



ISI Independent
Schools
Inspectorate

Focused Compliance and Educational Quality Inspection Report

Duncombe School

June 2022

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School's Details

School	Duncombe School			
DfE number	919/6098			
Address	Duncombe School 4 Warren Park Road Bengeo Hertford Hertfordshire SG14 3JA			
Telephone number	01992 414100			
Email address	office@duncombe-school.co.uk			
Headteacher	Mr Jeremy Phelan			
Director of Education	Mr James Carroll			
Age range	2 to 11			
Number of pupils on roll	280			
	EYFS	101	Juniors	179
Inspection dates	14 to 17 June 2022			

1. Background Information

About the school

- 1.1 Duncombe School is an independent co-educational day preparatory school located in a residential area on the edge of Hertford. Founded in 1939 the school remained in private ownership until bought by Cognita in 2005, which is responsible for its governance. The school comprises three departments: The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) for children from age 2 to 5 years; Lower School for pupils from 5 to 8 years; and Upper School for pupils from 8 to 11 years.
- 1.2 The inspection took into account the circumstances faced by schools during the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions imposed by government guidance at various points of the pandemic.

What the school seeks to do

- 1.3 The school aims to educate the whole child, promoting respect for Christian values whilst recognising and respecting beliefs, needs and achievements of others in a multi-cultural society. It seeks to provide a structured and happy environment where each member of the community is valued and secure, and where there is a commitment to encouraging individual development.

About the pupils

- 1.4 Pupils come from a range of professional backgrounds who mostly live within 15 miles of the school. Nationally standardised test data provided by the school indicate that the ability of the pupils is above average compared with pupils taking the same tests elsewhere. The school has identified 32 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), which include dyslexia, autistic spectrum condition, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and other sensory and physical needs; 26 of these pupils receive additional specialist help. No pupil in the school has an education, health and care (EHC) plan. English is an additional language (EAL) for 12 pupils, who receive additional support as required. The curriculum is modified for those pupils identified by the school as being the most able.

2. Regulatory Compliance Inspection

Preface

The Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) is approved by the Secretary of State to inspect schools which are, or whose heads are, in membership of the associations which form the Independent Schools Council (ISC) and report on the extent to which they meet the Independent School Standards ('the standards') in the Schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014. Inspections of schools with early years settings not requiring registration also report whether the school complies with key provisions of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework. Additionally, inspections report on the school's accessibility plan under Schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010 and the ban on corporal punishment under section 548 of the Education Act 1996. Inspections also comment on the progress made to meet any compliance action points set out in the school's most recent statutory inspection.

ISI inspections are also carried out under the arrangements of the ISC Associations for the maintenance and improvement of the quality of their membership.

This is a FOCUSED COMPLIANCE INSPECTION which was combined with an inspection of EDUCATIONAL QUALITY. The FOCUSED COMPLIANCE inspection reports only on the school's compliance with the standards. The standards represent minimum requirements and judgements are given either as **met** or as **not met**. All schools are required to meet all the standards applicable to them. Where the minimum requirements are not met, this is clearly indicated in the relevant section of the report and the school is required to take the actions specified. In this focused compliance inspection, key standards have been inspected in detail. These are the standards on safeguarding; measures to guard against bullying; arrangements for pupils' health and safety; arrangements to check the suitability of staff; the provision of information; the handling of parents' complaints; and other related aspects of leadership and management. The remaining standards and requirements are deemed to continue to be met unless evidence to the contrary has been found.

Inspections do not include matters that are outside of the regulatory framework described above, such as: an exhaustive health and safety audit; compliance with data protection requirements; an in-depth examination of the structural condition of the school, its services or other physical features; contractual arrangements with parents; an investigation of the financial viability of the school or its accounting procedures.

Inspectors may be aware of individual safeguarding concerns, allegations and complaints as part of the inspection process. Such matters will not usually be referred to specifically in published reports in this document but will have been considered by the team in reaching its judgements.

Links to the standards and requirements can be found here: [The Education \(Independent School Standards\) Regulations 2014](#), [Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework](#).

