

School inspection report

20 to 22 February 2024

Reading Blue Coat School

Sonning Lane

Sonning-on-Thames

Reading

RG4 6SU

The Independent Schools Inspectorate is appointed by the Department for Education to inspect association independent schools in England. Our inspections report on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards and other applicable regulatory requirements are met, collectively referred to in this report as 'the Standards'.

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Summary of inspection findings

1. Leaders and governors are highly committed to the school. They have a shared vision to build a thriving school community which aims for excellence, whilst demonstrating compassion, courage and integrity. This contributes strongly to pupils' success and promotes their wellbeing. Leaders and staff at all levels carry out their roles effectively because they are well trained. The strong, open and reflective culture is focused on continuous improvement.
2. Important decisions are informed by comprehensive self-evaluation, careful planning and strategic risk assessment, for example, in support of the decision to expand the co-education offer throughout the school. In this case, leaders and governors continue to build on the experiences of pupils in Year 7 and in the sixth form to plan for changing needs as more female pupils join over time.
3. The curriculum is wide ranging and challenging. Well-planned teaching and learning take account of pupils' needs and interests. Precise and regular feedback is based on accurate and detailed assessment. This includes the tracking of individuals' and group progress. Teachers set challenging and attainable targets. Pupils are highly motivated to achieve well. Most pupils make good and sustained progress. Typically, they attain above their predicted grades and well above the national average at GCSE and A level.
4. Staff and pupils have access to high-quality facilities and resources. Premises are maintained to a high standard. Suitable and detailed risk assessments are in place. The required maintenance checks are completed and recorded accurately. Thorough monitoring systems include checks of all aspects of health, safety and safeguarding.
5. Comprehensive schemes of work are in place for personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) and relationships and sex education (RSE). Careful planning and implementation mean that pupils understand a wide range of issues that are important to their physical and mental health, and emotional wellbeing. These include developing healthy relationships and understanding of the dangers of addiction. Pupils have positive attitudes to physical wellbeing. They participate in a wide range of sports and activities tailored to their abilities and interests.
6. Most pupils are polite and considerate. They do not tolerate bullying behaviour. While most pupils are respectful to each other, a few pupils on occasions use discriminatory language and behaviour including online.
7. Pupils of all age-groups socialise well with one another in the classroom, in their houses and in the many activities that they engage in. Most older pupils are positive role models who actively promote the school's values and rules.
8. Pupils' economic education supports them in developing key life skills such as opening a bank account and managing a budget. They embody the school's ideal of service to others. For example, by engaging in community service through the Aldworth Partnership. Pupils enjoy supporting charities that make a difference locally, nationally and internationally.
9. Leaders have recently reviewed and revised the careers education programme. The changes focus on supporting pupils to evaluate their strengths and interests effectively, as well as to consider a

wide range of higher education options and career possibilities. The revised programme is at an early stage and still embedding throughout the school.

10. The strong culture of safeguarding is well established. Pupils learn how to keep safe including when online. They are confident that there are people to speak with if they are worried. Staff respond appropriately and without delay to any concerns raised. Leaders maintain and monitor detailed safeguarding records and risk assessments. Safer recruitment procedures are in place. The required checks are implemented thoroughly and carefully recorded.

The extent to which the school meets the Standards:

- Standards relating to leadership and management, and governance are met.
- Standards relating to the quality of education, training and recreation are met.
- Standards relating to pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing are met.
- Standards relating to pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society are met.
- Standards relating to safeguarding are met.

Recommended next steps:

Leaders should:

- build on the successful strategies implemented in Year 7 and the sixth form as co-education extends throughout the school.
- continue to strengthen the school's culture of inclusion so that all members of the school community interact as respectfully as they should, including when online.
- embed the recently revised careers programme throughout the school so that pupils are supported effectively to make more informed decisions about their futures beyond school.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

