



INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS INSPECTORATE

DAME ALICE HARPUR SCHOOL

STANDARD INSPECTION

FINAL VISIT

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS INSPECTORATE

Dame Alice Harpur School

Full Name of School	Dame Alice Harpur School
DCSF Number	822/6012
Registered Charity Number	204817
Address	Dame Alice Harpur School Cardington Road Bedford Bedfordshire MK42 0BX
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Headmistress	Mrs Jill Berry
Chair of Governors	Miss C Beddoes
Age Range	7 to 18
Total Number of Pupils	814
Gender of Pupils	Girls
Number of Day Pupils	814
Final (team) visit	8th to 10th February 2010

PREFACE

This inspection report follows the STANDARD *ISI schedule*. It consists of two parts: an INITIAL two-day inspection of regulatory requirements followed by a three-day FINAL (team) inspection of the school's broader educational provision.

The Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) is the body approved by the Government for the purpose of inspecting schools belonging to the Independent Schools Council (ISC) Associations and reporting on compliance with the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2003 as subsequently amended with effect from January 2005, May 2007 and February 2009. The range of these Regulations is as follows.

- (a) The quality of education provided (Curriculum)
- (b) The quality of education provided (Teaching)
- (c) The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils
- (d) The welfare, health and safety of pupils
- (e) The suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors
- (f) The premises and accommodation
- (g) The provision of information
- (h) The manner in which complaints are to be handled

Legislation additional to the welfare, health and safety Standard is as follows.

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

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

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.

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1. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SCHOOL

- 1.1 Dame Alice Harpur School is a girls' day school, with a junior school for girls aged seven to eleven and a senior school for girls aged eleven to eighteen. It is situated on the banks of the Great Ouse, to the south of Bedford town centre. Founded in 1882, this is its third site and Dame Alice is its second name. The school has 814 girls of whom 170 are in the junior school. It is one of four seven to eighteen independent schools owned by the Bedford Charity (the Harpur Trust). The full Harpur Trust Governing Body oversees the work of all the schools, each of which has its own school committee of governors which consists of Harpur Trust governors and those who are co-opted directly onto the School Committee.
- 1.2 No girl has English as an additional language and no girl has a statement of special educational needs. The school has identified 109 girls as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD) and gives them support. About a fifth of the girls are from ethnic minority backgrounds, mainly Asian but also including some of Italian descent. Results of standardised tests as girls enter the senior school indicate that girls' average ability is above the national average at this stage. If the senior girls perform in national tests according to their ability, their results will be above the average for all maintained secondary schools.
- 1.3 The school states that through offering each girl the widest possible opportunity to achieve success and to feel good about herself both within the classroom and beyond it, the school strives to build confidence and healthy self-esteem so that the girls can meet with assurance the personal and professional challenges the future will bring, and make a responsible contribution to the society in which they live. The school simplifies these aims to: "Discover your talents. Be the best you can be."
- 1.4 National Curriculum nomenclature is used throughout this report to refer to year groups in the school.

2. THE SUCCESS OF THE SCHOOL AND ACTION POINTS

2.(a) Main findings

- 2.1 The pupils reach high achievements and make good progress in their learning, with examination results even better than their above-average ability would suggest. The school has an excellent, broad and challenging academic curriculum and the activities programme, in which girls participate wholeheartedly, is wide-ranging, giving sporting, artistic, cultural and social experiences. The well-qualified and enthusiastic teachers provide teaching of good quality, which is stimulating and often excellent. They use suitable methods varied well for the age of the pupils and the nature of the subject. The marking of work, usually most helpful to pupils, is on some few occasions less so when it is not diagnostic and does not clearly show pupils how to improve. The girls are excellent learners, keen and fully participating in their own learning. Their behaviour and manners are exemplary and their relationships with each other and their teachers outstanding. The school has a calm, ordered, well-disciplined air where high standards are demanded in an atmosphere where girls delight in learning.
- 2.2 The personal development of pupils is outstanding, and supported by excellent pastoral care. The girls have a sense of belonging and they are cared for very well. Girls collaborate very well with each other in the classroom and outside. The school council encourages them to contribute to their school community in a positive way. The girls themselves and the whole school give strong support to local, national and international charities.
- 2.3 The school largely fulfils its high aims, fostered by the governing body, which is committed to the academic and personal progress of each girl and sees itself as the keeper of the school's values. The governors have very good oversight of the school, informed by reports from senior managers and by their own frequent visits. They have provided a detailed strategic plan and have published a long-term strategy for the school and the Trust. The leadership team is excellent, with the headmistress and the team establishing an atmosphere where all are aware of the school's aims. They promote a striving after excellence by keeping the school self-aware and avoiding complacency. The school responded well to the recommendations of the last report especially about identifying the needs of different pupils and now does this and provides for these needs very well for the relatively less able, though not yet on all occasions for the most able. The school has excellent links with parents and their replies to the pre-inspection questionnaires were highly supportive.

