



INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS INSPECTORATE

READING BLUE COAT SCHOOL STANDARD INSPECTION

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS INSPECTORATE

Reading Blue Coat School

Full Name of School	Reading Blue Coat School		
DfE Number	872/6006		
Registered Charity Number	1087839		
Address	Reading Blue Coat School Holme Park Sonning Lane Sonning on Thames Reading Berkshire RG4 6SU		
Telephone Number	0118 9441005		
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Email Address	reception@rbc.org.uk		
Headmaster	Mr Michael Windsor		
Chair of Governors	Mr Brian S Walsh		
Age Range	11 to 18		
Total Number of Pupils	668		
Gender of Pupils	Boys 11-16, Mixed 16-18		
Numbers by Age	11-18:	668	
Number of Day Pupils	Total:	668	Capacity for flexi-boarding: 0
Number of Boarders	Total:	0	
	Full:	0	Weekly: 0
Inspection dates	08 Feb 2011 to 09 Feb 2011		
	09 Mar 2011 to 11 Mar 2011		

PREFACE

This inspection report follows the STANDARD *ISI schedule*. The inspection 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 previous ISI inspection was in February 2005.

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 2010*. The range of these Regulations is as follows.

- (a) Quality of education provided (curriculum)
- (b) Quality of education provided (teaching)
- (c) Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils
- (d) Welfare, health and safety of pupils
- (e) Suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors
- (f) Premises and accommodation
- (g) Provision of information
- (h) Manner in which complaints are to be handled

*These Standards Regulations replace those first introduced on 1 September 2003.

Legislation additional to Part 3, Welfare, health and safety of pupils, 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 of the school is from an educational perspective and provides limited inspection of other aspects, though inspectors will comment on any significant hazards or problems they encounter which have an adverse impact on children. The inspection does not include:

- (i) an exhaustive health and safety audit
- (ii) an in-depth examination of the structural condition of the school, its services or other physical features
- (iii) an investigation of the financial viability of the school or its accounting procedures
- (iv) an in-depth investigation of the school's compliance with employment law.

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1. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SCHOOL

- 1.1 Reading Blue Coat School was founded in 1646 by Richard Aldworth, a merchant of the Skinners' Company. At that time it was situated near St Mary's Minster Church in Reading and was intended to provide 'education and bringing up of twenty poor male children'. It now occupies a forty-four acre site beside the River Thames in the village of Sonning and is a day school for boys from the ages of eleven to sixteen with a co-educational sixth form. Currently, 668 pupils attend the school of whom 195, including 46 girls, study in the sixth form. The school aims to foster a stimulating, friendly and supportive atmosphere that enables personal growth and social development, and to encourage the growth of intellectual curiosity, creativity and habits of learning in order to help each pupil to achieve his or her full potential.
- 1.2 The school premises are owned by the Reading Blue Coat School Foundation which delegates the running of the school to a governing board. Since the last inspection in 2005 the present headmaster has been appointed, the sixth-form centre has been developed and information and communication technology (ICT) and sports facilities improved. The curriculum has been expanded and International GCSE (IGCSE) courses introduced. A learning support department has been established.
- 1.3 Pupils travel to the school from a wide catchment area and are from predominantly business and professional backgrounds. A small minority are from ethnic origins other than white British. According to nationally standardised measures, the ability profile of pupils throughout the school is above the national average. Ninety-seven pupils have been identified as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD) of whom sixty receive specialist learning support. No pupil has a statement of special educational needs and no pupils have English as an additional language (EAL).
- 1.4 National Curriculum nomenclature is used throughout this report to refer to year groups in the school.

