

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS INSPECTORATE

INSPECTION REPORT ON

Downside School

Full Name of the School	Downside School
DfES Number	933/6021
Registered Charity Number	232548
Address	Stratton on the Fosse, Radstock, Bath, BA3 4RJ
Telephone Number	01761 235 100
Fax Number	01761 235 105
Email Address	admin@downside.co.uk
Headmaster	Dom Leo Maidlow Davis
Chair of Governors	Abbot Aidan Bellenger
Age Range	9-18
Gender	Mixed
Inspection Dates	30th October - 2nd November

This inspection report follows the framework laid down by the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI). The inspection was carried out under the arrangements of the Independent Schools Council (ISC) Associations for the maintenance and improvement of the quality of their membership. It was also carried out under Section 162A(1)(b) of the Education Act 2002, as amended by the Education Act 2005, under the provisions of which the Secretary of State for Education and Skills has accredited ISI as the body approved for the purpose of inspecting schools belonging to ISC Associations and reporting on compliance with the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2003.

The inspection was not carried out in conjunction with the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) and the report does not contain specific judgements on the National Minimum Boarding Standards. It comments on the progress made by the school in meeting the recommendations set out in the most recent statutory boarding inspection and evaluates the quality of the boarding experience and its contribution to pupils' education and development in general. The full CSCI report can be found at www.csci.org.uk.

The inspection does not examine the financial viability of the school or investigate its accounting procedures. The inspectors check the school's health and safety procedures and comment on any significant hazards they encounter: they do not carry out an exhaustive health and safety examination. Their inspection of the premises is from an educational perspective and does not include in-depth examination of the structural condition of the school, its services or other physical features.

I. INTRODUCTION

Characteristics of the School

I.1 Downside is a Catholic co-educational boarding school founded by the Benedictine Community of St Gregory the Great, in Stratton-on-the-Fosse, Somerset. Its aims are to prepare highly educated people with high aspirations whose lives are infused with the values of Jesus Christ, and to help them gain an understanding of the Catholic and Benedictine Christian tradition. It also seeks to guide them in developing a commitment to service in society, whilst being courageous in the search for truth, and growing in responsibility and leadership through enjoying a rich co-curricular programme.

I.2 Since the last inspection the school has been undergoing a great deal of change and continues to be in the process of transition. A new headmaster is in post, the management structure has been reorganised and the school has become co-educational. It now serves boys and girls from the age of 9 to 18. The school has 384 pupils on roll; 98 are girls and 286 are boys. Of these, 26 pupils are in Years 5 and 6, the junior school, and 124 in the sixth form; 282 are boarders. Years 5 to 8 are accommodated separately from the main school in St Oliver's House.

I.3 The backgrounds of pupils vary a good deal. The day pupils and the majority of boarding pupils are from mainly middle class backgrounds from the local and wider community in Britain; the overseas pupils, many of whom are Catholics, come from many different countries, particularly in Europe and the Far East. The range of ability among pupils on entry is wide and includes very able as well as pupils with learning difficulties; the overall average is slightly above the average for all maintained schools and if pupils are performing in line with their abilities their results will be broadly in line with the average for all maintained secondary schools. In 2006 the school introduced the Common Entrance examination for all pupils entering the secondary school and this is likely to lead to a more selective intake. The school has 33 pupils who have English as an additional language (EAL), 13 of whom receive extra support because of their language difficulties. One pupil has a statement of special educational need and 56 are identified as having learning difficulties within the national Code of Practice.

I.4 Entry into the sixth form is based on pupils obtaining a minimum of six GCSE passes at A*-C, including at least three B grades in subjects they wish to study in the sixth form, although these pre-conditions vary according to circumstances. A few scholarships are offered to students who join the school from other schools, including two for Polish students through the United World Colleges scheme, and two rugby scholarships. The majority of the school's pupils continue into the sixth form and the school also takes external pupils. The school has a close link with a local state school, Writhlington, which sends pupils to the sixth form to study subjects it cannot provide itself. Most of the sixth form leavers go on to higher education.

I.5 National Curriculum nomenclature is used throughout this report to refer to year groups in the school. The year group nomenclature used by the school and its National Curriculum (NC) equivalence are shown in the following tables.

Junior School

School	NC name
Lower First	Year 5
Upper First	Year 6

Senior School

School	NC name
Lower Second	Year 7
Upper Second	Year 8
Third	Year 9
Fourth	Year 10
Fifth	Year 11
Lower Sixth	Year 12
Upper Sixth	Year 13

2. THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION

The Educational Experience Provided

2.1 The school has continued to provide the 'generous educational experience' reported at the time of the last inspection. The taught curriculum is, in the main, broad and balanced. In addition, the school provides a wide range of opportunities designed to extend pupils' educational experience and personal development through an extensive programme of activities, which includes the Combined Cadet Force (CCF), sport, the performing arts, educational visits, and regular prayer. In doing so, it goes a good way to meeting its aims of preparing highly educated people with high aspirations, growing in awareness of how to respond to responsibility and leadership, and whose lives are infused with the values of Jesus Christ.

