

School inspection report

14 to 16 October 2025

Dragon School

Bardwell Road

Oxford

Oxfordshire

OX2 6SS

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. Governors and leaders collaborate effectively to promote the school's aims and support the academic, emotional and physical needs of pupils, both day pupils and boarders. Governors' regular visits to the school enable them to ascertain the views of staff, pupils and parents and assure themselves that Standards are being met. They use this information thoughtfully, together with detailed reports from senior staff, to determine the future development strategy for the school. Rigorous governor oversight ensures that leaders prioritise the safety of pupils through the implementation of an effective approach to all aspects of risk management. Leaders maintain suitable links with external agencies and ensure that parents benefit from detailed information about school provision.
2. The curriculum successfully supports pupils' learning across a range of subjects. Leaders ensure that the communication, language and numeracy needs of early years children are successfully met. Pupils develop their skills and acquire greater knowledge and understanding as they continue their educational journey through the school. Well-planned teaching stimulates pupils' interest. Pupils benefit from constructive feedback from their teachers. Teachers take account of pupils' individual needs, including those with higher prior attainment and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Over time, pupils learn and achieve well. A wide-ranging programme of extra-curricular activities and after-school clubs supports the interests and enthusiasms of both day pupils and boarders. However, the after-school clubs programme is less well developed for pre-prep pupils and is limited primarily to those in Year 3.
3. Leaders successfully promote a culture based on kindness and respect for others. Pupils benefit from a personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) programme which supports these values. This programme includes effective relationships and sex education (RSE) which teaches pupils how to manage their interactions with others confidently. Leaders ensure that if day pupils or boarders have any concerns, they can seek advice from trusted adults who will respond promptly and supportively. Consistently fair behaviour management by staff supports the calm, friendly and positive culture which characterises the school. Staff teach pupils to value and respect different beliefs and opinions. Through the carefully planned physical education (PE) programme, pupils develop their physical skills and learn how good physical health benefits their emotional and mental health. Leaders' rigorous approach to all aspects of health and safety ensures that the school premises and accommodation are well maintained and the pupils' physical wellbeing is prioritised.
4. Leaders promote pupils' social, economic and political wellbeing successfully. Pupils learn about important values, such as democracy, in theory and through their practical application in school life. Staff teach pupils about Parliament and the rule of law and provide them with opportunities to elect pupils to representative bodies which influence school development. Pupils develop economic and financial literacy through effective teaching about the history and uses of money. Participation in enterprise activities enables pupils to raise funds for their chosen charities and acquire project management skills. Leaders support pupils' involvement in community projects and provide a successful programme of careers guidance.
5. Leaders' rigorous approach to all aspects of safeguarding ensures that policies and systems are effective in keeping pupils safe.

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:

- extend the after-school clubs programme for pre-prep pupils so that they have more opportunities to develop their interests, knowledge and skills.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

6. Governors ensure that leaders are suitably trained and that they possess the professional understanding and necessary skills to promote the pupils' wellbeing consistently and effectively. Pupils and staff know that the school's core values are courage, kindness and respect and that they should strive to evidence these in all their activities, both academic and extra-curricular. As a result, the school's culture supports courtesy and empathy. Over time, pupils develop independence, confidence and self-esteem.
7. A programme of regular visits to meet pupils, parents and staff and observe a range of activities ensures that governors have a sound understanding of where the school is successful and the areas for development. Senior staff report frequently to the governors and collaborate successfully with them to establish a suitable school development strategy. Governors and leaders make their targets for the school available to the wider community on the website and provide an annual report on their progress in attaining them.
8. Parents receive regular, detailed reports about their children's learning, progress and attainment. These reports include helpful guidance as how their children can take the next steps in their learning. Senior staff also make themselves available in the morning at drop-off time for informal discussion with parents and carers.
9. Parents and prospective parents benefit from the provision of comprehensive information about school policies and activities on the website. Leaders provide the local authority, as required, with information about pupils who have an education, health and care plan (EHC plan), including information related to finance and funding. They also report to the local authority those pupils who join or leave the school at times other than the standard transition points.
10. Leaders ensure that parents have access to an appropriate complaints policy on the school's website. They respond promptly and effectively to any parental concerns and maintain suitably detailed records of any complaints, both formal and informal.
11. Leaders ensure that staff manage risk carefully and thoroughly. Pupils' wellbeing is prioritised through the detailed identification of risk and the implementation of appropriate strategies to manage and mitigate those risks. Suitably trained staff provide risk assessments which cover the school premises and events taking place on site, educational visits and the welfare of pupils with particular needs. A thorough process of review and evaluation of risk assessments ensures their continuing effectiveness.
12. Knowledgeable early years leaders successfully promote the academic, emotional and physical development and wellbeing of the children. Leaders provide a carefully planned curriculum and ensure that staff receive suitable guidance and training. This enables staff to support children's learning and personal development successfully. As a result, children make good progress.
13. Boarding provision benefits from leaders' effective strategic oversight. Leaders create a warm, inclusive boarding community and act consistently in support of boarders' emotional security and physical wellbeing. Boarding pupils benefit from early identification of need and timely, personalised support.