2. THE SUCCESS OF THE SCHOOL

2.(a) Main findings

- 2.1 Pupils' achievement in lessons and in public examinations is good in relation to their abilities and their achievement in a wide variety of extra-curricular activities is excellent. They reach high levels of attainment in literacy and numeracy; they are articulate and at ease with mathematical concepts. They use ICT with confidence and know how to conduct their own research, approaching their work seriously. They are supported in this by a well-constructed curriculum and by skilled and dedicated teaching. They take full advantage of an exceptionally wide ranging extra-curricular programme, developing their talents and interests to a high level.
- 2.2 Pupils' personal development is outstanding. Pupils are mature, confident and considerate. They have developed a sensitive understanding of other cultures and beliefs, and willingly take on responsibilities within the school community. The school's pastoral system successfully encourages this development and provides excellent care. The notably good relations amongst pupils and between pupils and staff are respectful, but relaxed.
- 2.3 Governance, leadership and management of the school are highly effective, ensuring that the school achieves its aims, but some shorter-term planning lacks clarity. Well thought-out safeguarding arrangements are assiduously implemented. Responses to the parents' questionnaire issued ahead of the inspection indicate an extremely high level of satisfaction with the school. Parents were particularly pleased with the range of subjects offered, the quality of the values promoted by the school, the availability of information about the school and its policies, and the governance and management of the school. There were no significantly negative responses. The questionnaire issued to pupils shows that the vast majority of those who responded enjoy their school life, and feel they are making good progress. A minority thought that teachers were not always fair. The school has responded robustly to the recommendations made in the last inspection by establishing a well-designed learning support department and by improving the provision and use of ICT resources.

2.(b) Action points

(i) Compliance with regulatory requirements

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

- 2.4 At the time of the initial visit, the school met all the requirements of the Independent School Standards Regulations 2010.

(ii) Recommendations for further improvement

- 2.5 The school is advised to make the following improvements.
1. Rigorously implement systems already in place to ensure that marking is of a consistently high standard in all subjects throughout the school.
 2. Improve whole-school and departmental development plans by including sharply defined objectives and identifying and recording success criteria and cost implications.

3. THE QUALITY OF ACADEMIC AND OTHER ACHIEVEMENTS

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

- 3.1 The quality of pupils' achievement throughout the school is good and frequently excellent. Their achievement in extra-curricular activities is outstanding. They are successfully educated to a high standard in accordance with the school's aims of encouraging the growth of curiosity, creativity and effective habits of learning.
- 3.2 In lessons, in their written work and in discussions with inspectors most pupils displayed a thorough knowledge and understanding of their work. They enjoy thinking for themselves when given the opportunity, and are ready to ask for further explanation if needed, or to seek help outside lesson time. They are highly articulate and almost always listen carefully to each other and to their teachers. They handle mathematical concepts with confidence and can apply them to other areas of the curriculum. They are adept and sensible users of ICT. High levels of creativity were evident in many lessons and activities. Pupils with LDD achieve similarly well in relation to their abilities.
- 3.3 In Year 11 boys sit all of their subjects at GCSE level, except for English and mathematics which are taken at IGCSE level. In the last three years for which comparative data is available (2007 to 2009) results at GCSE level have been far above the national average for boys in all maintained schools and similar to the national average for maintained selective schools. Results for the IGCSE in mathematics have been higher than international norms and similar to UK norms, where the benchmark is higher. At A level pupils' results have been above the national average for maintained schools sixth forms and similar to the average for maintained selective sixth forms. These results are good in relation to pupils' abilities, indicating that progress in Years 7 to 11 and through the sixth form is above the average for pupils of similar abilities, as confirmed by nationally standardised measures of progress. In 2010 nearly half of all A-level grades were at grade A and a fifth were at A*. Nearly two-thirds of GCSE results were at A or A*. Most Year 13 pupils were successful in gaining places at their preferred university.
- 3.4 The exceptionally high standards reached in extra-curricular activities are the result both of the notable hard work, commitment and perseverance of the pupils as well as the quality of direction by the staff. Pupils not only achieve highly in national music examinations and public speaking events but perform to an excellent standard in school and public concerts and productions. The junior Mathematics Challenge team reached the national finals recently and other pupils represented the UK at the Earth Sciences Olympiad in Taiwan. Recent national and county successes have been achieved in cricket, rugby and rowing, and in 2010 a pupil was selected for the England Under-18 hockey squad. Over fifty Year 10 boys take part in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme, and fourteen older pupils gained the Gold Award last year.
- 3.5 The vast majority of pupils are keen and active learners and this contributes much to their progress. They settle readily to their work and almost always respond enthusiastically, engaging in constructive discussion and reasoned argument. Occasionally their approach, although serious, is rather passive. They work productively in groups and pairs as well as individually. They take their own notes without fuss and organise their books and files efficiently.