Key findings

- 2.1 The school meets the standards in the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014, and relevant requirements of the statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage, and associated requirements, and no further action is required as a result of this inspection.**

PART 1 – Quality of education provided

- 2.2 The school's own framework for assessment confirms that teaching enables pupils to make good progress in the context of Part 1 paragraph 3(a).
- 2.3 The curriculum is documented, supported by appropriate plans and schemes of work for the pupils and covers the required breadth of material. The teaching enables pupils to make good progress, encompasses effective behaviour management and is supported by suitable resources. A suitable framework for the assessment of pupils' performance is in place.
- 2.4 Pupils receive relationships education. The school has consulted parents and published a written statement of its policy which has regard to the relevant statutory guidance.
- 2.5 The standards relating to the quality of education [paragraphs 1–4] are met.**

PART 2 – Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

- 2.6 Principles and values are actively promoted which facilitate the personal development of pupils as responsible, tolerant, law-abiding citizens.
- 2.7 The standard relating to spiritual, moral, social and cultural development [paragraph 5] is met.**

PART 3 – Welfare, health and safety of pupils

- 2.8 Arrangements are made to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils by means that pay due regard to current statutory guidance; good behaviour is promoted; bullying is prevented so far as reasonably practicable; health and safety requirements are met, including those relating to fire safety; provision is made for first aid. Pupils are properly supervised; admission and attendance registers are maintained, as required, and there is a strategic approach to risk assessment. A disability access plan is in place.
- 2.9 The standards relating to welfare, health and safety [paragraphs 6–16], the requirement of Schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010, and the ban on corporal punishment under section 548 of the Education Act 1996 are met.**

PART 4 – Suitability of staff, supply staff, and proprietors

- 2.10 The school makes appropriate checks to ensure the suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors, and a register is kept as required.
- 2.11 The standards relating to the suitability of those in contact with pupils at the school [paragraphs 17–21] are met.**

PART 5 – Premises of and accommodation at schools

- 2.12 Suitable toilet and changing facilities, and showering facilities where required by the standard, and appropriate accommodation for pupils' medical and therapy needs are provided. The premises are maintained to a standard commensurate with health and safety; acoustics and lighting are

appropriate; water provision is adequate. Suitable outdoor space is provided for physical education and outdoor play.

2.13 The standards relating to the premises and accommodation [paragraphs 22–31] are met.

PART 6 – Provision of information

2.14 A range of information is published, provided or made available to parents, inspectors and the Department for Education. This includes details about the proprietor, the ethos of the school and the curriculum, and of the school's arrangements for admission, behaviour and exclusions, bullying, health and safety, first aid, details of the complaints procedure, and the number of complaints registered under the formal procedure during the preceding school year, and the provision for any with education, health and care plans or English as an additional language. It also includes particulars of the school's academic performance during the preceding school year, inspection reports and (for parents only) a report at least annually of their own child's progress. The safeguarding policy is posted on the school's website.

2.15 The standard relating to the provision of information [paragraph 32] is met.

PART 7 – Manner in which complaints are handled

2.16 Parental complaints, if any, are handled effectively through a three-stage process, (informal, formal and a hearing before a panel of three, one of whom is independent of the school). Each stage has clear time scales, and at the third stage the panel can make findings and recommendations which are communicated to the complainant. Records are kept appropriately, including of any action taken, whether or not a complaint is successful.

2.17 The standard relating to the handling of complaints [paragraph 33] is met.

PART 8 – Quality of leadership in and management of schools

2.18 The proprietor ensures that the leadership and management demonstrate good skills and knowledge, and fulfil their responsibilities effectively, so that the other standards are consistently met, and they actively promote the well-being of the pupils.

2.19 The standard relating to leadership and management of the school [paragraph 34] is met.

3. Educational Quality Inspection

Preface

The **EDUCATIONAL QUALITY** inspection reports on the quality of the school's work. It focuses on the two key outcomes:

- The achievement of the pupils, including their academic development, and
- The personal development of the pupils.

The headline judgements apply one of the ISI descriptors 'excellent', 'good', 'sound' or 'unsatisfactory'.

Where necessary, National Curriculum nomenclature is used to refer to year groups in the school.