11. The school is well led and managed. Leaders and governors act decisively and with integrity to make sure that the school's aim of enabling all pupils to thrive, to be inspired and to enjoy their learning is realised.
12. Governors have extensive knowledge of the school through well-organised committees, surveys, visits and discussions with pupils and staff. They bring a wide range of expertise, including knowledge of safeguarding, finance, property, health and safety, education and inclusion. They use these effectively to provide challenge and support for leaders to continue to improve the school.
13. Governors check carefully to make sure that leaders have the required knowledge and skills and that staff training, including for safeguarding, is up to date. Effective monitoring and quality assurance systems, accurate self-evaluation and appropriate action means that the Standards are met consistently.
14. Governors and leaders work together to strategically manage risk and to secure an ambitious, shared vision which builds upon the work of the founder, Richard Aldworth. This vision includes service through the Aldworth programme, the funding of bursaries and becoming fully co-educational by 2027. Female pupils were admitted to Year 7 from September 2023 as well as into the sixth form, which has been co-educational since the 1980s. Careful planning for this development encompasses every aspect of school life, including meeting the needs of all pupils. Governors and leaders listen to the views and experiences of current pupils and parents to make further, informed changes as the provision grows.
15. Leaders' actions ensure that the well-maintained premises and specialist facilities create rich and varied learning environments, which allow pupils to be active, creative, reflective, spiritual and studious. The wide-ranging curriculum, cohesive assessment and extensive co-curricular programme combine to support pupils' high-quality academic and personal outcomes.
16. Governors and leaders have ensured that the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 have been taken into consideration, particularly through the implementation of the school's PSHE and RSE schemes of work and the school's accessibility plan. The accessibility plan is reviewed bi-annually. Updates take into account changing needs, including new building works, growth in pupil numbers, the admission of female pupils and the needs of pupils with SEND.
17. Leaders and governors check all aspects of safeguarding diligently in regular meetings with the designated safeguarding lead (DSL) and the scrutiny of records. Detailed reports ensure that governors are aware of all aspects of safeguarding and that they contribute to decisions made. Swift action is taken when concerns are raised. This includes, for example, developing additional strategies to address any shortfalls in pupils' behaviour that is not in line with the school's values and policy on equality and inclusion.
18. Parents have access to the required policies and a wide range of information through the school's comprehensive website. Information is also available in hard copy if requested. Parents receive regular newsletters and updates and direct communication through their child's tutor. Detailed written reports are provided to parents on their child's academic progress, effort, behaviour and personal development. Parents are also invited to parent-teacher meetings throughout the year. Parents may also arrange further individual meetings with tutors, leaders or governors to discuss

any issues or concerns. Consequently, parents are well informed about the school and their child's attainment, progress and wellbeing.

19. The school has a suitable complaints policy which is implemented consistently. Leaders, through the tutorial system, for example, respond promptly and sympathetically to concerns raised by parents and pupils. Where formal complaints are received, they are managed effectively through a three-stage process with clear timescales. The number of complaints received is published annually on the school's website. Records are kept appropriately, including of any action taken and the outcomes of the complaint.