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

- 3.6 The quality of the curriculum is excellent and it is complemented by the outstanding programme of extra-curricular activities, so fulfilling the school's aim to provide wide-ranging opportunities for pupils to develop their social, sporting, cultural and intellectual abilities.
- 3.7 The carefully designed academic curriculum stretches well beyond the subjects of the National Curriculum. Pupils in Years 7 to 9 study a broad range of subjects that includes three languages, library skills, classical studies, geology and the option to start Latin in Year 9. At GCSE or IGCSE level all pupils take a core course of English, mathematics and separately taught science plus short GCSE courses in religious education (RE) and ICT. They then choose other subjects from the range they have already experienced plus GCSE physical education (PE). At A level the choice broadens still further as opportunities to study economics, government and politics, philosophy and ethics, music technology, performance studies and history of art are added. There are plans to introduce more subjects at A level and to extend the number offered at IGCSE level. Since the last inspection significant investment has ensured that the school has appropriate facilities and resources for the cross-curricular use of ICT. Greater opportunities for independent learning have been provided by the development of a sixth-form study area, by extending the opening hours of the library and including an ICT suite.
- 3.8 The weekly programme of personal, social and health education (PSHE), taught to all year groups, is coherent and comprehensive and covers all relevant topics appropriate to pupils' ages. In the sixth form all pupils, except those involved in courses in further mathematics and Mandarin, experience the Reading Blue Coat School personal, life and university skills (RBCS PLUS) course which prepares them for higher education and life after school.
- 3.9 Since the last inspection the school has established an effective learning support department run by a full-time member of staff who ensures that all teachers are fully aware of the needs of individual pupils.
- 3.10 A thorough and well-planned scheme for careers education starts in Year 7 and is designed to help pupils recognise their personal strengths and interests. Work experience, diagnostic testing, a careers evening and specific lessons in Year 12 enable pupils to make considered choices of subjects and higher education courses.
- 3.11 The exceptionally extensive and varied range of extra-curricular activities, overseen by a member of the senior management team (SMT), is a major strength of the school. In addition to activities taking place in the lunch hour and after school, a weekly double period within the timetable ensures that all pupils are able to discover and develop their individual talents and interests. In addition to music, sport and drama, clubs and societies range from an a capella group, archery, the combined cadet force and Young Enterprise to journalism, fencing, horse riding, creative writing and a design and technology club using precious metals. An activities week in the summer term provides extended opportunities for cultural experiences, personal development and team work.
- 3.12 Links with the community are strong and many pupils participate in community service projects. The Sports Leadership Award and Primary Placement schemes give sixth formers opportunities to help in local primary schools. Links with the

international community include partnerships with schools in Ghana and Uganda, language exchanges and sports tours.