Key findings

3.1 The quality of the pupils' academic and other achievements is excellent.

- Pupils have excellent knowledge, understanding and skills, across all areas of learning.
- Pupils demonstrate consistently positive attitudes to learning and apply themselves fully in lessons.
- Pupils show excellent levels of aptitude with information and communication technology (ICT).
- Pupils use their strong communication skills to great effect across the curriculum.

3.2 The quality of the pupils' personal development is excellent.

- Pupils demonstrate high levels of self-knowledge and self-esteem.
- Pupils are adept decision-makers who know that the choices they make are important for their academic and personal development.
- Pupils' appreciation of the wonder and beauty of the world around them is a fundamental strength of their personal development.
- Pupils have a deeply embedded sense of right and wrong and high levels of self-discipline.
- Pupils' social awareness is excellent and they work effectively with others to achieve the best shared outcomes.

Recommendation

3.3 The school should make the following improvement:

- Ensure that pupils, of all ages, further develop their engagement with, and contribution to, society through involvement in collaborative activities within the local community and the wider world.

The quality of the pupils' academic and other achievements

3.4 The quality of the pupils' academic and other achievements is excellent.

3.5 The overall achievement of the pupils is excellent and successfully fulfils the aim of the school to provide each pupil with a broad and balanced curriculum that encourages them to realise their full capabilities. Externally standardised tests and data provided by the school show that attainment is above, and in many cases well above, that of the national average for all schools. Almost all leavers gain places at the senior school of their choice, with many achieving scholarships and other awards at selective independent and grammar schools. The school's own data indicate that pupils with SEND or

EAL make similar levels of progress to others due to the close monitoring by teachers and senior leaders so that appropriate support is provided to meet pupils' individual needs.

- 3.6 Data provided by the school, work scrutiny and observations of lessons confirm that pupils make excellent progress in all areas of skills, knowledge and understanding. Pupils are enthusiastic, committed learners from an early age due to the creative and imaginative lessons. This results in consistent wholehearted participation and engagement enabling pupils to progress at a high level. Pupils develop a broad range of skills, knowledge and understanding across a wide variety of academic and other areas, and this is recognised through the Duncombe Diploma which provides a detailed record of their achievements. Pupils make excellent progress in most lessons, demonstrating clear retention and recall of prior learning. Pupils cite science lessons as particularly engaging because of the practical work. This view is supported by the excellent scientific knowledge shown in workbooks, for example, in a written explanation of how sound travels between the cups of a string telephone, which was later used to design and make musical instruments. Pupils' mathematical and linguistic skills are strong and are used to great effect across the curriculum. Pupils demonstrated an excellent ability to compose descriptions, to use language persuasively and to communicate in a variety of languages. The use of ICT by pupils is fully established in all year groups, and pupils of all abilities use their digital devices independently and expertly to enhance their learning. Pupils' creative skills are of an excellent standard, and they achieve highly in music, speech, drama and art, as was seen and heard throughout the school.
- 3.7 Pupils' communication skills are excellent. Pupils of all abilities and ages are articulate and confident communicators when speaking with each other, and with adults. In assembly, EYFS, children confidently read riddles they had written about sea creatures. Through their questions and contributions, Year 6 pupils demonstrated excellent speaking and listening skills when participating in a police workshop on knife crime, readily sharing their thoughts and opinions demonstrating respect for, and considering, others' viewpoints. In the EYFS, children wrote independently in response to pictures, creating descriptive and imaginative sentences about a shipwreck. Pupils enjoy writing and use literary techniques easily to enhance their compositions so that their written work is of a high standard for their age and ability. This was particularly evident in a Year 3 English lesson in which pupils skilfully composed sentences, using metaphors, personification and interesting verbs and adjectives for a composition based on the theme of legends. Pupils of all ages and abilities are keen participants in the school's annual 'Christmas Write Competition' resulting in entries of high quality and creativity.
- 3.8 Pupils of all abilities make excellent progress in the development of their competence in numeracy. They cover a wide range of topics in mathematical studies, frequently at a level above that expected for their age. In the EYFS, children identify the value of different coins and then according to value rather than size, before calculating the fewest coins needed to make a given total. In Year 2, pupils exhibit a real enjoyment for maths as they search the classroom for, and successfully identify, right angles. In discussion with inspectors, pupils described their love for algebra and highlighted the enjoyment of solving challenging problems. Pupils use their mathematics skills effectively to develop their understanding across the curriculum; in science using a range of calculations in experiments, and for analysing results by constructing bar charts and graphs; in Year 4, pupils drew upon their understanding of symmetry to plan and accurately measure the decoration for an Anglo-Saxon clay brooch. Pupils recognise that learning maths is a very important life skill.
- 3.9 Pupils are highly competent users of ICT, which is embedded in the curriculum and in the educational experience of the pupils. As a result, all pupils, including those with SEND and EAL, make excellent use of ICT to support their learning across all subject areas. For example, in Year 2, pupils use hyperlinks to access an online encyclopaedia when writing fact files on historical figures. In Year 4, pupils produced and edited high-quality television reports based on the book 'Wolves in the Walls'. In Year 5, pupils used software to create three-dimensional images of Tudor houses in history. Pupils' strength in ICT is enhanced by teacher knowledge, the consistent integration of ICT into the curriculum and the