2.(b) Action Points

(i) Compliance with regulatory requirements

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

- 2.4 The school meets all the requirements of the Independent School Standards Regulations 2003 as subsequently amended.

(ii) Recommended action

- 2.5 The school has no major weaknesses but it should give particular attention to:
1. the marking of all work, schoolwork and homework; to the occasional overuse of commercially-produced worksheets; and to the stimulus of the most able pupils at all times.

3. THE QUALITY OF ACADEMIC AND OTHER ACHIEVEMENTS

3.(a) The quality of pupils' achievements and their learning, attitudes and skills

- 3.1 Pupils are well educated: the quality of their achievements, learning and skills is good and their attitudes to learning are excellent. The school provides a wide range of opportunities, meeting well all its aims especially to encourage every girl to discover her talents and to be the best that she can be.
- 3.2 Pupils make good progress over time in relation to their ability profile, which is above the national average. Results in GCSE and A level for the last three years for which comparative data are available have been high when compared with the national average of girls in all maintained schools and in line with the national average for girls in maintained selective schools. As at the time of the last inspection, standards are good and are now often excellent.
- 3.3 The pupils demonstrate good, and sometimes excellent, levels of knowledge, understanding and skills in curricular and extra-curricular activities. They are excellent learners who can discuss issues confidently and express those ideas clearly while listening and responding well to teachers and to each other. In the junior school, pupils quickly build a very firm foundation in the basics of reading, writing and mathematics. At all levels, pupils apply their mastery of literacy and numeracy effectively to their work across the curriculum. They are very well spoken: articulate, clear, with excellent diction, speaking effectively and with grace in formal and informal situations. Good examples of pupils applying their numerical skills were seen in the junior school when working out longitudes and latitudes and in the senior school in economics and science subjects where they were able to process complex data and present results in various mathematical ways. Sixth formers in English literature lessons demonstrated a sophisticated appreciation of literary classics. When encouraged to do so, pupils use information and communication technology efficiently and effectively.
- 3.4 The pupils' excellent attitudes to learning are supported by their hard work and an ethos of respect for each other and their teachers. Throughout the school, pupils are hard working, happy learners. They apply themselves well to tasks and sustain high levels of concentration. Pupils co-operate well together; their ability to work collaboratively and to support each other's learning is a strength of the school. In demeanour, the girls are elegantly dressed, and very well mannered

3.(b) The contribution of curricular and extra-curricular provision (including community links of benefit to pupils)

- 3.5 The curriculum is excellent throughout the junior and senior school and is very effective in covering different areas of learning. It is well planned and supports the aim of the school to offer each girl the widest possible opportunity to achieve success and to feel confident in and beyond the classroom.
- 3.6 The curriculum is suitable for all ages, abilities and needs. It consists in a broad core of subjects up to the end of Year 9, and then central band of compulsory subjects with a wide choice of optional subjects for GCSE (and IGCSE) and A level. Strengths of the senior school curriculum include the availability of both double award and triple single sciences (biology, chemistry and physics) at GCSE, and also at IGCSE level, to give greater rigour; and the wide choice of languages. Classics is

a foundation course in Year 7 and girls can take Latin as an option and Greek through study beyond the timetabled day. Individual subjects contribute to the rigour and depth of the curriculum. For instance, in English, from Years 7 to 11 all girls study at least one play by Shakespeare. The library provision in both the junior and senior schools is extensive and pupils use libraries enthusiastically. These libraries help the school's intent to encourage the girls to read widely for enjoyment as well as study.