3.(c) The contribution of teaching

- 3.13 The quality of teaching throughout the school is good and often excellent, contributing strongly to the progress and intellectual development of the pupils and so fulfilling the school's aim to enable its pupils to thrive and enjoy their education.
- 3.14 Almost all lessons are purposeful and productive. Enthusiastic teaching successfully captures the attention of the pupils and enables them to develop their knowledge and understanding rapidly. Lessons are carefully planned with clear objectives. Most teachers possess an excellent knowledge of their subject and use an interesting variety of imaginative activities and techniques to communicate complex ideas and concepts. In the best lessons observed discussion was actively encouraged and the teaching built constructively on the points and questions raised by the pupils. In a few lessons teachers gave pupils limited opportunities to contribute.
- 3.15 Teachers know their pupils well. In most lessons work is skilfully, and often subtly and unobtrusively, tailored to the individual abilities of the pupils. Extension work for the more able is usually available. Individual specialist lessons together with the help provided in mainstream classes enable pupils with LDD to make good progress. Pupils feel that their teachers are approachable and appreciate the time willingly given outside lessons to support their learning if they have difficulties, or to extend those who are eager to take a topic further. ICT is used in many lessons to enrich and stimulate learning.
- 3.16 The quality of marking is inconsistent; the best is clear and thorough but more often it is limited and general, lacking informative comments to help pupils improve. Pupils' progress is assessed and recorded regularly. Tutors use the grading systems to help pupils set themselves stretching, but realistic, targets.

4. THE QUALITY OF THE PUPILS' PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

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

- 4.1 The excellent quality of the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the pupils successfully ensures that the school's aims are met, and that its ethos of mutual respect, tolerance and courtesy is firmly underpinned. Pupils are self-confident and relaxed, and feel safe in the school environment. Girls are well integrated into the sixth form. Strong friendships are developed and pupils comment positively about the quality of their relationships with each other and with the staff.
- 4.2 Pupils' spiritual development is particularly strong. They respond sensitively to the opportunities for reflection provided in the weekly spiritual assemblies when the whole school gathers together to learn about and consider diverse issues, often beyond the confines of their own immediate experience. Pupils take an active part in these assemblies, playing music, reading or presenting the topics. Pupils are self-aware and have a sense of self-worth. Most feel that the school listens to their views and they are confident in expressing their ideas and values. The school is based on a Christian ethos, but pupils from other faiths are able to practise their religion. Tolerance and understanding between pupils are notable.
- 4.3 Pupils' deep appreciation of moral issues is successfully fostered by the PSHE programme in Years 7 to 11 when opportunities to discuss ethical dilemmas and to understand a citizen's responsibilities are provided. Moral and ethical issues are also explored in many other curriculum subjects. In the sixth form the PLUS course and the weekly 'special' lessons contribute to the ability of these older pupils to set their own well-considered moral values. Pupils have a strong sense of responsibility towards those less fortunate than themselves. They work hard for charity and in 2010, for example, they raised significant sums for two charities for the homeless during the Harvest Festival celebrations.
- 4.4 Pupils' social development is excellent. Although some pupils felt that they lacked enough opportunities to take on responsibilities, the inspection found that pupils participated enthusiastically in school life and were eager to take on the many leadership roles available, for example as prefects, captains of teams or music groups, and as representatives on the school councils. Pupils respond positively to the encouragement they receive to initiate new extra-curricular activities and fund-raising events. The house system promotes a strong sense of community and pupils enjoy organising the many house events, some of which include chess and public speaking.
- 4.5 Pupils' awareness of their own culture and that of others is strongly developed. Many pupils take advantage of those extra-curricular activities which offer them opportunities to explore the arts and to perform themselves. Visiting lecturers, a poet in residence and many external trips add to these opportunities. Pupils gain an insight into life in other countries through many foreign trips, for example language exchanges, a literary trip to Dublin, and public speaking competitions in Canada, the USA and Lithuania. Pupils also have an excellent appreciation of cultural diversity gained from visits to a Jewish synagogue and a Hindu Mandir, from RE lessons on the major world faiths, and work in music on the traditions of different areas of the world.