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

20. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

21. Attainment at GCSE and A level across all subjects is well above the national average. Most pupils attain the highest grades at GCSE and A level. Many gain entry to their first-choice universities and to higher and degree apprenticeships. A comprehensive tracking system is used effectively to monitor pupils' attainment and progress. This highlights where extra support may be necessary. Consequently, pupils achieve consistently and well. Leaders set challenging targets for pupils in all subjects. This contributes to pupils' typically good progress, including for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).
22. The curriculum is planned carefully across an extensive range of subjects. Pupils are supported to maintain a breadth and depth of study which is carefully tailored towards success in the sixth form and beyond. Linguistic, literacy and numeracy skills are developed to a high level. Pupils study GCSE English language, English literature, mathematics and usually at least one foreign language successfully. The English and learning support teams work well together to support pupils to develop their reading, comprehension and study skills to an even higher level.
23. Pupils who have SEND make rapid and sustained progress. They attain in line with their peers. This is because learning support staff have an extensive knowledge of specific learning needs. They use accurate assessments and personal encouragement to ensure that appropriate support is provided in the classroom, in one-to-one and groups sessions. Teachers in all subjects benefit from training, support and guidance provided by learning support staff. This means that they are effective in supporting the learning of all groups of pupils. There are a small number of pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL). For these pupils, individual support is provided by specialist teachers so they can access the full curriculum effectively.
24. Subject leaders have extensive subject knowledge which they use to plan learning carefully, considering pupils' needs and interests, as well as examination requirements. Their enthusiasm for their subjects inspires pupils to learn creatively and to achieve well, as exemplified in geography, where pupils researched the impact of global natural disasters. Using the results of their individual research, pupils considered creatively and scientifically the possible causes, effects and patterns of disasters and whether it is possible to predict and avert future disasters. In Latin, leaders have introduced software with animations featuring a diverse cast of characters from the 'Subura' in Rome and their travels through the empire. This creative approach successfully enables pupils to study for GCSE in a way that builds their knowledge, skills, understanding and confidence when translating, speaking and writing Latin. Pupils' progress is monitored regularly to ensure that high expectations and challenging targets are the norm. Departmental teams work together so that consistent standards are maintained in marking and feedback. Pupils appreciate the verbal and written feedback from their teachers. This helps them to identify ways in which they can improve.
25. Well-planned teaching and learning is enhanced by an extensive range of resources and specialist facilities. Most teachers use a wide variety of strategies to make learning interesting, challenging and exciting. They know the curriculum requirements and their pupils well. Teachers are flexible in providing support where learning is insecure and further guidance where deeper learning can be achieved. In most lessons the rapport between teachers and pupils is positive. Lessons are characterised by a focused, yet relaxed and supportive atmosphere where pupils are respectful and self-motivated. Most teachers manage any low-level disruptions effectively.

26. Leaders have developed an extensive programme of wider activities that is planned into the school's timetable. The programme offers something for everyone. Pupils build on existing talents, as well as trying new and challenging opportunities. These include community action, enterprise, public speaking, dance and the combined cadet force, with sections for the army, navy and air force.

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

27. All the relevant Standards are met.

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

28. Pupils build their ability to self-reflect, whilst raising their self-esteem and confidence, because of effective and nurturing support from their tutors. The regular one-to-one tutorials provide opportunities for pupils to discuss their wellbeing, as well as their academic and personal development.
29. The reflective and caring ethos of the school enables pupils to develop spirituality and to appreciate the non-material aspects of life, including the importance of generosity and helping others. Pupils gain a deeper understanding of faith in compulsory religious studies up to Year 10. The work of the chaplaincy, which includes running the multi-faith group and leading weekly spiritual assemblies, also supports the spiritual development of the school community.
30. Comprehensive PSHE and RSE schemes have been devised and implemented. Pupils understand the importance of a wide range of topics, including healthy relationships, boundaries and consent, harassment and the dangers of addiction. The school is reviewing this area of the curriculum to ensure that there is sufficient time for reflection and discussion.
31. Pupils participate in a wide range of physical activities, including through physical education, competitive sports and extra-curricular activities. These contribute effectively to pupils' positive mental health and wellbeing. Teachers listen to pupils' interests, so new sports such as basketball have been introduced. A flexible games programme is available for older pupils. Those pupils who find exercise more of a challenge are provided with a tailored experience that enables them to get active.
32. The school's behaviour policy sets out clearly leaders' high expectations, as well as the ethos of acknowledging and rewarding good behaviour. Sanctions are appropriate and in line with the needs of the pupils, including for pupils who have SEND. Most pupils are polite, considerate and very clear that bullying is not tolerated. Comprehensive behaviour records are monitored regularly by senior leaders and shared appropriately with governors through detailed reports and discussions. Some older pupils would like further opportunities to discuss issues that are of concern to them including where, on a small number of occasions, sanctions have been administered inconsistently.
33. Supervision is well organised. Staff are always visible including before and after school. The sixth-form centre has unobtrusive oversight by both academic and operational staff. The centre provides older pupils with a valuable resource for socialising and for private study. The attendance registers and admission register are maintained accurately. Absences and any pupils missing from registration are followed up quickly. Relevant notifications are in place when pupils transfer to another school.
34. The school premises are maintained to a high standard by diligent operational staff. Comprehensive health and safety and risk assessment training are in place. Well thought out risk assessments are implemented, including annually for fire safety. Efficient systems support the control of traffic and people on the site. Effective monitoring with accurate record keeping is implemented for all the required aspects, including the electrical system, water, fire equipment, lighting, asbestos and school vehicles. Lockdown procedures are practised, and fire drills are carried out termly. Suitable action is taken to address any issues of concern.

