



ISI Independent
Schools
Inspectorate

Focused Compliance and Educational Quality Inspection Report

Akeley Wood Senior School

February 2023

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School's Details

School	Akeley Wood Senior School			
DfE number	825/6015			
Address	Akeley Wood Senior School Akeley Buckingham Buckinghamshire MK18 5AE			
Telephone number	01280 814110			
Email address	admissions@akeleywoodschoo.co.uk			
Headmaster	Mr Christopher Drew			
Chair of proprietors	Mr Simon Rudland			
Proprietor	Cognita Schools Ltd			
Age range	11 to 18			
Number of pupils on roll	482			
	Seniors	400	Sixth Form	82
Inspection dates	7 to 9 February 2023			

1. Background Information

About the school

- 1.1 Akeley Wood Senior School is an independent coeducational day school, owned and governed by the Cognita group of schools. Pupils are taught on two sites in rural Buckinghamshire, approximately one mile apart: one for pupils aged 11 to 16, and the other for the sixth form. There is a junior school with a separate DfE number that is inspected separately. Since the previous inspection a new headmaster has been appointed.

What the school seeks to do

- 1.2 The school aims to inspire a community of global citizens who feel empowered to be active and socially aware, and to develop character by encouraging pupils to be adventurous, collaborative and future-ready. The aims build on the core values of resilience, charity, kindness and respect.

About the pupils

- 1.3 Pupils come from professional and business families living within daily reach of the school, with a number from a local USA air base. A small group of international pupils live with local guardians. Data provided by the school indicate that the ability of pupils on entry is in line with the average for those taking the same tests nationally. The school has identified 148 pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), 95 of whom receive additional support. Four pupils have an education health and care plan. English is an additional language for 27 pupils, most of whom are supported within regular lessons. Pupils who are identified as the school's more able are supported through a programme for pupils with exceptional potential. The curriculum is adjusted for those who have particular talents in sport.

2. Regulatory Compliance Inspection

Preface

The Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) is approved by the Secretary of State to inspect schools which are, or whose heads are, in membership of the associations which form the Independent Schools Council (ISC) and report on the extent to which they meet the Independent School Standards ('the standards') in the Schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014. Additionally, inspections report on the school's accessibility plan under Schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010 and the ban on corporal punishment under section 548 of the Education Act 1996. Inspections also comment on the progress made to meet any compliance action points set out in the school's most recent statutory inspection.

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

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

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

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

Links to the standards and requirements can be found here: [The Education \(Independent School Standards\) Regulations 2014](#).

Key findings

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

PART 1 – Quality of education provided

- 2.2 The school's GCSE and A-level results in the years 2019 to 2022 confirm that teaching enables pupils to make good progress in the context of Part 1 paragraph 3(a).
- 2.3 Pupils receive relationships and sex education, except in so far as they are lawfully excused. The school has consulted parents and published a written statement of its policy which has regard to the relevant statutory guidance.
- 2.4 The standards relating to the quality of education [paragraphs 1–4] are met.**

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

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

PART 3 – Welfare, health and safety of pupils

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

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

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

PART 5 – Premises of and accommodation at schools

- 2.11 Suitable toilet and changing facilities, and showering facilities where required by the standard, and appropriate accommodation for pupils' medical and therapy needs are provided. The premises are maintained to a standard commensurate with health and safety; acoustics and lighting are appropriate; water provision is adequate. Suitable outdoor space is provided for physical education and outdoor play.
- 2.12 The standards relating to the premises and accommodation [paragraphs 22–31] are met.**

PART 6 – Provision of information

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

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

PART 7 – Manner in which complaints are handled

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

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

PART 8 – Quality of leadership in and management of schools

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

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

3. Educational Quality Inspection

Preface

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

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

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

Key findings

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

- Pupils' basic skills for learning and subject knowledge are appropriate for their age in most areas.
- Pupils have good numeracy skills, and some have excellent creative skills, particularly in art and media.
- Pupils' communication skills are sound, but most do not develop arguments or ideas in lessons of discussions.
- Pupils feel secure in their learning within the structured teaching approaches, but they do not develop higher level study skills.
- Pupils enjoy reasonable success in sport, and levels of participation are high.