excellent resourcing that ensures every pupil has use of a personal device provided by the school. Pupils in Year 6 demonstrated their excellent ICT skills when collaborating remotely with peers at a school in Chile, to produce an app which won an international award.

- 3.10 Pupils develop excellent study skills as they progress through the school. They select appropriate resources and draw upon information from a wide range of sources to support their learning and to complete their own independent research. In Year 2, pupils refer to their 'SPACE HOTEL', a mnemonic which reminds them of the key features of writing. In Year 4, pupils work quickly and with great focus as they research countries where Spanish is the principal language, using search engines very effectively to find specific information and to complete a work sheet in Spanish. Pupils utilise a range of research and study skills very effectively as they investigate topics of personal interest and produce multi-media presentations that include digital slideshows, video, animations and 3D models.
- 3.11 Pupils' achievements in a wide range of academic and other pursuits are excellent. In the EYFS, children achieve widely outside the main curriculum, completing junior cross-country races, gaining nationally recognised swimming and gymnastics certificates. All achievements are celebrated on classroom displays and inspire children to strive for further success. Children in reception have recently been selected to have their entries published in a 'My First Riddle' book following a national competition.
- 3.12 Older pupils are proud of their achievements in curricular and extra-curricular activities and celebrate others' successes as if they were their own. Pupils confidently speak of the sporting activities they take part in at school, with several also competing, and achieving highly, at local and regional level. Pupils have achieved high levels of success in national drama, piano, flute, singing, and violin exams, with some gaining places at highly prestigious music schools and the National Youth Orchestra.
- 3.13 Pupils' attitudes towards their learning are extremely positive from the EYFS onwards. Pupils relish the opportunity to learn in every lesson. In the EYFS, children are fully engaged with the reading of a story, laughing and joining in with their favourite parts. Pupils apply themselves fully due to the well-planned, often highly creative lessons. For example, they showed perseverance as they participated in an Indiana Jones style adventure in PE: climbing over car tyre mountains and negotiating a narrow plank bridge above a 'crocodile infested swamp' demonstrating excellent levels of balance, coordination and resilience for their age.
- 3.14 Pupils willingly, and ably, take leadership in their learning, and pupils of all ages are very focused in their response to the challenges presented to them. Pupils collaborate extremely well, whilst working equally successfully on their own to achieve very effective results. Year 1 pupils show excellent collaboration and social skills when working effectively in pairs to carry out a conversation in Spanish on behalf of their cuddly toy animals. In their responses to the pre-inspection questionnaire, almost every parent agreed that the school equips pupils with the team working, collaborative and research skills they need in later life.
- 3.15 Pupils listen respectfully to the views of others. In a Year 6 'Thoughtful Thursday' registration session pupils engaged very articulately and thoughtfully in discussing, in groups, the question 'Do you think that there is an ultimate truth, or do you think that the truth is different for everyone?' In response, pupils demonstrated an excellent level of philosophical thinking and discussion by considering aspects of validity, opinion, reasoning and fairness.