- 3.7 The curriculum is enriched by an extensive range of high-quality extra-curricular activities and links with the community. Although pupils are not compelled to undertake an activity, levels of involvement are high. Activities range from the medical society, debating, drama, building a car, babysitting and Young Enterprise, to the more formal Combined Cadet Force (where the girls joins boys and other girls of the Trust) and The Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme where awards are gained at all levels including gold. These two large activities themselves promote other activities. Pupils are able to choose from a very wide range of sports and games, which includes rowing on the Great Ouse, using the facilities of the Trust Boathouse. Girls achieve considerable success in these activities, either as individuals or in groups, and achieve local, county and even national selection and honours. They contribute in many ways to the local community further afield. The Trust embraces several old-established charities supported whole-heartedly by the school. One example was a lunch-time concert in the beautiful medieval local church, with high musical standards and much enjoyed by the local congregation. Over the years, the school has helped other local schools by, for example, running a sixth-form reading project with local primary schools. While all these items undoubtedly benefit the girls, they also convey considerable public benefit. This richness of experience provided by the extra-curricular provision is a strength of the school.

3.(c) The contribution of teaching

- 3.8 The teaching is good overall. It is stimulating, effective and frequently excellent. It is very successful in promoting the pupils' progress and fully supports the school's aims, especially by offering each girl the widest possible opportunity to achieve success.
- 3.9 The teachers' subject knowledge is profound and frequently they convey their own love of their subject to the pupils who respond enthusiastically. They are professionally self-confident: they know each girl very well and so this makes it easier to provide for the needs of each girl as an individual and to establish a rapport. Teaching uses methods suitable for subjects and the ages of the girls. In French, German and Spanish assistants, who are native speakers, give extra practice in conversation. The school is very well supplied with interactive whiteboards and teachers use these confidently and effectively and, most of all, appropriately to help the pupils to learn. The best lessons were characterised by pace and challenge, suitable questions, often open-ended, and with opportunities for pupils to participate and to develop their interests, opportunities to which pupils responded. Most often, teaching had high expectations and expects hard work from the pupils. On a very few occasions pupils were not challenged sufficiently, sometimes because teachers did not afford pupils sufficient opportunity to be independent or because they chose apparently popular but less demanding topics or approaches. In a very few instances, too much use was made of worksheets which made it difficult for the teaching to provide different levels of work for individuals. But the overall pattern is of high standards set by teachers and demanded of, and obtained by, pupils.

- 3.10 The last inspection report found that assessment data were not always being used to identify individual needs, in particular for the most and least able. The school has made rapid progress in this area and individual needs are now identified. Provision is usually suitable for all but in a very few instances the most able were not given appropriate attention. Formal subject-based clinics and individual learning sessions, usually at lunch times, play a significant part in helping pupils, as does the programme of curricular enrichment whereby girls can, in various subjects, take part in topics and activities not covered in the normal classroom or examination syllabus.
- 3.11 Marking is mostly regular, thorough and accurate with useful diagnostic comments. In a very small number of instances marking is less effective because it is not constructive and does not indicate to pupils how they could improve. The school is reviewing this and the marking most of the time provides a good pattern. Pupils are encouraged to be self-critical and, for example, a Year 8 English class presented, with intelligent insights, very-well produced and acted extracts from *The Winter's Tale*, with the non-participants making a sensitive, appreciative, excellently-behaved but not uncritical audience.

4. THE QUALITY OF THE PUPILS' PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

4.(a) The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the pupils

- 4.1 The overall spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the girls is excellent. Their concerns go beyond material ones. Spiritually, they develop sensitively. Junior girls respond positively to questions which lead them to demonstrate values. The senior school girls take advantage of the opportunities for all girls between Years 7 and 11 to participate actively in religious education lessons and to consider spiritual matters. In addition to the GCSE in religious education, all girls in Years 10 and 11 follow a core course for one period a week. This includes a philosophical and spiritual look at life and the nature of religion, and provides the opportunity to explore the metaphysical and transcendental dimension and moral issues. The girls say that they benefit from these lessons. Pupils from various faith backgrounds are encouraged to share their beliefs with other pupils. In specific groups such as the Christian Union, pupils take the opportunity to explore and reflect upon the important questions in life. In both junior and senior school assemblies an atmosphere of calm and reflection is evident. A sense of awe and wonder was present in some science lessons. Girls are enabled to develop an appreciation and understanding of aspects of all the major world religions.
- 4.2 The moral development of the girls is excellent. Girls have a strongly developed sense of right and wrong and of good and evil. The school council is a positive force taken seriously both within the junior and senior school and its meetings contain moral concerns and not just practical ones. The medical society provides an opportunity in which girls can debate current ethical issues including euthanasia and abortion. Debates in Year 9 have recently considered moral issues such as whether the giving of overseas aid to dictatorships in developing countries is ethical. Pupils appreciate the education they receive and embrace the school's aims which encourages them "to be the best they can."
- 4.3 The girls develop well socially and learn to relate well to each other. Sixth form prefects and older girls help younger ones. The Combined Cadet Force gives the girls opportunities, along with some girls and boys from other schools, to learn how to lead and how to follow, and to learn something of the value of order and discipline. Sixth-form girls have been involved in a local community project with disabled children. Girls are socially aware and are involved in a variety of initiatives such as fund raising for selected charities. They appreciate the value of informed debate and take advantage of school societies that give them opportunities to learn about the principles and practice of democracy.
- 4.4 The girls' cultural development is excellent. The calibre of musical activity and performance is high with ensembles and choirs which perform at concerts inside the school and beyond. The school chamber choir recently were category finalists in the Radio Three choir of the year competition. The education of pupils is greatly enhanced by the various opportunities on offer to develop artistic talents representing a wide variety of media such as painting, textiles and ceramics. In addition, participation in a range of speech and drama activities such as the Bedford Festival affords pupils opportunities to develop and grow in confidence. Girls share and value each other's cultural differences, for example through trying food from around the world.