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

- Most pupils show appropriate levels of self-understanding for their age.
- Most pupils have harmonious relationships with each other, but a small minority are disrespectful towards the other gender, and others do not challenge this behaviour.
- Pupils are appreciative of their rural environment and the very high quality of learning resources, but have little concept of the non-material aspects of life.
- Sixth formers collaborate effectively, but these approaches are still to be developed in other age groups.
- Pupils have a good understanding of how to keep safe and healthy.

Recommendations

3.3 The school is advised to make the following improvements.

- Enable pupils to more consistently demonstrate the school's values of kindness and respect.
- To identify opportunities in the curricular and extra-curricular programmes to realise pupils' appreciation of the non-material aspects of life.
- To build on recent initiatives to ensure that pupils of all abilities are challenged to be more ambitious in their learning and develop their higher order study skills.

The quality of the pupils' academic and other achievements

- 3.4 The quality of the pupils' academic and other achievements is sound.
- 3.5 The development of pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding as they move through the school is appropriate for their age across nearly all areas. In response to the pre-inspection questionnaire, the very large majority of parents said that the range of subjects was suitable for their child. The wide choice of subjects, particularly in the sixth form, gives opportunities for pupils to make progress in a breadth of skills, which they do in line with expectations for the stages of their education. In this way the school meets its aim of supporting pupils to recognise and achieve their personal goals. Data provided by the school show overall that pupils achieve GCSE grades slightly above those of the same ability sitting the same examinations nationally. In some subject areas for which pupils are selected by ability, such as separate sciences, results are stronger. In all subjects GCSE results have been consistent over the last four years, with between one-third and one-half achieving one of the top three grades. In the questionnaires most pupils thought their skills and knowledge improved in most lessons, which correlates with inspection evidence. Although the teacher and centre-assessed results at A level were higher, in line with national trends, in 2019 and 2022 about one-half of examinations were graded A* to B, and just under one-fifth at least a grade A. Data show that these results are in line with expectation for ability. About one-quarter of pupils have been identified as having SEND. Planning for the specific and different needs of these pupils is meticulous, and they receive good support from experienced staff and other pupils. As a result, their progress is in line with expectations, as confirmed by observations of their written work, of lessons and data. In the questionnaire parents commented on the effectiveness of SEND support. Pupils with EAL make good progress, being well supported by individual and subject specific help.
- 3.6 Pupils' basic skills for learning and subject knowledge are appropriate for their age in most areas. Pupils generally develop a satisfactory level of understanding of key concepts that is supported by well-structured teaching. However, there is often little opportunity for pupils to develop facility with their knowledge, and hence they do not move towards higher levels of understanding. In sixth-form lessons observed, pupils satisfactorily consolidated their knowledge, but few were able to explore topics in greater detail. In GCSE classes, pupils were quick to identify key techniques, but were unable to explain their impact when applied to the specific context of the extract from literature being studied. Pupils have confidence in their teachers. In the questionnaires most pupils agreed that teachers helped them learn and know their subject well. However, the lack of challenge identified by a small number of parents in the questionnaire correlates with a significant minority of pupils who responded that lessons were not interesting. Where planning allows, pupils make faster progress. For example, in a Spanish lesson, pupils confidently recapped infinitives and the near future in Spanish and applied their learning to correct the deliberate mistakes in sentences on the whiteboard. Pupils' learning was progressed by a willingness to have a go and not being fearful of making mistakes. Written work shows good examples of longer-term rapid progress made by SEND and lower ability pupils. More able pupils have begun to tackle more challenging tasks in some lessons as a result of recent initiatives implemented by school leaders and the proprietors. These have included an exceptional potential initiative and the introduction of a more detailed approach to the tracking of pupil progress.
- 3.7 Many pupils have good creative skills. The sixth-form curriculum reflects the school's aim to give pupils freedom to find their distinct voice, and to flourish in their diversity. Sixth-form pupils have a strong record in external competitions in media, film studies and design and technology. Pupils are regularly finalists in national art and photography competitions and exhibit their work locally. As they move through the school, pupils develop their artistic skills through a well-planned curriculum; finished pieces in their portfolios reflect their eagerness to seize chances to follow their own styles and perspectives. Each year pupils leave to follow associated university courses, for example in fashion, media or comic art.