14. Leaders ensure that the school actively promotes and supports pupils' specific individual needs so that they can access their education and make progress alongside their peers. These actions, together with the implementation of an appropriate accessibility plan, ensure that the school meets its responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010.

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

15. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

16. Leaders provide a broad curriculum which seeks to extend pupils' knowledge and understanding. Appropriate schemes of work give teachers precise information about the topics to be studied and the objectives to be met. Pupils benefit from studying both classical and modern foreign languages and from a PSHE programme which emphasises the importance of individual needs, wellbeing and positive relationships. Leaders thereby ensure that pupils are taught key values such as tolerance and develop self-esteem and self-confidence.
17. As pupils get older, they develop the ability to understand and use more complex skills which enable them to analyse and hypothesise. In English, for example, pupils learn about pathos and rhyme schemes in poetry and why writers use such literary devices. During mathematics lessons, pupils complete complex problems and explain their approach to their peers thereby reinforcing their understanding. Pupils learn about the theory of combustion in chemistry and then observe the process through thoughtfully managed practical work.
18. Carefully planned lessons provide early years children with suitably creative activities and skilfully deployed resources to support their learning and progress. Children engage enthusiastically in activities based on their topic book and discuss related themes and ideas such as light and dark and how pulley systems operate. Staff use class reading books to teach children new vocabulary and actively promote children's communication and language skills. In numeracy, staff make effective use of counters and whiteboards to develop their understanding of numbers to ten and beyond. Children are successfully prepared for the next steps in their learning and the transition to Year 1.
19. Teachers develop well-structured lessons which build skilfully on previous knowledge, make effective use of different resources and provide pupils with appropriate challenge suitably matched to their ages and aptitudes. Knowledgeable teachers stimulate pupils to show independence, creativity and ambition when devising pantomimes in drama and an entrepreneurial project in French. Teachers use computer software confidently in music to support pupils' compositions. Pupils benefit from their teachers' helpful written and verbal feedback which enables them to improve their work.
20. A comprehensive framework for tracking and monitoring pupils' progress and attainment provides teachers with information which they use to support pupils' learning. Formal, standardised assessments, together with end of unit tests and surveys of pupils' attitudes, help staff in analysing the impact of wellbeing on pupils' achievement levels. As a result, teachers can tailor their support to individual pupils' needs. Year 8 pupils achieve success in entry examinations to selective senior schools and many secure scholarships.
21. Assessment on entry and monitoring of pupils' progress enables staff to identify those who have SEND and provide support appropriate to their needs. Suitably trained staff use appropriate resources and regular breaks to meet pupils' sensory needs. Pupils also benefit from individual support provided by external specialists such as speech and language therapists. As a result, these pupils make progress in line with that of other pupils in their year group.
22. Early assessment enables leaders to identify those pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL). Teachers benefit from specific guidance as to how best to support these pupils. Use

of word banks related to specific subjects, translation of key vocabulary and individual support by trained teachers of EAL enable pupils to learn well and make rapid progress.

23. Pupils benefit from an extensive range of extra-curricular activities including yoga, roller-skating and gardening amongst many others. However, leaders provide fewer after school clubs for pupils in the pre-prep department where the programme is predominantly for Year 3 pupils only. Boarders can read and relax in their particular boarding house, play board games or table football and use the school's sports facilities. At weekends, boarders benefit from trips to theme parks and theatres and more adventurous activities such as paintballing. Pupils' enthusiastic participation in these activities enables day pupils and boarders to develop their interests and skills and acquire new hobbies.