35. The purpose-built medical centre, which is managed by well-qualified and caring staff, provides treatment rooms for the short-term care of sick and injured pupils. Medicines are stored and administered safely. The centre also offers provision for counselling and the support of pupils' mental health and emotional wellbeing.

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

36. All the relevant Standards are met.

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

37. The PSHE curriculum encompasses the theme of living in the wider world. This supports pupils' understanding of society, culture and the differences between people such as race, religion or sexuality. The PSHE curriculum is enhanced through the wider curriculum and through thought-provoking assemblies.
38. Pupils develop a mature awareness of social issues. Through taking part in the Model United Nations scheme, for example, pupils become part of a global community. They give deep consideration to issues related to war and peace, human rights, humanitarian aid, world health and sustainable development.
39. PSHE modules and economics within the curriculum allow pupils to develop an understanding of financial decision-making at political and personal levels. Older pupils learn the skills required for life after school, including opening a bank account, managing a budget, the cost of loans and the benefits of saving.
40. Pupils socialise well with each other through, for example, vertical grouping in the house system, the school council and the wide range of activities available each day. Older pupils are extremely positive about their leadership roles. Most understand the importance of being positive role models, enabling others to understand right from wrong, and the importance of promoting the school values. Younger pupils appreciate the support and encouragement they receive from their pupil mentors. Pupils in the lower part of the school say that the absence of mobile phones during the school day helps them to socialise better and to enjoy their friendships and activities.
41. Leaders emphasise the importance of respect in line with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010. Most members of the school community, for example, show respect for one another, celebrating diversity, as exemplified through the pupil led Mandela, Safe, Neuro Café and Pride societies. Occasionally, a few pupils use discriminatory language and behaviour. Where this happens, leaders take prompt and appropriate action to address concerns. This includes the use of a restorative justice approach, which provides opportunities for pupils to consider the impact of their behaviour and how to improve. Strategies to enable the school community to tackle discrimination are being developed further with the support of a recently appointed equality and diversity leader.
42. Most pupils set themselves challenging targets and are ambitious for their future. Leaders have recently reviewed the careers education provision to continue to improve the offer. The revised programme is in the early stages of implementation. Pupils receive helpful support and guidance about the options they choose at GCSE and A level, and with their university applications. Electronic psychometric testing supports pupils' decision-making about the career pathways available to them. Access to a universal destinations' platform allows pupils to compare a wide range of university and further education courses and apprenticeships available in different locations.
43. Pupils are encouraged to aspire to the philanthropic aims of Richard Aldworth, founder of the school. Through the Aldworth partnership, pupils give service locally, nationally and internationally. Pupils regularly help at local primary schools. They engage in an extensive range of fundraising activities, including school fayres and concerts supporting a wide range of charities. The charities they select include a local charity which supports the homeless, and a charity providing free period

products for women and girls. Pupils evaluate the work of the charities they would like to support. They show a deep understanding of how they can make a difference to others. Some pupils give service internationally, for example, through the Ghana project and Brass for Africa tour to Uganda. Participating in these projects enables pupils to experience the transformational impact of serving others, as espoused by Richard Aldworth.