The quality of the pupils' personal development

- 3.16 The quality of the pupils' personal development is excellent.
- 3.17 Pupils demonstrate high levels of self-knowledge and self-esteem. In the EYFS, children displayed confidence and resilience at sports day, demonstrating a determination to finish, knowing that trying hard is as important as winning. Throughout the school, pupils adapt very easily to new situations and display high levels of perseverance and understanding that 'practice makes perfect'. The pupils agree

that teachers are encouraging when they make academic mistakes, providing guidance on how to improve. Pupils thrive on challenge. More able pupils in Year 5 showed great resilience when solving a complex mathematics problem calculating a composite shape's perimeter. Pupils exhibit very high levels of personal awareness and reflection, for example in a personal, social and health education (PSHE) lesson when Year 3 pupils discussed whether different genders should have different responsibilities and roles. They were absolutely clear that being a firefighter, wearing make-up, or using a saw and a hammer are not gender dependent. In their responses to the pre-inspection questionnaire, almost every parent agreed that the school is successful in helping pupils to be confident and independent.

- 3.18 Pupils are highly adept decision makers. Whether deciding their next level of challenge, who to play with, which after school club to attend, or which ideas to put forward for discussion by the school council, pupils know their choices are important in their academic and personal development. The school's highly effective PSHE programme includes social stories and role play to assist pupils in making sensible choices socially. In the EYFS, children appropriately select resources to complete their chosen activity. From Year 1, pupils contribute to their own target setting, building an understanding of their own strengths and priorities for development. Pupils become increasingly able to recognise the impact of their choices on the success of their efforts, as was seen in a Year 5 art lesson where pupils reviewed and reflected on their choice of media, textures and colours for a collaborative artwork. In conversation with inspectors, pupils in Year 6 expressed a clear understanding of the impact their choice of senior school may have on their future academic success, relationships, and well-being.
- 3.19 Pupils have a deep appreciation of the wonder and beauty of the world around them, articulating the important things in life such as happiness, trust, friendship, and family. In Year 2, pupils picked up the melody and words to 'Love Me Tender' quickly, spontaneously making a 'heart' sign to each other and, afterwards, discussing the meaning of love in a mature and open way.
- 3.20 A strong aesthetic awareness, evident in the quality of pupils' art displayed around the school, was shown by Year 1 pupils who described being overawed when visiting a magnificent historic house. Pupils think deeply about their own feelings and mental wellness, taking pleasure from the opportunities to 'just be' provided by well-being afternoons. In outdoor learning sessions, upper school pupils enjoy taking time out to listen, in silence, to birdsong. Similarly, the sound of pupils playing music, heard throughout the day, provides a source of reflection and relaxation for all.
- 3.21 Pupils have a deeply embedded sense of right and wrong, derived from a clear set of school rules reinforced through assemblies, PSHE lessons and an underlying atmosphere of respect and consideration for others. Younger pupils conscientiously follow the golden rules displayed in each classroom. Recognition of acts of kindness is provided through, for example, the 'star of the week' awards. From Year 1, pupils join a House to which they feel a great sense of loyalty and responsibility. Older pupils have an outstanding respect for the school's code of conduct, displayed on posters around the school.
- 3.22 Pupils said that whilst the system of rewards and sanctions in the school's behaviour policy is effective and helps them develop self-discipline, they would behave just as well without them as 'that is the right thing to do'. Pupils are deeply aware of their own responsibilities to others and are quick to apologise if needed. Pupils are confident that poor behaviour is very rare, but if it does occur the school's response is swift and fair. In Year 6 enrichment talks by representatives from the police and magistracy, pupils demonstrated through their contributions to the role-play 'trial', excellent understanding of lawful behaviour, the process of law and the concept of benefit of doubt.
- 3.23 Pupils have an excellent capacity for working collaboratively to achieve a common goal, thereby developing strong supportive and respectful relationships. Pupils were observed to be working very easily, willingly and effectively in paired and group work in a wide range of situations across all ages. For example, in the EYFS sports day, pupils supported and cheered each other on. Older pupils develop

excellent teamwork and leadership skills during residential trips, where they work together to complete tasks such as building towers or encourage each other to overcome the fear of abseiling.