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

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

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

25. Leaders maintain a warm, welcoming environment. Pupils engage confidently with each other and with adults. Staff successfully promote pupils' wellbeing through the effective PSHE programme which is complemented by the carefully structured pastoral care system. Assemblies and lessons focus, for example, on empathy, sympathy and self-awareness. Staff then further develop understanding of these themes in tutor periods. As a result, pupils develop high levels of self-esteem and emotional literacy.
26. Well-structured RSE is taught effectively through the PSHE programme. This is supported by assemblies and lessons in other subjects such as English and religious studies. Leaders consult parents about the programme each year. Pupils learn about friendships, different family structures, consent and how to manage conflict, amongst other themes. Staff assess the pupils' understanding of these themes through surveys which enable pupils to share their thoughts and knowledge.
27. Leaders successfully promote good pupil behaviour and adopt effective strategies to ensure bullying is rare. Staff training ensures that teachers liaise promptly with parents if there are concerns about their child's conduct. Teachers apply the code of conduct consistently and provide pupils with opportunities to reflect on and modify their behaviour so that they can maintain good relationships with their peers.
28. Staff foster understanding of different faiths and spiritual awareness through well-planned religious studies lessons. Understanding of different religions is further developed in the boarding houses where pupils join together to celebrate key events and festivals. Pupils are supported to appreciate the wonder of the non-material aspects of life when studying art, music, literature and drama.
29. Appropriate staff supervision in the pre-prep and prep promotes the pupils' typically good behaviour. Effective deployment of staff during breaktimes and extra-curricular activities supports pupils' play and recreation. Pre-prep leaders ensure that the required adult-to-child ratios are maintained in the early years.
30. The boarding leadership team prioritise the health, safety and emotional wellbeing of the pupils in their care. Leaders provide boarders with secure, comfortable, well-maintained accommodation in which they can relax and enjoy each other's company. House parents promote good behaviour using suitable reward systems. Leaders ensure that pupils are appropriately supervised, including overnight and during weekends. Daily meetings with their house parents, frequent informal discussions with other boarding house staff and the meetings of the elected boarding committee ensure pupils can express their views on life in the boarding houses and secure appropriate changes. If they have concerns about their own welfare or that of others, they can talk privately to boarding staff or contact an independent adult, anonymously if they so wish. There are many opportunities for boarders to contact their parents by phone or email.
31. Leaders plan suitable activities for early years children and older pupils to develop their physical skills successfully. Early years children develop their fine and gross motor skills through planned play. They practise cutting, sticking and painting, have opportunities to learn how to use simple woodworking tools and enjoy large construction toys. In PE lessons, specialist teachers promote their running, hopping and skipping skills and children learn how exercise supports their physical

wellbeing. Older pupils learn to swim and build skills of teamwork and tactical thinking through participation in a range of competitive team sports such as football, hockey, netball, rowing and rugby. Pupils practise these skills through a wide-ranging programme of fixtures against other schools in local, regional and national competitions.

32. Leaders ensure the admission and attendance registers are maintained, as required by statutory guidance. Staff monitor pupils' attendance carefully and liaise promptly and supportively with parents if their child's absence levels cause concern.
33. Leaders support pupils' medical needs through the provision of suitable accommodation and safe storage of any medicine. Pupils who are injured or unwell benefit from appropriate first aid and medication provided by staff suitably qualified in first aid, including paediatric first aid.
34. Leaders' consistently thorough approach to health and safety ensures that the premises and accommodation are suitably maintained. Regular fire evacuation drills, including overnight in the boarding houses, ensure that pupils know how to respond appropriately in the event of an emergency. Leaders implement regular checks and maintenance, including of fire safety equipment, to ensure the school meets all regulatory requirements relating to health and safety.

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

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

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

36. Through assemblies, tutor periods, PSHE lessons and the wider curriculum, staff teach pupils the importance of kindness and respect for others. Initiatives such as non-uniform days, Odd Socks Day and celebrations of different sexualities led by the extra-curricular culture club promote tolerance and understanding of diversity in society. As a result, pupils learn that discrimination and prejudice are harmful to others and to wider society.
37. Pupils learn about democracy in history and PSHE lessons, through practical experience in school and from visiting speakers. Each year they hold debates as part of Parliament Week and study the concept of human rights and how they are applied in practice through the Equality Act 2010. They learn about the rule of law, how laws are made and the nature of police powers during a talk by a visiting police officer. Elections to representative bodies such as the school council, boarding committee and food committee provide pupils with an understanding of how democracy works in practice. Pupils in Reception take part in the pre-prep department election to choose their charity for the year.
38. Early years staff establish consistent routines so that children develop greater independence and learn to collaborate successfully with adults and each other. The books which they read in class promote their understanding and appreciation of other people's needs. Through their involvement in different activities, children are taught how to share, take turns and co-operate successfully. In these ways children are supported to understand the difference between right and wrong.
39. A carefully structured programme promotes pupils' understanding of financial and economic matters. Early years children learn about money through picture books which they read with their teachers and by using the role play café. Older pupils complete life skills courses provided by national banks which teach them about the history of money and how it is used today. They learn about pay slips, bank statements, bills and receipts. Pupils benefit from enterprise schemes which provide them with a small sum of money and require them to work collaboratively on projects to raise money for charity. This enables pupils to develop entrepreneurial and project management skills.
40. Staff support pupils in contributing to the wider community. Pupils engage with the member of parliament on environmental themes. Each year they select three charities to support and representatives from each form work together to initiate fundraising activities for these charities. Links with local primary schools enable pupils to collaborate successfully across a range of areas including music, drama, art and an extra-curricular Saturday morning programme.
41. Pupils benefit from opportunities to take on roles of responsibility. Early years children take turns to be line-leaders as they and their peers move from one activity to another. In all forms, staff appoint pupils to support charity fundraising initiatives. Pupils submit applications to be appointed as ambassadors with roles such as supporting younger pupils in sporting activities and promoting the school's links with the local community.
42. Leaders provide a programme of careers guidance through the PSHE curriculum. In Reception, children benefit from a workshop which enables them to explore different occupations such as café owners, shopkeepers and managers of garages and construction sites. Pupils in Years 7 and 8 attend