- 3.8 Pupils' oral communication skills are sound. In the lessons observed and discussions with inspectors, pupils were able to articulate their thoughts clearly, but tended to give brief answers rather than looking to develop points or initiate discussion. In drama, those with confidence speak clearly and with good intonation. Art portfolios show a high level of presentation and explanation. When writing descriptively about moral dilemmas, Year 9 pupils showed themselves to be willing to use ambitious vocabulary, although similar examples were not seen throughout the school.
- 3.9 Most pupils have good numerical skills. Year 7 pupils showed a good working knowledge of multiplication tables and Year 10 pupils could rearrange formulae and carry out complex calculations accurately. However, some lower ability pupils were hindered in their mathematics work by not being able to recall basic number facts accurately. The clear and thorough teaching ensures that skills such as algebraic manipulation are well embedded, so that pupils can use them confidently in later work. Pupils' graphical work is excellent: for example, scatter graphs and distance-time graphs were drawn with precision and pupils understood how to extract information from them. In physics, Year 12 pupils showed a good awareness of sequential patterns when constructing diagrams of standing waves. Over half of the A-level candidates in mathematics achieve at least grade A, and a few gain awards at various levels in the British Mathematics Olympiads.
- 3.10 Some pupils demonstrate good use of information communication technology (ICT) to support note taking. Pupils make appropriate use of CAD (2D design software) for developing design ideas. Pupils in art and food science make good use of ICT to aid research and project portfolios of digital recording platforms and equipment in music technology. However, although all pupils have access to laptops, their own research is almost always limited to sources provided by teachers, which constrains pupils from taking leadership of their own learning.
- 3.11 Pupils' study skills are limited in range due to lack of opportunity to fully challenge themselves. Pupils are able to analyse ideas well, but there are few opportunities for pupils to further their understanding through higher-order skills. Thus they lack models and confidence to pursue such challenges, impacting on oracy and limiting both their learning and development. Pupils work in a calm, focused and systematic way, and engage willingly in classroom tasks, appreciating the very clear structure of what they are being asked to do. They are able to synthesise new and existing knowledge effectively. For example, in a geography lesson, Year 9 pupils put forward balanced arguments for and against the HS2 railway line, and in Year 8 humanities others offered thoughtful responses on Elizabeth Fry's reforms. The depth of pupils' analysis is restricted because they are content to use the sources provided rather than searching more widely. When opportunities and encouragement are given to hypothesise, pupils of all abilities react enthusiastically. For example, in an A-level English class when pupils used higher-order thinking skills to tease out the links between pre-existing insecurities within Othello, and Iago's growing malignant influence.
- 3.12 Pupils enjoy a reasonable level of success in extra-curricular activity and external competitions. Sport is a relative strength, and both male and female individuals and teams reach the finals and win local and some county competitions. Pupils have reached national finals in triathlon and won national competitions in rugby. The vast majority of pupils participate enthusiastically in school teams. Group and individual achievements in activities such as music, games, drama, clubs and societies are typical for their age. In the questionnaire the very large majority of parents thought the range of extra-curricular activities to be suitable, and in discussions pupils spoke warmly about the opportunities they provide.
- 3.13 Pupils have generally good attitudes towards learning, although the scope they have to demonstrate initiative and independence or show leadership is limited by the nature of most lesson tasks. They want to succeed and are willing to persevere when necessary. Their participation in lessons tends to be passive. Collaboration and co-operation is often encouraged by staff, but pupils do not naturally adopt this approach in lessons, often defaulting to working by themselves. The school's proprietors and leadership are already working hard to develop pupils' collaborative approaches, and there are some examples of the success of initiatives. For example, in history Year 7 pupils were highly engaged

with the story of Thomas à Beckett, deducing events through some excellent collaboration; and in games Year 8 shared ideas to devise a set-play.

