

Inspection of The American School in London

1 Waverley Place, London NW8 0NP

Inspection dates: 14 to 16 December 2021

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

The quality of education

Requires improvement

Behaviour and attitudes

Good

Personal development

Requires improvement

Leadership and management

Requires improvement

Early years provision

Outstanding

Sixth-form provision

Good

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Outstanding

Does the school meet the independent school standards?

No

What is it like to attend this school?

Most pupils are happy at this school. They benefit from access to first-class resources and well-qualified teachers, particularly in Grades 11 and 12. Leaders stated that expectations are high, with emphasis on developing creativity and intellectual effort. They give strong importance to equality and inclusion. Sometimes, however, teaching places much more weight on the school's approach to social justice than on learning subject-specific knowledge and skills. Opportunities are available for pupils with different characteristics to discuss issues that affect them. However, not everyone felt that they are able to express their views freely in class. A significant number felt that their voices are not encouraged or, in some cases, are suppressed.

Children in the Kindergarten develop exceptionally well. Pupils have many opportunities throughout the school to perform as a musician, athlete or actor through the curriculum and in extra-curricular activities. The school offers many high-quality careers and work-placement activities to pupils in the high school. However, some pupils would like more guidance for their future adult lives and college applications.

Pupils are safe. Behaviour is good. Bullying between pupils is not common. Parents, carers and pupils said that it is usually dealt with quickly and effectively when it happens. A minority of pupils did not feel they would talk to a member of staff if they had concerns. However, the school gives clear pointers to where external help can be found, should it be required.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

All areas of learning required by the independent school standards are covered. Work is logically sequenced, and students' progress is regularly assessed in line with the school's curriculum. Teachers are experienced and well qualified. All are specialists in their field. This expertise enables pupils to prepare well for examinations, particularly in the sixth form. Extensive support for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities enables them to access the same curriculum programmes as their peers.

Early reading and early mathematics are taught extremely effectively. The programme for teaching phonics is strong and includes books for independent reading chosen carefully to match the sounds that children know. Socially, children in the Kindergarten develop very well. They show great confidence and inquisitiveness in all areas. Leaders ensure children are fully prepared for their future learning when they move up to First Grade.

Leaders place great store on promoting respect for the different characteristics protected by the Equalities Act 2010. For example, in music, this is reflected very well through the broad and balanced repertoire chosen for study. Staff select music that represents folk, popular and art-music styles, along with a diverse range of composers. This matches the increasing technical knowledge that pupils build through their participation in the instrumental and vocal programmes. Work in lower-

school music establishes secure musical understanding before these programmes begin. This includes rhythm and notation work that secures musical understanding in small, incremental steps.

In other areas of the curriculum, the approach is not as balanced. This is particularly where teaching places more emphasis on the school's social justice programme than on the acquisition of specific subject content. In lower-school social studies, pupils spend much time repeatedly considering identity (including analysing their own characteristics) rather than learning, for example, geographical knowledge. The middle-school humanities curriculum, which includes English, also leads to a focus on social issues rather than subject knowledge and skills. This means that some pupils felt underprepared for high school. A stronger focus on subject knowledge and skills is evident in the sixth form. Here, for example, courses in English focus on social issues such as gender and post-colonial literature, alongside other options for students to choose. Overall, the programmes for Grades 11 and 12 offer a broad and rich range of academic options that prepare sixth-form students effectively for university learning.

Many aspects of the school's personal, social and health education work are excellent, including a stellar programme of careers advice and work placement opportunities in the high school. Nevertheless, some pupils would like more information about practical aspects of college applications and adult life, particularly as they look towards the world after high school. A comprehensive programme of extra-curricular activities offers something for everyone. Many of these are student-led with staff support. 'Affinity groups' provide opportunities to discuss world issues. Memberships to most of these are open to all, but the school has limited some to under-represented groups in the belief that this represents positive action on behalf of these pupils. However, some parents and pupils feel that this approach is divisive when seen alongside some teachers' stridently expressed views on social justice.

Many aspects of pupils' behaviour and attitudes are commendable. This makes a significant contribution to their learning. Pupils are diligent and serious-minded, and show remarkable levels of maturity. However, significant numbers in all parts of the school said that they feel uncomfortable giving their viewpoints in class. This is particularly the case when pupils' views do not chime with opinions presented by teachers. However, the confidence and eloquence shown by pupils in meetings with inspectors demonstrated that their thinking goes beyond partisan or political issues.

Leaders provide some exceptional professional development opportunities for staff, including working with subject specialists from around the world. Workload is generally well considered by leaders and by trustees. Again, however, recent in-school training and required staff reading have been disproportionately dominated by social justice issues.

Before this inspection, trustees had already acted in response to recent events at the school. This included steps to deal with concerns raised around the promotion by some staff of political and partisan views. An external review of diversity and inclusion content within curriculum subjects was commissioned, and an action plan

approved by the board. Leaders and trustees had recognised that, in some cases, the academic freedoms allowed have been misused. These actions provided assurance that trustees are aware of the issues and have made a start in dealing with them. The school is undergoing a significant change of leadership, and this provides opportunities for further action. Nevertheless, evidence from this inspection showed that opinions among parents, staff and pupils remain fractured. Much more work is needed to unite this school community.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

All the independent school standards relating to safeguarding are met, including employment checks on staff from within the United Kingdom and from overseas. The school has a safeguarding policy published on its website. The safeguarding and support team includes nurses and counselling staff to whom pupils can turn. Clear and confidential channels to external help are provided for any pupils who feel unable to speak to a member of the school staff.