presentations by visiting speakers drawn from professions such as law, veterinary science, video-gaming and filmmaking to support their awareness of possible career options for the future. Further staff guidance teaches pupils how different subject choices might relate to their career aspirations.

43. Leaders support pupils' transition to the next stage in their education. They organise moving up days at the end of each academic year so that pupils can meet their form teacher for the following year. Prep school members of staff visit the pre-prep department to take part in activities to prepare Year 3 children for the transition to Year 4 on the prep school site. Pupils and parents receive specific guidance and advice as they prepare for their move to senior schools. They benefit from the work of future schools advisors and from examination preparation and interview practice.

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

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

Safeguarding

45. Leaders ensure that safeguarding is managed effectively. Leaders with responsibility for safeguarding are appropriately trained and ensure that all members of staff receive suitable training, including at induction. Leaders provide staff with regular updates and reminders about safeguarding issues. As a result, members of staff know how to respond to any concerns about pupils, pupil disclosures or allegations against adults working at the school and do so without delay.
46. Leaders with responsibility for safeguarding liaise effectively with external agencies, including local authorities, children’s services and the police. They make any required referrals to these agencies promptly. Leaders respond in a timely and appropriate manner to concerns and provide pupils with the support and help they need. Leaders keep detailed safeguarding records and store these securely.
47. Governors benefit from appropriate safeguarding training and provide effective oversight of leaders’ work on safeguarding. The governor responsible for safeguarding visits the school regularly to meet with leaders responsible for safeguarding and review procedures and documentation. Leaders responsible for safeguarding report to the governing body at its termly meetings. Governors review the safeguarding policy annually to ensure that it is updated in accordance with statutory guidance.
48. Staff teach pupils how to stay safe, including online and when crossing the road. Leaders implement appropriate filtering and monitoring of the school’s internet and digital devices. They respond promptly to any notifications of potentially inappropriate usage and regularly review the effectiveness of the filtering and monitoring systems.
49. Appropriately trained leaders implement safer recruitment procedures effectively. No adult begins work at the school before the required pre-employment checks have been completed. Leaders maintain an accurate single central record of staff appointments. Senior staff and the safeguarding governor check the record regularly. The safeguarding governor reviews staff personnel files to ensure they are properly maintained.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

50. All the relevant Standards are met.

School details

School	Dragon School
Department for Education number	931/6062
Registered charity number	309676
Address	Dragon School Bardwell Road Oxford Oxfordshire OX2 6SS
Phone number	01865 315400
Email address	prep.office@dragonschool.org
Website	www.dragonschool.org
Proprietor	Dragon School Trust Limited
Chair	Mrs Penny Cameron Watt
Headteacher	Mrs Emma Goldsmith
Age range	4 to 14
Number of pupils	754
Number of boarding pupils	236
Date of previous inspection	29 November to 1 December 2022

Information about the school

51. Dragon School is a co-educational boarding and day school. It is located in the city of Oxford in Oxfordshire. It comprises a pre-prep department for pupils aged four to eight years old and a prep department for pupils aged eight to 14 years old. The school is run by a registered charity whose trustees also take roles on the board of governors. The chair took up her post in March 2024.
52. There are eight boarding houses. Four of the boarding houses are for female boarders aged eight to thirteen years old and four houses are for male boarders aged eight to 14 years old. Boarders are full time, weekly, flexi or occasional boarders.
53. There are 36 pupils in the early years comprising three Reception classes.
54. The school has identified 148 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). A small number of pupils in the school have an education, health and care plan (EHC plan).
55. The school has identified 54 pupils as speaking English as an additional language.
56. The school states its aims are 'To inspire encourage and develop free-thinking, confident young people who reach for the sun'.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

14 to 16 October 2025

57. A team of 10 inspectors visited the school for two and a half days.

58. 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 of governors
- discussions with the headteacher, school leaders, managers and other members of staff
- discussions with pupils
- visits to the learning support area and facilities for physical education
- visits to boarding houses accompanied by pupils and staff
- scrutiny of samples of pupils' work
- scrutiny of a range of policies, documentation and records provided by the school.

59. 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**.

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