The quality of the pupils' personal development

- 3.14 The quality of the pupils' personal development is sound.
- 3.15 As they move through the school, pupils develop self-knowledge, self-esteem, self-confidence, self-discipline and resilience, including an understanding of how to improve their own learning and performance. The range of subjects followed after leaving school, from business to blacksmithing, is evidence that the school fulfils its aim of not expecting pupils to conform to a certain mould. Pupils feel well-prepared for their futures, and in discussions and questionnaire responses appreciated the guidance they receive from the school.
- 3.16 In most year groups, most pupils show appropriate levels of self-understanding for their age. Pupils are generally self-disciplined in lessons and have a very good awareness of what they need to do to improve their learning. In questionnaires the vast majority of pupils said that teachers' feedback and/or marking helps them to improve. Written work shows an effective dialogue between pupil and teacher, with clear direction on the next steps. Pupils have confidence in their teachers, and are content to follow the course of structured lessons. They show less certainty in their own ability to challenge ideas or introduce different perspectives to an argument. In the questionnaire, most parents responded that school helped their child to be confident and independent. The vast majority of parents with children with SEND remarked on the growth in self-belief and assuredness, attributing this to the strong nurturing culture experienced. However, few pupils take risks in their learning. Those leading the school's learning and teaching initiative already know that the school has still to make progress in achieving its aim to develop the character of pupils to be adventurous and collaborative.
- 3.17 Most pupils are receptive to the idea that the decisions they make about lifestyle can be instrumental in determining their own future success and well-being. They draw on support and information to make choices about options and courses and contribute when asked to decisions about school life. In the questionnaire the vast majority of parents and the majority of pupils said that the school listens and responds to their views. In discussions, pupils spoke clearly about the rationale for their choice of Friday activities. They seize the opportunities given by the school's outdoor learning programme to assess and mitigate risk. More formally, many articulate their decision-making skills through The Duke Of Edinburgh's Award, which a good number achieve at various levels before leaving school. In the questionnaire the very large majority of parents agreed that the school actively promotes good behaviour and responds effectively when pupils use unkind or prejudiced language to each other, for example, comments about sex, ethnicity or faith. The school has introduced several new initiatives including a character education programme and has revised its approach to relationship and sex education. Their impact is yet to be judged, but currently a small minority of pupils make poor decisions about their behaviour.
- 3.18 In the questionnaire a significant minority of pupils, and a larger proportion of female pupils, said that pupils were not kind to or did not respect each other. In discussions and written responses, pupils said this response reflected the inappropriate comments occasionally made between female and male pupils when in larger groups. Such behaviours are counter to the school's core values of kindness and respect. Pupils stressed that such language was very rarely based on race, gender preference, or sexual orientation, and in those areas levels of respect were high. Almost all pupils said that the school expects them to behave well, but in discussions some could not distinguish between friendly, non-threatening talk and that which could be seen as harmful. Few pupils challenge such behaviour when it occurs. Pupils spoke positively about the small group work initiated to further discuss these issues. Pupils are aware and appreciative of what they describe as the stricter and clearer expectations of the school in recent times, demonstrating a satisfactory ability to articulate why this is the case. More generally pupils understand and respect systems of rules and laws, and some can defend the values

they espouse. Sixth-form pupils appreciate and successfully accept responsibility for their own conduct and the drawing up of behavioural codes, and by this age questionnaire responses were overwhelming more positive in this area.