2.2 In Years 5 and 6 the school provides a good educational experience for its pupils. The curriculum is, in general, broad and balanced, as at the time of the previous inspection. It consists of the National Curriculum, with the exception of food and textiles, religious education and European studies, and in Year 6 a flavour of classics. Overall, the curriculum is slightly weighted towards the humanities.

2.3 Effective linguistic development is provided mainly through English. Other subjects also contribute, ensuring that pupils develop secure speaking, writing and listening skills. Pupils' understanding of number, problem solving and the value of investigating theories is developed satisfactorily in science, mathematics and design technology. They develop a useful range of information and communication technology (ICT) skills in the planned ICT lessons, though their use across the curriculum remains limited. The European studies course promotes background knowledge of other societies well and their studies in religious education help develop their good awareness of spiritual and moral issues. The good provision for drama, art and aspects of design technology, and the outstanding provision for music and games encourage the successful development of aesthetic, creative and physical skills and knowledge.

2.4 Subject schemes of work in Years 5 and 6 provide good guidance for teaching. They show an awareness of the need to provide for the different learning requirements of pupils, including those who have learning difficulties or who have English as an additional language. This is not always carried through into teachers' short-term planning, although teachers support these pupils when they see them having difficulty.

2.5 Years 5 and 6 are closely linked to the senior school because they use the same teaching accommodation. They naturally integrate with older pupils, and understand what is expected of them as they pass into Year 7. The transition is, therefore, smooth. The school rightly believes that following the common practice of providing an induction session to help them move into new surroundings would be superfluous. However, curricular links are not as they might be, as those teaching the same subject in the two parts of the school do not meet formally to discuss what the pupils are doing. Similarly, liaison on the strengths and weaknesses of individual pupils is not as effective as it should be.

2.6 Pupils' experiences in Years 7 to 13 are also consistent with the school's aims and philosophy and both here and in Years 5 and 6 all pupils have equal opportunities to participate in what the school offers. The broad range of subjects offered up to Year 9 includes very good linguistic provision, especially through English, French, German, Spanish and the classics. Religious education and a comprehensive personal, social, health and citizenship education (PSHCE) programme, which provides very well for pupils' academic, physical, emotional, moral and social development, further enhance the curriculum.

2.7 In Years 10 and 11 pupils have a solid core curriculum and a good range of subjects from which they can choose their options, though they do not include food and textile technologies or drama. The sixth form have compulsory general studies and games, as well as a wide choice of AS and A Level subjects. As in Years 5 and 6, pupils in senior school develop sound basic skills in ICT but rarely use them in other subjects. The good programme for careers advice helps pupils prepare for the next stage of their education and for life at work, as does the provision of work experience where parents can arrange it. Overall, the curriculum in senior school meets the school's aims for pupils' overall educational and personal development.

2.8 Curriculum planning in senior school is secure; subjects have appropriate schemes and handbooks. Provision for pupils of different abilities is achieved largely by ability setting and through specialist teaching on a one-to-one basis for those with EAL, SEN or learning difficulties.

2.9 Throughout the school pupils enjoy and appreciate an outstanding range of extra-curricular activities, which are, as the school intends, integral to the curriculum. Pupils' experience is positively enriched through the generous programme. The school rightly believes that the appointment of a director of activities has been a key factor in this. Pupils have opportunities for well-organised visits, carefully thought out sporting competitions, to perform in public, to participate in the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme and to benefit from the disciplines of the CCF. They contribute to local and distant charities, learning about the conditions of people that are different from their own. These activities encourage pupils to work as a team and willingly take on responsibility. Pupils' understanding and knowledge of other beliefs and cultures, as well as life styles, are enhanced through what they learn in religious education, history and geography and more particularly through their contact in school with pupils from different ethnic and cultural groups. Links with the community are better than at the time of the last inspection, particularly for older pupils, and opportunities for voluntary service are promoted, with the soup run being very popular amongst the 6th form.

2.10 The school meets the regulatory requirements for the curriculum [Standard 1].

Pupils' Learning and Achievements

2.11 Overall, pupils achieve good standards and make good progress. In Years 5 and 6, pupils perform in line with their abilities; in Years 7 to 13 they perform better than their abilities suggest and better than was reported at the time of the previous inspection.