4.(b) The contribution of arrangements for welfare, health and safety

- 4.5 The pastoral care provided for pupils is outstanding. Staff give excellent support and guidance for the pupils in accordance with the school's aims. From the earliest days right through to the sixth form, the pupils report that they feel safe, secure and valued. Induction to each new phase of the school is managed sympathetically so that girls feel thoroughly prepared and equipped to meet new challenges.
- 4.6 As was the case at the last inspection, relationships are extremely positive between staff and pupils and among the pupils themselves. These relationships are a strength of the school. Staff know the pupils well as individuals and so can take care that they are looked after well. Pupils are very clear about to whom they would turn or confide in when necessary. They are provided with excellent guidance in such matters as careers. In the sixth form each girl is allocated her own careers tutor who guides her through the process of applying to university, or employment. Sixth formers have links with reading groups in the junior school and offer peer listening to younger pupils in the senior school.
- 4.7 The school has very effective procedures for promoting good behaviour and guarding against harassment and bullying and dealing constructively with any unacceptable behaviour. Throughout the school, girls report that there is very little bullying and that any that occurs is dealt with promptly and effectively. They say they feel very safe in the corridors and have confidence that concerns will be dealt with quickly.
- 4.8 The safeguarding policy meets requirements and is implemented successfully. All staff and others concerned receive suitable safeguarding training at the required intervals. All necessary measures are taken to reduce risk from fire and other hazards. Arrangements to ensure health and safety are effective and include provision for pupils who are ill. The school has a suitable plan to improve educational provision for pupils with disabilities. Pupils are encouraged to be healthy through science lessons on health, and especially by taking regular physical exercise in the curriculum and in the fine range of extra-curricular sports and games. School lunch offers nutritious choices and girls are given help and gentle encouragement to choose and eat balanced options. The lunch experience is a civilised and civilising one. The admission and attendance registers are properly maintained. The pupils are very punctual for lessons and activities. Pupils who responded to the questionnaire were almost all entirely positive in their replies.

5. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GOVERNANCE, LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

5.(a) The quality of governance

- 5.1 The governing body provides effective oversight of the school in line with its aims and discharges well its responsibilities for educational standards, financial planning and investment in staff, accommodation and resources. The governors see themselves as the keepers of the school's values. They have definite ideas about the advantages of all-girl schools and are determined that the pupils will benefit from the school's status. There is an effective strategic plan to which the whole school has been able to contribute. The governors have produced and announced far-reaching plans for the future of the school and the Trust. A sensible pattern of sub-committees enables decisions to be taken and the workings of the school to be monitored and supported.
- 5.2 The governing body has a very good insight into the working of the school and provides support and stimulus for growth and improvement. The governors are informed by regular reports from different parts of the school including the junior school. They visit the school frequently to keep in touch.
- 5.3 The governing body is very effective in discharging its responsibilities for child protection, welfare, health and safety throughout the school. All the necessary checks are done and carefully recorded. All the required policies are in place, implemented and reviewed. The governing body shows a strong wish to go beyond what is legally required to produce humane policies and procedures which benefit the education and welfare of the pupils.

