders consistently promote the school's aim of providing a happy, caring and fun environment for pupils. Leaders maintain a culture of ongoing professional development for staff, characterised by a commitment to rigour and openness to challenge from all members of the school community. Pupils feel their voices are heard in deciding the future direction of the school.
14. Leaders oversee effective procedures ensuring that complaints are dealt with within the timeframes detailed in the school’s policy and keep appropriate records. Leaders use learning from complaints to inform self-evaluation and school development planning. Relevant information is provided to parents of pupils and parents of prospective pupils, as necessary. Reports to parents about pupils’ progress and attainment are clear in providing context and identifying next steps for pupils in their learning.
15. Leaders’ self-evaluation is robust and informed by pupil, parent and governor surveys as well as reports from the Harpur Trust. This is central to the school’s development planning, through which leaders have a clear understanding of strengths and relative weaknesses. For example, the school identifies the challenges faced by some pupils in managing their friendships and leaders’ plans include strategies to support pupils appropriately.
16. In the junior school, leaders’ expectations are successfully embedded and pupils are engaged and make rapid progress in their learning. In the senior school, pupils make good progress, though levels of focus and engagement vary.
17. Careful accessibility planning in line with the Equality Act ensures that all pupils have access to the full range of subjects and pupils of all abilities and needs thrive and make progress. Pupils are proud of their achievements and their school.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to leadership and management, and governance

- 18. All the relevant Standards are met.**

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

19. Leaders provide a broad, balanced and varied curriculum for pupils across the full age range. The school follows an external framework learning programme which effectively promotes pupils' self-knowledge, self-esteem and self-confidence. The language of the International Baccalaureate (IB) primary years programme infuses the everyday learning environment in the junior school, helping pupils to develop their thinking skills.
20. Pupils are motivated to learn and are keen to improve and do well, in line with school aims. Pupils are self-motivated and communicate effectively in lessons across the curriculum. Pupils are enthusiastic contributors in lessons and are able to speak eloquently about their learning.
21. Leaders have a thorough understanding of the aptitudes, abilities and needs of pupils. This supports pupils to make good progress relative to their starting points. The framework for assessment is robust and detailed, allowing teachers to plan effectively and enabling leaders to closely track pupil performance. Teachers give pupils regular feedback on their work, with next steps in learning clearly identified. Pupil outcomes at GCSE and A level exceed national expectations and similarly, IB diploma outcomes exceed expectations against international benchmarks.
22. Leaders provide dedicated specialist support for pupils who have SEND. In addition, effective teacher planning across subjects and lessons supports pupils who have SEND to access the curriculum.
23. When lessons are well planned and staff implement the positive behaviour policy, pupils enjoy their learning and develop and improve their answers in a supportive and constructive environment. In the junior school, the use of varied and engaging teaching and learning strategies ignites a passion for learning in pupils; for example, pupils write play scripts to explore religious stories and write journals to imagine the experience of migrants. However, in some lessons in the senior school, behaviour and low-level disruption impact on pupils' learning when teachers do not consistently implement the positive behaviour policy.
24. Pupils use a variety of effective technological tools to make progress in their learning. Technology is often used positively to meet individual needs, for example pupils use discreet earphones to reduce distraction while working on complex calculations.
25. Leaders actively promote the extensive co-curricular programme as an integral part of school life and expect pupils to actively engage in a variety of activities each week. Levels of participation are monitored and pupil engagement is high, supporting pupils to develop a wide range of skills and expertise across a range of sporting, artistic and academic activities.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to the quality of education, training and recreation

26. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 3: Pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing

27. Pupils' mental health and emotional wellbeing is a key part of the school's strategy and stakeholders understand that 'wellbeing is everyone's responsibility'. Pupils develop effective strategies for managing their own wellbeing. Through the consistent implementation by staff of the anti-bullying policy and pupil mental health strategy, the school community understands the school's focus on the fostering of positive relationships.
28. Through an extensive programme of sporting activity, leaders support pupils to develop effective teamwork, interpersonal skills and healthy habits with respect to physical activity.
29. Outside lessons, pupils typically behave well, showing respect for teachers and each other.
30. Leaders keep careful logs of all incidents of bullying to help identify trends and to plan effective actions. For example, leaders have a clear strategy and plan for helping pupils in the lower years in the senior school to manage their friendships more effectively using friendship management tools. Pupils in the junior school feel that bullying does not often happen, but they know that when it does it is dealt with effectively by staff.
31. The behaviour of pupils in the junior school is consistently good. For example, pupils demonstrate highly respectful behaviour towards one another in a groupwork activity, complimenting each other on accurate language and empathising when answers are incorrect. Pupils in the sixth form are self-motivated, collaborative, discerning and successfully hold each other to account.
32. Leaders foster an inclusive school culture by giving older pupils the opportunity to lead clubs to engage with the younger pupils, including in the junior school. For example, the house pancake race develops house spirit, and supports pupils' self-esteem and self-confidence. Sixth-form pupils receive suitable support from leaders to deliver key messages in assembly around mutual respect, taking responsibility, knowing the law and taking a pledge against harassment. Pupils acknowledge the positive impact of hearing messages from and having contact with older pupils.
33. The PSHE programme incorporates Relationships and Sex education (RSE) and is delivered through the planned curriculum including form time as well as visits from guest speakers, stand-alone events and assemblies. Staff deliver lessons from the well-planned PSHE curriculum and leaders seek frequent pupil and parent feedback to further tailor provision. The programmes are developed in consultation with parents and external support when necessary and this ensures the curriculum successfully meets the needs of pupils.
34. Leaders provide a well-maintained site and variety of buildings with suitable lighting and acoustics. Spacious accommodation of a high standard is provided. Pupils benefit from recreational spaces that are clean, bright and inviting. The premises and facilities are maintained to a standard which ensures the health, safety and welfare of pupils. There are regular fire drills and pupils know what is expected in the event of an emergency. Pupils appreciate the opportunities the well-maintained and bespoke specialist accommodation gives them and develop a broad range of skills.
35. Staff use a robust system to ensure pupils' attendance and admission is recorded accurately. Pupil absence is followed up swiftly and effectively with suitable interventions in line with school policy.

Any pupils who join or leave the school at non-standard transition times are reported to the local authority in line with statutory guidance. This positively impacts pupil attendance to school. Supervision in school during non-structured time is effective.

36. Leaders provide suitable accommodation for the medical examination and treatment of pupils, and medical needs are dealt with appropriately on school trips by well-trained staff, ensuring that the school meets with relevant regulations and pupils are safeguarded.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing

- 37. All the relevant Standards are met.**

Section 4: Pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society

38. Leaders provide suitable opportunities in the curriculum for pupils to learn about social, human and economic aspects of life. For example, younger pupils learn about taxation and sixth-form pupils studying business understand the concept of liquidity and solvency ratios.
39. Pupils explore British society in the humanities curriculum. Leaders actively promote British values and democracy. For example, pupils in the senior school confidently discuss prospects for the general election applying their knowledge of the UK political system.
40. Pupils in the sixth form understand the importance of budgeting at university. Learning about topics such as credit ratings in the enrichment programme deepens pupils' understanding and economic awareness.
41. Leaders work with pupils to raise the awareness of diversity within the school community and this is embedded in the curriculum. For example, the creation of cross-curricular learning units in the junior school brings studies together in the humanities, arts and science. Pupils confidently present their learning back to parents and leaders. For example, in a Year 6 exhibition on global human rights representing diverse groups of people.
42. Pupils are encouraged to take a lead in developing the diversity and inclusion profile in the school through the formation of a range of societies. For example, leaders oversee the pupil-led 'Pride Club', South Asian and African Caribbean societies in leading assemblies to promote understanding of the contribution of diverse groups of people to society. These opportunities positively impact pupils' interactions with their peers and support them in understanding each other's differences.
43. Leaders carefully weave careers education and highly personalised support and guidance throughout the school's curriculum. The youngest pupils are able to imagine possible career pathways and the curriculum encourages them to explore the skills and subjects needed to take part in various careers. The pairing of older pupils with those who have recently left school has considerable impact on pupils' understanding of their own next steps and careers guidance. Leaders arrange for pupils to work through an external careers project which develop pupils' skills to choose a broad range of next steps, including degree apprenticeships and internships.
44. Leaders prioritise helping pupils to understand the realities of the workplace through the school's curriculum. For example, in a textiles project, leaders encourage pupils to appreciate the commercial aspects of working as a professional artist, enabling them to identify factors in becoming commercially successful. Through extensive use of parental and school connections combined with their own exploration, pupils take part in a wide variety of work experience and develop real world skills. Pupils gain effective understanding of the realities of the workplace which help them make decisions about their own futures.
45. Pupils are given appropriate opportunities to engage in their local community and several charitable organisations benefit from pupils' fundraising efforts. This supports pupils to gain a deeper understanding of local issues. Leaders encourage older pupils to volunteer in local primary schools and pupils find this rewarding and uplifting.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society