2.12 Pupils in Years 5 and 6 have sound literacy and number skills. They use a dictionary appropriately to improve their vocabulary, write interesting poems and read with reasonable fluency. In numeracy, they can distinguish between different angles, construct graphs and solve number problems. Standards are good in music, whether it be in lessons or when performing as an instrumentalist or singer. The singing at Mass, for example, was of high quality. Pupils handle tools and materials in design technology confidently and have grasped the basic skills in ICT. The now well-equipped ICT room, which has the benefit of digital projectors, contributes positively to pupils' learning. Boys and girls make sound progress in their studies and those identified with learning difficulties and EAL, benefiting from the informal support they receive in the relatively small classes, do likewise.

2.13 In Years 7 to 13 pupils have a good understanding of the issues raised in the subjects they study and achieve good standards in most of the areas of the curriculum. There are no obvious differences in the achievements of boys and girls, or those with EAL or SEN. Overall, pupils continue to achieve the good standards they reached in music in Years 5 and 6 and they also do well in mathematics and modern foreign languages. The quality of work observed in lessons was mirrored in pupils' written work, though the presentation was not always as careful as might be expected among the younger pupils.

2.14 Pupils' achievement in GCSE is good in relation to their abilities. At GCSE pupils have achieved well above the national average for all maintained schools over the three years 2003-2005, for which official figures are available. Results were even better in 2006. When related to the standardised tests taken in Year 9, it is clear that pupils made good progress and on average achieved above the predicted grades in all subjects. In 2006 they achieved particularly good results in music, religious studies, French and Spanish. Pupils also performed well at A level in the three years 2003 to 2005, and even better in 2006. It is not possible to compare their results with all maintained schools because of the generally small number of candidates entered, but they performed above the average in English, mathematics and religious studies, where such a comparison is possible.

2.15 A few individual pupils perform well in activities outside the normal taught curriculum and, in relation to the size of the school, some school teams also perform well.

2.16 Throughout the school pupils are articulate. They converse with adults confidently and when given the opportunity make positive contributions to lessons. Older pupils show a similar ability in modern foreign languages. They have a good facility with number, not only in mathematics, but also in science and geography, where they handle statistical information confidently. When given the opportunity they show a good ability to apply their understanding in mathematics to problem solving. Pupils have basic skills in ICT, using computers mostly for improving the presentation of their work. Older pupils make sound progress in using spreadsheets and recognising the value of computers in carrying out calculations.

2.17 Pupils of all ages can explain and argue a point effectively and older pupils reason out cause and effect for themselves, as in history when discussing the reign of Elizabeth I. When using folders, as in the sixth form, pupils organise them sensibly; this aids their learning. Pupils of all ages work independently with effect when given the opportunity, as in art and music. They work cooperatively in pairs and groups well and are prepared to contribute to discussion in a lesson, a feature of some of the lessons for the older pupils that inspectors observed. A strong characteristic of the school is that pupils persevere willingly, which contributes to their learning and the progress they make, not only in their academic studies, but in the other activities in which they are involved.

2.18 The school has first-class on-site facilities, which allow pupils to participate in a range of major and minor sports. Despite the relatively small numbers in each year, they work hard at team games and perform well in winter and summer sports. In music, a great many pupils have achieved high success in the Associated Board examinations and perform well in the choir and orchestra. Good achievement in activities extends to success in The Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme and high quality performances by boys and girls in the CCF.

Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development of Pupils

2.19 Provision for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils is outstanding and a strength of the school. It has improved since the last inspection, notably through the new and effective approaches of the chaplaincy team, the good quality of religious education and the thorough and effective PSHCE programme. The efforts of staff and the very positive response of pupils helps the school meet its aims of developing pupils whose lives are infused with the values of Jesus Christ, and understand what is meant by Christian tradition and to have a commitment to Christian service in society.

2.20 Pupils' outstanding spiritual development is encouraged through a range of activities and several subjects. In religious education pupils have opportunities to discuss faith and its implications for spiritual life, and to reflect on its implications for them. In subjects such as English they consider the non-material and how it can influence the lives of people. They talk about spiritual matters without embarrassment, as in the case of a pupil talking about his involvement in the Sodality of Our Lady. Their involvement in Mass as servers, choristers, and congregation was impressive, and almost all, Catholics and non-Catholics, showed no hesitation in approaching the altar to receive Holy Communion or a blessing. Pupils attend Mass on Sunday and on other occasions such as holy days and have opportunities to go voluntarily during the week. Morning and evening prayers are a part of every pupil's daily experience, which helps them to grow in familiarity with the spiritual. The curriculum supports this, such as in Latin where discussions of Christianity and Judaism and a study of the various Greek and Roman gods, take place. The well-staffed chaplaincy team, working within the Houses and being available in dedicated, welcoming rooms, makes a major contribution. The chaplains are trusted by pupils and provide a rich source of advice and guidance. Keen to further understanding of the Benedictine tradition, recent discussions between the lay teaching staff and Benedictine Community have been concerned with widening pupils' understanding of monastic life, while outside speakers are invited in to talk to pupils about different faiths

2.21 Pupils' relationships with staff and other pupils contribute to their understanding that trust, loyalty and appreciation go beyond the material. The dealings they have with peers and staff help them develop self-esteem and confidence, while willingly recognising the talents and personal attributes of others, as in the presentations observed during the headmaster's assembly.