- 3.19 Pupils are appreciative of their environment. Some pupils talked eloquently about the beauty of the school's rural surroundings and of pheasants walking in the grounds. Equally they acknowledge the very high quality of teaching accommodation in which they learn. The portfolios of A-level artists show that the subject has touched their inner feelings. Some pupils wrote about 'losing themselves beyond the brief', and others described the synergy of music and their painting. In discussions most pupils found it difficult to engage with concepts of the non-material and could not give examples of them being encountered in lessons.
- 3.20 In the questionnaire the very large majority of parents agreed that the school helped their child build social and teamwork skills. In a few lessons pupils demonstrated that they can be collaborative when directed by teachers, but this is not a widespread approach, and some pupils are reticent to share enterprises and work with others. Exceptions are in sport and drama, where both male and female pupils work cooperatively in pursuit of common goals and are well practised at sharing their ideas. Collaboration is more common in sixth-form classes. In media studies, art, politics and mathematics pupils adopted critical stances to other's work or presentations. They are especially supportive of pupils whose learning barriers make collaboration an uncomfortable approach. When invited to do so, older pupils show concern and support for those who are younger, and for those new to the school. They implement the school's strategy for this effectively, particularly with those joining at non-standard points. Those given responsibilities take them seriously.
- 3.21 Most pupils recognise that others have particular needs and characteristics. They understand and support pupils who have learning barriers, and those who find communication more difficult are given time by both other pupils and staff in lessons. Sixth formers show good leadership skills, and work together to create a strong positive ambience in the sixth-form building. Pupils appreciate the circumstances of those less fortunate than themselves. A few pupils are involved in activities that benefit others, within school or through charitable enterprises. Pupils spoke about the importance of charity fundraising, and in particular the need to support recovery work after the Syrian-Turkish earthquake. Very few pupils live in the immediate vicinity of the school which limits opportunities to be involved in the immediate community, although choirs and other groups perform locally when occasions allow. Hence much emphasis is given to the school's own festivals which draw on pupils' musical talent and its woodland environment, and which are well supported by pupils. Pupils show strong engagement with the Duke of Edinburgh's Award and have a sound awareness of the service element, much of which they organise themselves.
- 3.22 Pupils' appreciation for and respect of those from different ethnic backgrounds is one of the stronger elements of their personal development. There is solid evidence that pupils are inclusive of those from backgrounds different to their own, mixing easily with pupils of other nationalities, backgrounds and beliefs. Documentation shows that any bullying or inappropriate behaviour on these grounds is extremely rare, and if it has occurred, is dealt with swiftly and effectively by the school. This correlates with the views of pupils and parents. Pupils said they valued the opportunities to discuss diversity. In the questionnaire the very large majority of parents said that they thought the school was well governed and well led. Inspectors did not find either group complacent, and pupils' understanding of diversity is just one area where further initiatives have already been introduced. Most pupils form sound and productive relationships with each other. Year 10 pupils said that on the whole relationships are harmonious and that they have the skills and confidence to resolve friendship issues which arise. They stated that they feel comfortable and well supported by staff if they do need to seek their support. At the same time, they noted the continued lack of respect shown to each other by a minority of male and female pupils.
- 3.23 Pupils know how to keep safe and healthy. In the questionnaire almost all pupils said the school was a safe place to be, but a small minority stated that the school did not encourage them to be healthy.

Inspection evidence refutes this. The curriculum is designed to give pupils abundant time for exercise, and the quality and choice of food at lunch is excellent. The school does not over-emphasise examination attainment in its aims, and there is little academic pressure on pupils. They are comfortable in their lessons, which promotes their mental health. Pupils have a good awareness of how to keep safe online.

4. Inspection Evidence

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

Inspectors

Mr Stephen Cole	Reporting inspector
Mr James Kazi	Compliance team inspector (Under master, HMC school)
Mrs Catherine Hill	Team inspector (Assistant director of studies, HMC school)
Mrs Jane Huntington	Team inspector (Former head, ISA school)
Mrs Helen Snow	Team inspector (Former head, IAPS school)
Mr Timothy Weston	Team inspector (Assistant head HMC school)