5.(b) The quality of leadership and management

- 5.4 At all levels of responsibility, the leadership and management of the school are effective, in accordance with the aims of the school. The senior leadership team includes the headmistress, the head of the junior school, the deputy head, two assistant heads and the bursar. Its leadership and management are excellent, being particularly successful in conveying to the pupils the main aims of the school and thus endowing the whole school with a sense of purpose. Pupils of all ages in the junior and senior schools are aware of the school's essential aims and readily quote them. The senior leadership team makes every effort to know personally each girl in the school: the headmistress herself teaches English to each of the new Year 7 girls in the senior school in order to get to know them. The headmistress has overall responsibility for the junior school but delegates the day-to-day running to the junior school head.
- 5.5 Leadership and management provide clear educational direction, as reflected in the quality of the pupils' education and the high standard of their personal development. Leadership and management are very effective in self-evaluation, setting priorities and ensuring that they are achieved. This is a school which is very self-aware. It is, for example, carefully examining the relationship between work done in school and homework and the continuity involved and also the most effective uses of technology. At the time of the last inspection it was reported that limitations in the management of heads of department and subject co-ordinators meant that some good practices in teaching and assessment were not disseminated fully throughout the school. This is no longer the case. The school has made much progress and is still working at bringing every teacher up to the standard of the best by monitoring

and appraising. The system of appraisal helps all staff to be involved and to be aware of their own contribution.

- 5.6 Management at all levels is successful in securing, supporting, developing and motivating sufficient high-quality staff and ensuring they are suitably trained for their roles in safeguarding, welfare, health and safety. The staff are very well-qualified. The school has thorough arrangements for checking the suitability of staff (including volunteers), supply staff and governors. The bursar and his staff, while prudently keeping the school finances, also lead very effectively the non-teaching staff who are very committed and make a significant contribution to the success of the school. They very often know the girls as individuals and take an interest in them. The neat and aesthetically-pleasing buildings and grounds are carefully maintained. This is a school where all staff – teaching and non-teaching – work together for the manifest benefit of the pupils.

5.(c) The quality of links with parents, carers and guardians

- 5.7 Links between school and parents are excellent and strongly support the education of the girls. Parents are actively encouraged to participate in the life of the school, by being spectators at the many sporting fixtures, audiences at the plays and concerts, and, especially in the junior school, accompanying school visits. Homework diaries are used effectively as a means of communication between home and school and open dialogue is actively encouraged. Parents are very pleased with the education and support provided for their children and with the quality of communication with the school. Responses to the pre-inspection questionnaire indicate that parents are very positive about the school. There were no concerns raised by a significant number of parents about any aspect of school life.
- 5.8 Parents have suitable opportunities to be involved in the school. A strong parents' association is active in both junior and senior schools, raising significant funds to support school projects, including the purchase of an off-road vehicle for the school's use. It also acts as means of communicating between home and school and a way in which parents can meet each other. Parents of pupils and of prospective pupils are provided with the required information about the school and much beyond that. They receive regular, clear and useful reports about their children's work and progress. Detailed written reports are sent home annually which include guidance on what pupils can do to make progress in their future learning. Shorter reports are sent more frequently and each year has at least one parents' evening in each academic year. In both junior and senior schools, an informative and helpful weekly newsletter is sent home electronically and in June a curriculum booklet is sent home to parents of girls in the junior school, containing information about work to be covered by their daughter in the following year. An informative, well presented and accessible website is widely used. The school can, in fact, contact almost all parents electronically. The school has a complaints policy in accord with the government regulations and handles the concerns of parents properly. In recent years no complaints have gone beyond the initial stage. The inspectors saw something of life at the end of the school day and many parents were on the school premises, not just to pick up their daughters but also to watch an extra-curricular event or to make a contact with a teacher.

INSPECTION EVIDENCE

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

Inspectors

Mr Eric Hester	Reporting Inspector
Mr Patrick Wenham	Junior Team Inspector (Headmaster, IAPS school) .
Mr Richard Yeates	Junior Team Inspector (Headmaster, IAPS school) .
Dr Pam Hillier	Senior Team Inspector (Co-ordinator, GSA school) .
Mrs Zelma Braganza	Senior Team Inspector (Headmistress, GSA school) .
Mr Bill Burn	Senior Team Inspector (Second Master, HMC school)
Mrs Lynne Renwick	Senior Team Inspector (Headmistress, GSA school).
Mrs Catherine Sams	Senior Team Inspector (Head of Upper School GSA).