2.22 The school provides an environment in which pupils recognise Christian values and, in the main, live by them. The strong emphasis on moral values provide pupils with a clear understanding of right and wrong, to know when someone is being unfair, and to value the Christian virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. In subjects such as religious education, history, geography and English, pupils explore moral values and are helped to develop a moral value system for themselves. They contribute generously to those less well off than themselves through the school organised charities such as the soup kitchen and Fair Trade, and the older pupils recognise a moral responsibility to support those visiting Lourdes, just as the cricket team thought it only right to share with children in the townships around Capetown.

2.23 Provision for pupils' social development is very strong. The ethos of the school grows from the partnership that links pupils and staff in what many pupils proudly describe as 'our school'. Pupils willingly take on a range of responsibilities that support the smooth running of the school. Older pupils take responsibility for younger ones in the houses, supporting and advising them, thus moving towards the school's aim of contributing to the betterment of society and the common good. The wide range of opportunities includes the existence of house and team captains, school prefects and leaders in the CCF, positions in sport and as music prefects. Pupils behave well and are very courteous, recognising the value of a code of discipline and of rewards in ensuring that society functions smoothly. Relationships are positive among pupils, which contributes to the very positive Christian ethos that pervades the school.

2.24 The first rate provision of activities does much to further pupils' cultural development. Their understanding is encouraged through a range of visits and links that raise cultural awareness, such as music festivals, visits to different countries and to theatres, art galleries and concerts. The ongoing relationship with Chilean schools has furthered this by sharing experiences. They also benefit through their own involvement in school productions and music making. Provision includes some study of different world faiths in religious education and in general studies in the sixth form, and the study of how people live and have lived in geography, history and classics. Pupils' awareness of life elsewhere is also heightened through the extensive range of modern foreign languages they can enjoy. The presence of pupils from other countries and cultures helps pupils learn about, and how to live with, those of a different race and culture, though opportunities are missed to display pictures and artefacts reflecting the differences that those pupils are bringing to the school.

2.25 The school meets the regulatory requirements for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils [Standard 2].

The Quality of Teaching (Including Assessment)

2.26 The overall quality of teaching is good, and better than at the time of the previous report, when it was satisfactory. In Years 5 and 6 it is sound and occasionally good; in Years 7 to 13 it is good. Parents are very positive about the quality of teaching, a view shared by their children. The school also believes teaching to be good and a key element in helping it to reach its aim of encouraging pupils to 'be courageous in the search for truth'.

2.27 Teachers have secure knowledge of their subject and talk with interest about what it offers to pupils. They recognise the importance of creating a positive learning environment, and do so through their high expectations of pupils' attitudes and behaviour. They take care with their planning, working within the framework of the subject schemes, but often being prepared to go beyond them if the lesson demands it. They are highly committed, a key factor in the school's growing academic success, have good relationships with the pupils and create a good learning environment. The management of pupils is good and most lessons are taught at a brisk pace, which helps to keep pupils on task and furthers their learning. Teachers use rewards and encouragement well to motivate pupils and ensure good behaviour.

2.28 Teachers have access to resources such as overhead projectors, video players and television, as well as basic tools and textbooks; they make sound use of them, adding variety to the teaching. However, the majority do not have use of more up-to-date equipment such as interactive whiteboards or class-based computers, which inhibits their ability to provide the more exciting and stimulating teaching that such devices offer. In Years 5 and 6, the range of teaching approaches is limited, relying largely on the teacher directing pupils closely in their work, in some subjects too often through worksheets. The lack of a designated junior library and limited classroom libraries means that teachers do not have ready access to alternative

resources to aid teaching and learning. In Years 7 to 13, the approach is more varied, with more opportunities for research, problem solving and the application of skills, though there is still an emphasis on whole-class teaching. The teaching methods are particularly successful in the years when pupils are taking public examinations and enable teachers to guide pupils to achieve good results.

2.29 Pupils occasionally work independently in class, whether on research and problem solving, but it is not a strong feature in their classroom learning. It is much more related to their prep time. Here, they are mainly restricted to completing homework and in Year 9 do not have the range of resources to help their research and problem solving as effectively as is likely to be the case when guided in good class teaching.

2.30 Pupils with learning difficulties and SEN have effective support in one-to-one sessions with a teacher qualified in special educational needs. The specific support for those for whom English is a second language could not be observed during the inspection. In normal lessons, teachers offer good support to such pupils as they move around the classroom and identify problems. They are less successful at using assessment analyses to prepare a variety of tasks matched to the different abilities of pupils, though the arrangements for placing pupils in different classes based on ability overcomes this to some extent.