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

- 4.6 Arrangements for the pastoral care, welfare, health and safety of pupils are excellent. The school amply fulfils its aims to provide a nurturing environment where all pupils feel valued and cared for.
- 4.7 Carefully thought-out interlocking structures strongly support staff in providing care and guidance to the pupils. The use of vertical tutor groups, for Years 7 and 8, 9 to 11 and in the two years of the sixth form, contributes much to the personal development of the pupils. Tutors have the prime responsibility for care and guidance of their tutees and use the mixed-age groups to good effect to provide a family feel of respect, nurture and responsibility among the pupils. Year heads have a clear overview of the needs of each year group and directors of studies for each section watch carefully over academic issues. Weekly section meetings that are also attended by the deputy head with responsibility for pupils' development, ensure that information is communicated effectively and that any incidents or problems are dealt with swiftly and efficiently. As pupils move from one section to the next, relevant information is passed on ensuring that transitions are smooth. The house system is another important element in pupils' development. All the members of a tutor group are in the same house and this fosters a sense of collegiality and fellowship within both the tutor groups and the houses. Responses to the pupils' questionnaire and discussions with pupils during the inspection confirm that pupils feel secure, that they consider that they are making good progress and that they welcome the support they receive from the staff. Although a minority indicated that they felt that staff were not always fair, this was not borne out during the inspection. Almost all feel that there is an adult or older pupil they could turn to if they had a problem, as well as the school nurse and the school counsellor.
- 4.8 The school has developed an effective policy to prevent bullying and deal with any unpleasantness should it occur. Pupils say that bullying is rare. A system of 'pink' and 'green' slips is effective in controlling any poor behaviour, while the award of merits and commendations motivates pupils to behave well and work hard.
- 4.9 The school policy for safeguarding pupils and child protection is thorough and detailed. All staff are regularly trained in these issues, understand their importance and know how to respond.
- 4.10 Arrangements for health and safety are robust and implementation is effective. All necessary measures are taken to reduce the risk from fire and other potential dangers. Risk assessments are comprehensive and carefully constructed to cover hazards both on the school premises and on trips out of school.
- 4.11 The school nurse runs an appropriately equipped medical centre and takes good care of any pupils who are ill or injured. Teaching staff are fully informed of the needs of any individual pupils with disabilities. The school has devised a thorough and thoughtful plan to improve educational access for pupils with special educational needs or disabilities.
- 4.12 Extensive opportunities both in the curriculum and in extra-curricular activities ensure that all pupils take regular exercise. The range and variety of the menus offered in the school dining hall promote healthy eating habits. Admission and attendance registers are properly maintained.

5. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GOVERNANCE, LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

5.(a) The quality of governance

- 5.1 The extremely high quality of governance ensures that the schools' aims are successfully promoted and its distinctive ethos protected. The governors and SMT share a vision for the school and work harmoniously to achieve it.
- 5.2 The governing body is carefully structured to provide effective and appropriate oversight of all aspects of the school. The executive, education, finance, buildings and health and safety committees work closely with relevant senior staff and report regularly to full governing body meetings. The members of the governing body cover a useful range of expertise and include parent representatives. As well as the headmaster, second master and bursar, a teacher representative is also in attendance at governors' meetings, so providing for excellent communication.
- 5.3 Governors take their responsibilities to the school, its staff and pupils extremely seriously. New governors are offered a well-structured induction programme and governors attend training courses. Governors meet annually off the premises to review their own performance and discuss ways to improve. They are fully involved in the construction of the long-term whole-school development goals and regularly review the school development plan. They ensure thorough knowledge and understanding of the school through their work with senior staff, through shadowing pupils and through attendance at events. A clear appreciation of the importance of their strategic role enables them to both support and challenge senior management for the better advancement of the school.
- 5.4 Governors are well aware of their statutory duties. All major policies are reviewed with the appropriate member of staff by a named governor who signs off the policy and reports to the full governing body. The governing body ensures that arrangements for safeguarding and child protection, safer recruitment and health and safety are well designed and effective.