Leaders have put effective systems in place to liaise with outside agencies when appropriate, and staff are aware of procedures to follow should they have concerns. Pupils learn about safeguarding risks, including online and peer-on-peer abuse, through the school's health curriculum. Leaders fulfil their statutory duties to provide relationships, sex and health education. Pupils are helped to recognise that these issues are particularly pertinent when socialising outside of school.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and proprietor)

- Some aspects of the school's education provision are strong, including in the Kindergarten, and in Grades 11 and 12. However, in other parts of the school, teaching and learning place less emphasis on subject-specific knowledge and skills, and give more weight to issues of social justice. Trustees commissioned an external review to identify where this is happening. In partnership with senior leaders, they should undertake further, more detailed reviews of all subject areas. These should ensure that the focus is firmly on the subject-specific knowledge that pupils need to prepare them for the next stages of their education.
- While recognising the importance of promoting equalities, a significant minority of parents and pupils told inspectors that a culture has developed where alternative opinions are not felt welcome. In some classrooms, teaching has not allowed for questioning or for the balanced presentation of opposing views. Leaders and trustees should ensure that teaching does not preclude tolerance of those with different views, particularly where specific partisan or political views are presented.
- Opinions among parents, staff and pupils are polarised about the way that the school's diversity, equity and inclusion strategy has been implemented in recent

years. Inspectors have identified necessary improvements, particularly in the quality of education and in work to promote students' personal development. Leaders and trustees should communicate and work with parents, staff and pupils to unite the school's community. Together, they should ensure that these improvements happen in a way that strengthens the school's curriculum, allows for all voices to be heard and maintains equal respect for all.

How can I feed back my views?

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If you are the provider and you are not happy with the inspection or the report, you can [complain to Ofsted](#).

School details

Unique reference number	101168
DfE registration number	213/6215
Local authority	Westminster
Inspection number	10214690
Type of school	All-through school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	4 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1406
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	230
Proprietor	The American School in London Educational Trust
Chair	David Novak
Headteacher (Head of School)	Robin Appleby
Annual fees	£29,000 to £32,000
Telephone number	020 7449 1200
Website	www.asl.org
Email address	head_of_school@asl.org
Date of previous inspection	20 to 22 March 2018

Information about this school

- The American School in London is organised into three sections. These are: lower school (ages 4 to 10, including Kindergarten for four- and five-year-olds), middle school (ages 11 to 13) and high school (ages 14 to 18). The last two grades in high school, Grades 11 and 12, represent what in the United Kingdom is known as sixth form.
- The stated aim of the school is to 'empower each student to thrive as a lifelong learner and courageous global citizen by fostering intellect, creativity, inclusivity and character'.
- Since the school's last standard inspection in March 2018, several changes have been made to the senior leadership team. The head of school is leaving at the end of the autumn term 2021.
- From Kindergarten through to high school, the school's curriculum follows American education frameworks including the Common Core Standards for English and mathematics, National Core Standards for the arts, and the Next Generation Science Standards. Alongside the subject standards, leaders also use the Learning for Justice Social Justice Standards to inform teaching, particularly in the lower and middle schools.
- The school does not use alternative education provision.
- The school fulfils its duties under schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010.
- The school is exempt from the learning and development requirements of the early years foundation stage.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors carried out this inspection under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008. The purpose of the inspection is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

The school has failed to meet the independent school standards. These are the requirements of the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation.

- Inspectors met with the head of school and other senior leaders. A meeting was held with the chair and 20 other trustee board members.
- Inspectors completed deep dives in these subjects: language arts (including early reading), English, health education (including experiential education), music and social studies. This included meeting with subject leaders, discussions with staff and pupils, and visiting lessons to look at students' work.
- Inspectors looked at a range of documents, including the leaders and trustees' priorities for improvement.
- Inspectors reviewed the arrangements for safeguarding by scrutinising records and through discussions with staff and students.
- Inspectors considered the responses of 697 parents, 397 students and 185 staff to Ofsted's inspection surveys. These included many written comments.

Inspection team

Mark Phillips, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Heather Fearn	Her Majesty's Inspector
Noeman Anwar	Her Majesty's Inspector
Roary Pownall	Her Majesty's Inspector
Sarah Hubbard	Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex. Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school failed to meet the following independent school standards

Part 1. Quality of education provided

- 3 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that the teaching at the school-
 - 3(i) does not undermine the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs.

Part 2. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

- 5 The standard about the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils at the school is met if the proprietor-
 - 5(a) actively promotes the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs;
 - 5(b)(i) enable pupils to develop their self-knowledge, self-esteem and self-confidence;
 - 5(c) precludes the promotion of partisan political views in the teaching of any subject in the school; and
 - 5(d) takes such steps as are reasonably practicable to ensure that where political issues are brought to the attention of pupils-
 - 5(d)(i) while they are in attendance at the school, they are offered a balanced presentation of opposing views.

Part 8. Quality of leadership in and management of schools

- 34(1) The standard about the quality of leadership and management is met if the proprietor ensures that persons with leadership and management responsibilities at the school-
 - 34(1)(a) demonstrate good skills and knowledge appropriate to their role so that the independent school standards are met consistently;
 - 34(1)(b) fulfil their responsibilities effectively so that the independent school standards are met consistently.

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