2.31 The director of studies has led the recent revision of the whole-school assessment and marking policy. They are useful documents but have yet to be adapted and implemented fully across the school or by all heads of department. The approach to assessment varies from subject to subject, as it does for marking. The regularity of marking is inconsistent. The most useful marking was found usually in those classes involved in public examinations. Here, marking was often detailed, helpful and clearly supported pupils' learning. Other books contained no more than a tick and in some instances several pieces of work were left unmarked, reflecting comments made in the previous report.

2.32 The school has a system of interim assessments, which help identify pupils who are falling behind in their work. It also has formal internal school examinations at the end of Michaelmas term and for those pupils not doing public examinations at the end of the school year. Mock examinations for those taking GCSE or A level take place in the Lent term. In addition, standardised tests are used to help teachers predict and set targets for likely grades in GCSE. As yet, standardised tests are not being used to predict grades at A level. Public examination results are analysed and comparisons made between different subjects and different years. These are discussed to help the school measure its performance in relation to its expectations. As yet, assessment outcomes are not used to set short-term targets designed to help pupils overcome specific hurdles in their learning, or to track how well they are progressing towards them. Assessment for learning is not sufficiently used within the school.

2.33 The school meets the regulatory requirements for teaching [Standard 1].

3. THE QUALITY OF CARE AND RELATIONSHIPS

The Quality of Pastoral Care, and the Welfare, Health and Safety of Pupils

3.1 Good pastoral care continues to be at the heart of a Downside education as reported at the last inspection. The school's own self evaluation points out that it prides itself on the care and attention it gives to pupils, and recognises that it needs to be vigilant if it is to ensure that procedures work effectively. To this end the recently appointed head of pastoral care has brought structure to the system and provided a whole-school dimension to policies, which are helping to sustain the good practice that was reported at the last inspection. Parents made very positive responses to the questionnaire on the way the school looks after their child, commenting on the 'unique family feel and ethos' and 'the extremely caring attitude based on a strong Christian belief'. Pupils in the junior section of the school are also full of praise while a minority of older pupils are more circumspect, feeling that the school and some staff do not properly listen to their views.

3.2 The structure for pastoral care is well thought out and provides a supportive framework for staff involved and for pupils. The houses are well organised and serve the pupils well. St. Oliver's accommodates boys and girls in Years 5 to 8 in separate houses, and Powell the boys in Year 9. Caverel provides new accommodation for girls in Years 9 to 13. Boys in Years 10 to 13 inhabit the three other houses. The head of pastoral care leads the housemasters, housemistresses and house tutors well, giving them the opportunity to share their views on how the system should develop through the pastoral meetings. Useful handbooks and procedures guide their work and govern how the houses should be run. They provide sufficient flexibility for the houses to develop different characteristics and allow for different styles of leadership.

3.3 The clear disciplinary procedures that apply during the school day and in the boarding houses are well understood by pupils, most of whom abide by them, recognising that they are for the good of all. The rewards and sanctions help pupils to see that a framework of care exists, which gives them a feeling of security and of belonging to a community responsive to their needs. Most respect the rules, which they recognise are laid down for their benefit. Their behaviour in class, in the houses and their demeanour as they move about the school is exemplary; the good policies related to bullying and poor behaviour are not often needed. Where there are difficulties, pupils say they are usually quickly resolved. The quality of relationships is excellent and pupils spoken with openly professed a 'love for the school and what it offers us'.

3.4 The school council and prefects' council have the responsibility of representing the views of other pupils. Members have only just been elected to the former for the new academic year and at the time of the inspection neither had met to discuss issues. The councils represent positive development, providing a forum for discussion and further opportunities for pupils to take on responsibility. Their members expressed, however, some frustration with their limited ability to influence the school's provision and policies, feeling that their recommendations were not taken seriously enough, and that they did not always receive a response to their suggestions.

3.5 The good programme of careers teaching and the resources in the well kept careers room provide helpful guidance to pupils from Year 9 upwards, though internet access is not available to enable pupils to carry out further research. Links with the local careers service help pupils gain sound all-round advice as to their next steps.

3.6 The food provided in the refectory is nutritious and varied. Younger pupils are aware of the need for healthy eating but older pupils are less conscious of healthy eating guidelines and several observed did not take full advantage of the provision for this made by the school.

3.7 Appropriate procedures exist for child protection and all staff have undertaken the current required training. The staff know that the deputy head is the child protection officer and what to do if they have any concerns. Links with outside agencies are in place. The school has very good risk assessments for off-site visits and extra-curricular activities, while many of those for departments are somewhat dated and are being revised. Good efforts have been made to provide easy access for those with disabilities, with, for instance, the provision of ramps. Appropriate plans are in place to make further improvements as funds become available. The school has a very good medical facility offering 24 hour nursing cover. In addition, a good number of staff are trained first aiders, several having undertaken advanced training. Suitable procedures exist for first aid provision and the administration of medicines. The school complies with the requirements for maintaining an admissions register and keeping appropriate registers of attendance.