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

44. All the relevant Standards are met.

Safeguarding

45. Leaders and governors place the highest priority on the safeguarding and wellbeing of pupils. There is a strong, open culture of safeguarding in which pupils feel safe.
46. Arrangements for safeguarding are thorough and effective. The school's safeguarding policy and procedures are updated regularly, in line with guidance from the secretary of state. The school has strong links with external agencies, including the local safeguarding partnership and the local authority designated officer.
47. Safeguarding is monitored and reviewed regularly by the safeguarding governor and through the safeguarding committee. Routine checks include regular meetings with designated safeguarding staff, discussion with pupils, surveys and detailed scrutiny of documentation and records, including data from the school's firewall and filtering system.
48. Designated safeguarding leads are trained in line with local requirements. The safeguarding team works well together. Safeguarding, pastoral and behavioural information is entered systematically into the school's electronic system. Individual cases, patterns and trends are monitored closely and action taken without delay, including referral to children's services and the police when required. Suitable risk assessments and safeguarding plans are in place for pupils who may be at risk or with specific needs, including for pupils who have SEND. These are reviewed and updated regularly, taking account of any changing circumstances and to ensure that prompt and appropriate action is secured.
49. Safeguarding training for staff and governors is effective, including in implementing recent changes to government statutory guidance. Staff are confident to respond to any concerns raised by pupils. They understand the importance of applying the school's staff code of conduct, whistleblowing and low-level concerns policies. Detailed low-level concerns are recorded. Appropriate action is taken to address concerns when they are raised. If required, the school reports any person to the relevant regulatory body without delay.
50. Through PSHE and RSE lessons, assemblies and visits by external speakers, pupils understand how to keep safe including in their understanding of their mental wellbeing, harassment, consent, boundaries and keeping safe online. Pupils have a range of ways to share concerns, including through the school's anonymous online system and through their tutors. Pupils who mentor younger pupils have been trained to support safeguarding. They understand the importance of sharing any concerns with staff and that the safety and wellbeing of their mentees is paramount.
51. Governors ensure that safer recruitment procedures are followed precisely, so they are confident that adults who work or volunteer at the school are checked appropriately. The required information is verified in staff files and entered accurately on to the single central register (SCR). Termly scrutiny by the safeguarding governor and the headteacher ensure that requirements are met consistently.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding.

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

School details

School	Reading Blue Coat School
Department for Education number	872/6006
Registered charity number	1087839
Address	Reading Blue Coat School Sonning Lane Sonning-on-Thames Reading Berkshire RG4 6SU
Phone number	0118 9441005
Email address	reception@rbc.org.uk
Website	rbc.org.uk
Proprietor	Reading Blue Coat School Ltd.
Chair	Mr Howard Williams
Headteacher	Mr Pete Thomas
Age range	11 to 18
Number of pupils	791
Date of previous inspection	November 2022

Information about the school

53. Reading Blue Coat School was founded in 1646 to teach and raise 20 poor children in accordance with the last will and testament of Richard Aldworth. The school moved to its current location in 1947, catering for male pupils until 1987 when female pupils were admitted into the sixth form. In September 2023 female pupils were admitted into Year 7. Plans are in place for the school to become fully co-educational from September 2027.
54. The school has identified 71 pupils who have SEND. No pupils in the school have an education, health and care (EHC) plan.
55. English is an additional language for two pupils.
56. The school states that it aims for pupils to thrive, be inspired and to enjoy their learning. Pupils are encouraged to develop self-discipline, personal responsibility, spiritual awareness and the development of a personal moral code within a Christian framework, leading to the highest possible standards of behaviour, consideration for others and a pride in themselves and the school. The school seeks to instil pupils with a love of learning enabling them to develop as flexible, independent and creative thinkers. It strives to offer a wide range of co-curricular activities through which pupils develop their cultural, intellectual and sporting abilities. Pupils are encouraged to develop a sense of service through links and projects with the local and wider community. The school endeavours to prepare pupils for life after school including an awareness of opportunities in higher education and career possibilities.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

20 – 22 February 2024

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

58. Inspection activities included:

- observation of lessons, some in conjunction with school leaders
- observation of registration periods and assemblies
- observation of a sample of extra-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection
- discussions with the chair and other governors
- discussions with the head, school leaders, managers and other members of staff
- discussions with pupils
- visits to the learning support area and facilities for physical education
- scrutiny of samples of pupils' work
- scrutiny of a range of policies, documentation and records provided by the school.

59. The inspection team considered the views of pupils, members of staff and parents who responded to ISI's pre-inspection surveys.

How are association independent schools in England inspected?

- The Department for Education is the regulator for independent schools in England.
- ISI is approved by the Secretary of State for Education to inspect independent schools in England, which are members of associations in membership of the Independent Schools Council.
- ISI inspections report to the Department for Education on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards, the EYFS statutory framework requirements, the National Minimum Standards for boarding schools and any other relevant standards are met.
- For more information, please visit www.isi.net.

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