- 3.24 Pupils are highly respectful to their peers, teachers and surroundings. In the playground, dining room and moving around the school, pupils display excellent consideration and engagement, happy to spend time with those from other year groups as well as their own. They pause to listen appreciatively to musicians practising in the 'through hall'. Pupils show a pride in being part of 'team Duncombe' and are open and welcoming to new pupils, helping them to settle quickly into the community through an established programme of pupil buddies.
- 3.25 Pupils of all ages contribute positively to the lives of others, through roles of responsibility, in the school. For example, in Year 6 pupils apply for the much sought-after role of lunch monitor, taking responsibility to ensure younger pupils eat a healthy lunch. Pupils are confident they have a voice at the school. Through pupil representation on the school council and eco council, they have proposed, argued for, and achieved changes which benefit the whole school community, including the provision of each year group's own breaktime equipment box, and the upgrade of female pupil toilets. Pupils appreciate the circumstances of those less fortunate than themselves and are proactive in organising charity fundraisers, such as cake sales and dress up days. In recent years, all school houses have supported a wide range of charities for the homeless, under privileged young adults and children living in poverty. Pupils also make a practical contribution to the local community by singing Christmas carols at a local nursing home and donating to a local harvest festival collection. Older pupils have engaged, very successfully, in global initiatives such as an international ICT challenge, working collaboratively with pupils in Chile. However, there are fewer opportunities for younger pupils to work collaboratively beyond the school community.
- 3.26 Pupils have a highly developed respect and understanding of diversity and equality. Foundations are laid in EYFS where children begin to appreciate different cultures and faiths through a wide range of celebrations, such as Chinese New Year and Diwali. This acceptance is underpinned with older children through first-hand experience, such as a Year 5 trip to a Hindu temple, where they enacted a Hindu story, ate authentic Hindu food, and learnt about the temple and Hindu religious practices. Pupils are openly accepting of others, flourishing within the multi-cultural community of the school. They express a genuine respect and appreciation of diversity. Pupils have a very strong sense of injustice when they are aware of discriminatory behaviour which, they say, is very rare in school and recognise the right of everyone to be treated fairly. In their conversations with inspectors, pupils unanimously confirmed their belief that it is acceptable to be different, saying 'we all respect each other'. This was demonstrated in a Year 4 PSHE lesson, where pupils discussed aspects of gender and sexuality, clearly expressing the view that everyone can choose who they love.
- 3.27 Pupils have an excellent understanding of keeping healthy and staying safe, including online, from a very young age. In the EYFS, children understand why they should put on a hat and sun cream on a hot day. Year 2 pupils built a den using boards and bags, explaining articulately that they had made it under a tree to be shaded from the hot sun. Pupils recognise the components of a balanced lifestyle, and how to stay physically and mentally healthy, including through the school's well-being day. Pupils appreciate the importance of a healthy, balanced diet and this is strongly promoted through the healthy meals charter displayed in the dining room, and the encouragement, from the staff and Year 6 pupil monitors, to eat a balanced plateful. Throughout the school, pupils recognise the benefits of regular physical exercise, keenly participating in the wide range of sporting activities available to them through the curriculum and after school clubs.
- 3.28 Pupils know not to share personal information online or accept friend's requests from people they don't know. They readily identify staff whom they could approach with a problem. Without exception all pupils say they feel safe at school and greatly appreciate the family environment and pervading culture of warmth and security. Almost every parent who responded to the pre-inspection questionnaire agreed that the school encourages pupils to adopt a healthy lifestyle.

4. Inspection Evidence

- 4.1 The inspectors observed lessons, had discussions with pupils and examined samples of pupils' work. They held discussions with members of staff and with the Director of education, observed a sample of the extra-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection period, and attended assemblies. Inspectors visited the facilities for the youngest pupils, together with the learning support and educational resource areas. Inspectors considered the responses of parents, staff and pupils to pre-inspection questionnaires. The inspectors examined curriculum and other documentation made available by the school.

Inspectors

Mr Chris Manville	Reporting inspector
Mrs Caroline Goodman	Compliance team inspector (Head, ISA school)
Mrs Sarah Fisher	Team inspector (Head, ISA and IAPS school)
Mr David Sibson	Team inspector (Former head, IAPS school)