3.8 Fire regulations are good and regular fire practices are held. Records of fire practices and of inspection by the local fire service are kept, electrical appliances are tested and chemicals are safely stored. The ventilation in the chemicals store, however, is unsatisfactory.

3.9 The measures to ensure health and safety are mostly effective. They are overseen by the health and safety committee, which meets regularly and which is chaired by the bursar. Some hazards, which are mentioned in the boarding section of the report, were identified during the inspection; that related to the proper labelling of drinking water applies to areas of the school as well as to the boarding houses.

3.10 The school has no equal opportunities policy against which to check that teaching is providing equally well for all pupils.

The Quality of Links with Parents and the Community

3.11 Links with parents and community are good. Parents receive a good deal of information from the school, are welcome to visit and support the school well. This continues the good quality relationships that existed at the time of the last report. Links with the community are fostered through contact with local schools, nearby parishes and the overseas links with other Benedictine schools and educational visits. Through its efforts the school seeks to fulfil its aims of helping pupils develop a commitment to service in society and growing in responsibility and leadership through enjoying a rich curricular and extra-curricular programme.

3.12 Almost half the parents responded to the pre-inspection questionnaire. They strongly support the school in almost every respect. They believe that the school helps their child make progress, that it promotes worthwhile values and achieves high standards of behaviour. A minority have reservations about the support for those with learning difficulties, the way the school handles parental concerns and the encouragement that the school gives to parents to be involved in the school. Inspectors agree with the positive views of parents. They also found that the school has updated its complaints policy and that the records of complaints received are well kept and reveal that senior staff have taken some care in dealing with them; inspectors are aware, nevertheless, that an unusually large number of pupils have been excluded from school over the past two years. Inspectors noted that support for those with learning difficulties is largely satisfactory, with that for pupils helped in one-to-one situations being good. They also recognise that it is not easy for the school to involve parents because of the distance many live from the school and the fear that those close to the school, usually parents of day pupils, may have an unfair advantage in this respect. Even so, parents are invited to sports fixtures, school productions and events, as well as to the school's prize giving and school Masses. The school's parents' association no longer functions, despite efforts in the junior section of the school to revive it.

3.13 The school provides parents with a good range of information through the termly diary, The Downside Diary, which is issued every six weeks, The Raven annual magazine and other pieces of information. Parents also have access to e-mail and the school's web site, which is updated weekly and contains information such as the school's weekly diary, sports fixtures and the weekly menu. The school holds parents' conferences each year and provides opportunities for parents who live at a distance to speak over the telephone with appropriate staff. Parents who visit the school from abroad are well received and a special programme of meetings with appropriate staff is often arranged for them. The parents' handbook is full of useful information, which backs up the glossy and well-presented prospectus.

3.14 Parents receive a written report on their child's progress at the end of each term, which shows how their child is progressing and how he or she is likely to do in public examinations. The reports are detailed, clear and helpful and usually provide some guidance on what pupils need to do to improve. Parents are invited to contact the school if they wish to discuss anything it contains, though there is no space on the reports for either parents or pupils to make a written response.

3.15 The school has good links with the community. The Fosse Way School activity group enables pupils to assist autistic pupils at a local school. Pupils from the upper years who are involved in the sports leadership programme are also active in the local primary school, developing their own skills as well as those of younger pupils. A further partnership has been established with a local secondary school whereby pupils attend Downside to attend some A-level classes. Links with other similar schools are strong, especially because of competitions. The school also takes advantage of what the local authority careers service can offer and where possible older pupils link with their own communities through work experience organised by their parents. The school's child protection officer has good links with the local social services and police. The Benedictines also have a presence in the local community, serving nearby parishes and the school has effective overseas links with other Benedictine schools. On occasions, school facilities are made available to others and a helpful partnership has been struck with Bermondsey Downside Fisher Youth Club, which has a summer camp at the school.

3.16 The school meets the regulatory requirements for the provision of information and the manner in which complaints are to be handled [Standards 6 and 7].

The Quality of Boarding Education

3.17 The quality of boarding provision is good. As recorded in the previous inspection report, 'the atmosphere in all the houses is warm and positive, yet each has a different character'.