46. All the relevant Standards are met.

Safeguarding

47. Safeguarding leaders have a clear understanding of the thresholds for actions arising from safeguarding referrals. Leaders work effectively with external agencies and make timely referrals to external agencies as appropriate. Detailed logs are maintained which allow leaders to analyse trends, identify patterns in behaviour and adapt practice to impact positively the safety of pupils. The safeguarding governor meets regularly with safeguarding leads and provides effective support. This enables governors and leaders to maintain an effective oversight of safeguarding and to promote pupils' welfare.
48. Leaders ensure that training of all staff is up to date, and new staff and volunteers receive appropriate training as they join the school. Staff understand their responsibilities, know how to make a referral and are aware of the process for reporting low-level concerns. Staff are trained to understand the risks of extremism and radicalisation and know how to identify warning signs in pupils' behaviour.
49. Thorough recruitment processes, including online checks for prospective staff, underpin the safety of pupils and provides the foundation for effective safeguarding across the school. Governors maintain effective oversight of recruitment checks and policies are updated to reflect contextual risk.
50. Leaders oversee robust risk assessments, policies and procedures in all areas of school life; leaders respond quickly when new risks emerge and consequently pupils feel safe in school. Leaders have oversight of pupils' work on devices and there are effective arrangements for filtering and monitoring. Pupils receive regular safety training and they understand how to protect themselves whilst online.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

- 51. All the relevant Standards are met.**

School details

School	Bedford Girls' School
Department for Education number	822/6012
Registered charity number	1066861
Address	Bedford Girls' School Cardington Road Bedford Bedfordshire MK42 0BX
Phone number	01234 361900
Email address	information@bedfordgirlsschool.co.uk
Website	www.bedfordgirlsschool.co.uk
Proprietor	The Harpur Trust
Chair	Mr Neil Harris
Headteacher	Mrs Gemma Gibson
Age range	7 to 18
Number of pupils	977
Date of previous inspection	22 April 2022

Information about the school

52. Bedford Girls' School (BGS) is a large independent girls' school, formed as the result of the merger of Dame Alice Harpur School and Bedford High School. The junior school opened in September 2010 and the senior school in September 2011 with girls in Years 7–10 and Year 12. From September 2012 the school welcomed girls in every year group from Year 3 to Year 13.
53. The school has identified 130 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Two pupils in the school have an education, health and care (EHC) plan.
54. English is an additional language for 25 pupils.
55. The school states its aims are to strive to deliver a future-inspired education: innovative teaching practices, technology and compassionate care combine to empower pupils with the attributes and self-confidence to seize opportunities and tackle the challenges of a complex world. As learners, the school aims for pupils to be bold, imaginative and reflective.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

13 to 15 February 2024

56. A team of 8 inspectors visited the school for two and a half days.

57. Inspection activities included:

- observation of lessons, some in conjunction with school leaders
- observation of registration periods and assemblies
- observation of a sample of extra-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection
- discussions with the chair and other governors
- discussions with the head, school leaders, managers and other members of staff
- discussions with pupils
- visits to the learning support area and facilities for physical education
- scrutiny of samples of pupils' work
- scrutiny of a range of policies, documentation and records provided by the school.

58. The inspection team considered the views of pupils, members of staff and parents who responded to ISI's pre-inspection surveys.

How are association independent schools in England inspected?

- The Department for Education is the regulator for independent schools in England.
- ISI is approved by the Secretary of State for Education to inspect independent schools in England, which are members of associations in membership of the Independent Schools Council.
- ISI inspections report to the Department for Education on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards, the EYFS statutory framework requirements, the National Minimum Standards for boarding schools and any other relevant standards are met.
- For more information, please visit **www.isi.net**.

Independent Schools Inspectorate

CAP House, 9-12 Long Lane, London, EC1A 9HA

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