5.(b) The quality of leadership and management

- 5.5 Leadership and management are in almost all respects excellent. A clear vision of the ethos of the school is shared with all in the school community and the school is highly successful in achieving its declared aims. The SMT works closely with the governing body to ensure that pupils are successful in their curricular and extra-curricular endeavours and that their personal development is of a high quality. Both teaching and support staff find the leadership approachable and supportive.
- 5.6 The SMT, which consists of the headmaster, the second master, the bursar and the three deputies, is a strong and close-knit group that liaises most effectively to promote the school's success. Planning and the development of policies are conducted in an open and consultative manner much appreciated by staff. Clear and comprehensive policies are regularly reviewed and revised. The carefully thought-out five-year school development plan consists of a detailed statement of whole-school developmental goals with annual development targets for each area of the school, although many lack precision. No success criteria are identified and resource implications are not recorded on the plan. Departments are asked to identify their own annual targets and to evaluate their success. However, although

loosely linked to the whole-school targets, these also lack success criteria or resource implications, so limiting their effectiveness as tools of management.

- 5.7 The school leadership has introduced a number of potentially effective monitoring initiatives. A cycle of 'Focus' weeks provides useful information on all aspects of a particular year group and contributes to both short-term and longer-term planning. The work of each department is reviewed by the head of department with the headmaster and two members of the SMT each September. Careful financial management and an active building programme ensure that the school is well resourced.
- 5.8 Departments are run effectively. Departmental meetings are held regularly and staff feel valued and included in all the work of their departments, with their contributions welcomed and their ideas listened to.
- 5.9 The school is successful in recruiting both teaching and support staff who are highly motivated and dedicated. Induction processes are thorough and new staff find them valuable and supportive. In-service training arrangements are generous and attendance at externally provided courses is tailored to the needs of the school and the individual member of staff. Performance review is well established among the teaching staff but is still under development for the support staff. All staff are well trained to fulfil their roles with regard to child protection and health and safety.
- 5.10 The school operates thorough and effective arrangements for checking the suitability of all those who work with the pupils. The centralised register of appointments is kept correctly. Recruitment panels always include a member who is trained in the techniques of safer recruitment.

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

- 5.11 The quality of the links with parents, carers and guardians is excellent, meeting fully the school's aim to pursue an active and open collaboration with parents.
- 5.12 Parents who replied to the questionnaire issued before the inspection indicated overwhelming support for and appreciation of the school. There were no significant negative responses. Parents were particularly pleased with the progress their children were making, the range of subjects, extra-curricular activities and other areas of experience offered, the quality of pastoral care, the values promoted, and the governance and management of the school.
- 5.13 Although a few respondents would have liked more frequent parents' consultation evenings and progress reports, the inspection found that plentiful opportunities to discuss progress are offered to parents. Parents are invited to come with their children to meet teachers annually and the headmaster attends these meetings. Extra meetings between parents and staff are also freely available at the request of either party. Additional meetings are arranged for new pupils and their parents before joining the school, for parents to meet the new tutors when their children enter Year 9, and to inform parents about particular issues, for example drugs and the plans for the new buildings. Detailed and informative subject reports are issued once each year with interim tutor reports and subject grades in the intervening terms.
- 5.14 Parents are warmly welcomed to school events such as concerts, plays, careers evenings and matches. The school is currently working on designing a database for those parents who offer work experience to Year 10 pupils. The active parents'

association offers further opportunities for involvement with the life of the school with popular events such as quiz nights, the New Year Dance and the Summer Ball.

5.15 Parents and prospective parents are properly provided with all the required information about the school. Comprehensive information about the school and its policies is also easily accessible on the school website. Parents receive a regular newsletter, and the weekly electronic *Clarion Call* ensures that they are kept up-to-date about practical matters. In addition a texting service is used to communicate important or urgent messages, such as snow alerts, or to direct parents to read email messages or consult detailed information that has been posted on the website.

5.16 If parents have any complaints or concerns these are dealt with swiftly and appropriately using correct and published procedures.

What the school should do to improve is given at the beginning of the report in section 2.

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

Mrs Ann Mayou	Reporting Inspector
Mr Christopher King	Head, HMC school
Mr Peter de Voil	Former Head, HMC school
Mrs Wendy Martin	Director of Studies, SHMIS school
Dr Timothy Stubbs	Second Master, HMC school
Mrs Susan Teal	Director of Curriculum, ISA school