3.18 Boarders are in six houses, and within each the structure of care is good. Housemasters and housemistresses oversee the provision effectively and have assistants who support them well. The head of pastoral care has overall responsibility, a function that he carries out conscientiously. He has taken the lead in recently revising the guidance on pastoral care in houses and in the school as a whole. Pupils also have an individual tutor who helps them in matters concerned with their academic work and personal life. The school has given careful thought to the arrangement of the houses and these work well, allowing for a smooth transition between the houses as pupils move through the school. It also provides an excellent opportunity for older pupils to help and support younger pupils, which they do very expertly. The sight of sixth form boys assisting their younger brethren at supertime provided inspectors with an outstanding example of how well they respond to the responsibility whilst contributing to the well being of younger pupils.

3.19 Each house has an appropriate handbook, which contains policies and procedures and sets out an agenda that gives each individual house its own character. Houses have appropriate risk assessments and fulfil regulatory requirements for health and safety. Appropriate information is kept on pupils, on incidents and on other matters related to health and safety. Pupils have use of a telephone, and have details of appropriate emergency numbers. However, not all drinking water is properly marked, pupils on some floors do not have ready access to drinking water and windows in some areas are not properly restrained or barred. These were issues identified in the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) report on boarding in 2005 and which have not been fully resolved.

3.20 Pupils are very proud of their house and speak fondly of it. It is the centre for their daily assemblies and morning and evening prayers, the latter being led often by one of the school chaplains. They relate well to one another and to the house staff. They talk about being well cared for and having plenty to do. Houses have adequate recreational facilities, such as table tennis, television and a variety of board games. Most do not have sufficient computers to serve the needs of the pupils, but their proximity to main school enables easy access to the ICT suite for all but the junior house, which is some distance from the main school buildings. For their part, house staff provide a good range of activities at weekends, which includes sport as well as visits to various places of interest. On Saturday evening, older pupils can go into the nearby city. On Sundays, all pupils attend Mass.

3.21 Since the previous inspection the school has had a programme of updating the décor and facilities of the houses. This programme continues to be part of the school's development plan and reasonable progress has been made in some of the boys' accommodation. In addition, a new girls' house has been built and well furnished and a second is being built as the school responds to the growing number of applications from girls. The location of five of the houses in relation to the school means that the school facilities, such as the infirmary, are readily available.

4. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

The Quality of Governance

4.1 Governors make a positive contribution to the school's success in moving towards the fulfilment of its aims. In liaison with the trustees, who are mostly concerned with financial matters they are overseeing and supporting the school's development as a co-educational boarding school. They have made good progress since their creation in 1999 and since the last inspection, when they were establishing their role

4.2 The trustees have a finance committee, to which governors with financial expertise are invited, and which has a good grip on the school's financial position. These governors are able to communicate financial discussions of the trustees to the governing body and give their advice to both governors and trustees. The committee makes recommendations to the trustees, who take the necessary decisions. The finance committee also draws on the advice of other professional experts, and the trustees buy in expert advice when appropriate.

4.3 Governors support the headmaster and the work of the school effectively, providing a body of expertise and experience that the school is keen to use. They discuss policies and procedures and were much involved in discussions about the restructuring of management and in formulating the school development plan. Links with other staff are more tenuous and a number of middle managers expressed disappointment at the limited contact they have with governors.

4.4 Governors have ensured that the school has a well-qualified and experienced staff to promote effective teaching and learning, though the provision of ancillary staff in science, art and technology is less than required. The governors are also aware that there are shortages of up-to-date resources, for example ICT provision, which they are planning to supply as money becomes available.

4.5 Governors rely on the headmaster's report for much of the information they receive about the school's progress. They also make informal visits, attend functions and meet with staff and parents, which enable them to know something of the school's work. Their social gathering with house staff is another useful way of learning about the school.

The Quality of Leadership and Management

4.6 The good quality of leadership and management is helping the school to progress towards fulfilling its aims. The headmaster provides a quiet, thoughtful style of leadership that is respected by colleagues. He receives very good support from his effective deputy, who is also well regarded by staff. The headmaster and deputy head, with other members of the senior management team, are dealing with major changes brought about by the arrival of girls and the management restructuring that is in response to the recommendations of the previous report and the desire to create clearer lines of responsibility. Line management has been introduced as part of the appraisal system and some of the responsibilities held by the previous head have been delegated to appropriate levels within the structure.

4.7 A number of groups have been created to improve staff consultation. These consist of the senior management team, the leadership team and various pastoral and academic groups. They have provided the opportunity for a more consultative approach than was the case at the time of the previous report, but as yet a number of heads of department and subject teachers still feel distant from much of the decision-making. The academic structure has also been modified with varying degrees of success. In Years 5 and 6, the role of the coordinators has not yet been developed sufficiently to ensure that best practice in teaching and learning is introduced. In Years 7-13 the new faculty structure is taking time to bed down. The recently appointed director of studies is working hard and with some success in overseeing its introduction. However, he is meeting with some resistance among those staff who are opposed to the faculty concept. Faculty heads have been appointed, but their role and responsibilities as faculty leaders are not fully accepted by some staff, and in some instances the faculty structure brings together subjects that have little in common. As a result, some heads of departments are still working independently of it, which is leading to inconsistency in practice in key areas, such as the approaches to assessment and the monitoring and evaluation of teachers' performance. The overloading of some staff with responsibilities is also hindering, to some extent, the speed of change.

4.8 The school has a well-considered staff review policy, which is based on the faculty system. Staff are appraised and targets are set, but the amount of monitoring and evaluation that precedes the exercise is not as rigorous as it might be. In all cases it leads to the identification of a professional development programme, to which the school seeks to respond, but which has not yet fully met the need for training in the use of a wider range of teaching approaches that include more independent learning for pupils. The induction process for new staff is satisfactory and that for newly qualified teachers is in line with government guidelines.

4.9 The classroom environment is clean, light and suitably furnished. Outside and inside sports facilities are of high quality and the school provides an ideal location for the provision of the full range of activities required by pupils of this age. The theatre and accommodation for music are also of good quality. The bursar deals with the allocation of finances to departments, who have responsibility for purchasing teaching resources. Departments have adequate resources, though there is a shortage of up-to-date equipment such as inter-active whiteboards.

4.10 The school runs smoothly. The support staff are efficient and well managed by the bursar. The bursarial staff have oversight of health and safety, financial and administrative issues that directly impact on the life of the school, and developments in school accommodation. They are working hard to keep pace with the rate of change. The bursarial staff also oversee the Criminal Records Bureau checks for all those involved in the school effectively and verify the applications for teaching posts.

4.11 The school meets the regulatory requirements for the suitability of proprietors and staff and for premises and accommodation [Standards 4 and 5].

4.12 The school participates in the national scheme for the induction of newly qualified teachers and meets its requirements.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Overall Conclusions

5.1 The school provides a good quality education at a time when it is going through a period of significant change. It has continued to make good progress towards fulfilling its aims of preparing its pupils for service in society guided by Christian principles.

5.2 The governors provide well-informed support for the school. Along with the headmaster, they have worked with success to integrate the intake of girls. The headmaster, supported by his very effective deputy and his senior management team, has enabled the school to respond positively to the changes, whilst strongly supporting his senior management colleagues as they seek to implement the many changes.

5.3 The overall quality of teaching is good; pupils achieve good standards and make good progress. They do well in public examinations. The provision of opportunities for pupils' personal development and pupils' response to it are outstanding. Pastoral care and welfare are well organised and pupils feel safe and secure. The quality of boarding is good. Pupils speak fondly of their house and school.

5.4 Links with parents and the local community are good. A strong feature of the school is the first-rate activities programme. Pupils enjoy participating and do so to a high standard.

5.5 The school has made sound progress in its response to the recommendations of the previous inspection. A programme of PSHCE has been introduced and improvements made in ICT provision. The school has a good development plan, a useful appraisal system, and the management has been restructured. Monitoring and evaluation are not yet rigorous enough and the success of consultation among staff is variable. The school has also to improve the use of ICT across the school and bring the teaching of younger pupils at least in line with the best in senior school.

5.6 The school meets all the regulatory requirements.

Next Steps

5.7 To continue its improvement, the school should:

1. review the management structure with a view to developing the role of subject leaders in Years 5 and 6 and heads of faculty in Years 7-13, improving communication between the different levels of staffing, and ensuring a consistently good quality of educational provision across the school;
2. use the outcomes of pupil assessment to help teachers plan better to meet the needs of pupils with different abilities, set the pupils targets for improvement and track the progress they make;
3. provide in-service training for teachers designed to broaden the range of the teaching approaches they use, with particular reference to the use of ICT, to extending opportunities for independent learning and to using more stimulating display and resources, especially in Years 5 to 9;
4. continue the development and implementation of the system for monitoring and evaluating the quality of teaching, learning and achievement.

5.8 No action in respect of regulatory requirements is required.

6. SUMMARY OF INSPECTION EVIDENCE

6.1 The inspection was carried out from 30th October to 2nd of November 2006. The inspectors examined samples of pupils' work, observed lessons and conducted formal interviews with pupils. They held discussions with teaching and non-teaching staff and with governors, observed a sample of the extra-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection period, and attended registration sessions and assemblies. Inspectors visited boarding houses and the sanatorium. The responses of parents and pupils to pre-inspection questionnaires were analysed, and the inspectors examined a range of documentation made available by the school.

List of Inspectors

Terry Dillon	Reporting Inspector.
Kathleen Hayes	Head IAPS School.
Jean Marsland	Head GSA School.
Catherine Nathan	Deputy Head IAPS School.
Joseph Peake	Head HMC/SHMIS School.
Patricia Tatum	Head of Year HMC School.
Margaret Viles	Head GSA School