INVESTORS IN PEOPLE
ASSESSMENT REPORT

The Ashcombe School

Presented by Sally Szwarc
Investors in People Specialist
On behalf of Inspiring Business Performance Limited

28th June 2013

Delivered by IBP, an official partner for London, South East and South West England
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Page</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Executive summary</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Areas of strength</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Opportunities for continuous improvement</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Feedback against your objectives</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Findings</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Recommendation and next steps</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Options for the future and support available</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Annex A: Outcomes table</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Annex B: Summary of evidence</td>
<td>14</td>
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1. Executive summary

“It’s a very positive place, friendly and relaxed”

“People are prepared to be flexible because they’re looked after”

“It’s a fantastic place to work; there’s immense support from the top…”

These are just some of the many positive comments that interviewees made about The Ashcombe School and sum up the supportive, people-centred culture. The school achieved accreditation as an Investor in People (IiP) in 1999 and nearly 15 years later IiP has become an integral part of the fabric of the organisation. For a number of years the school has opted for an annual review against the Standard to provide a ‘health check’ on the state of staff morale and this approach is testament to the undoubted commitment from the governors and senior leadership team to maintaining the ethos and principles of IiP.

The Assessor has visited the school on a regular basis over the years and the abiding impression is of a school that is well-led and has all the pieces in place of the ‘jigsaw’ that makes for a successful school. Despite the fact that the annual IiP health check takes place towards the end of the summer term the staff always appear enthusiastic and there remains a positive ‘buzz’ about the place. The leadership and management culture is caring and inclusive of staff as well as pupils. People value the style of leadership emanating from the top, which strikes a balance between formality and informality, and the measured and calm approach to dealing with the challenges of the ever-changing world of education.

There were many highlights for the Assessor from the latest review including: the school’s well-defined values and ethos that is shared by people at all levels, the level of support and equality of opportunity for all staff to develop and progress, the quality of leadership and management, the desire to share and spread best practice both within The Ashcombe and the wider education community and the evident commitment of the people that work at (or are associated with) the school to its ongoing success.

There are some suggestions for continuous improvement that will help the school maintain good practice and the already high standards in relation to both Investors in People and Ofsted. These mainly relate to maintaining the strong culture of learning and development against a backdrop of change and potential threats such as the introduction of performance related pay.

In conclusion, the Assessor would like to congratulate The Ashcombe School on retaining its IiP accreditation (which affirms the wealth of good practice within the organisation) and to acknowledge the efforts of everyone involved in the latest review (whether in helping to ensure that it ran smoothly or taking part in the interviews).
2. **Areas of strength**

This annual ‘health check’ against the IiP standard affirmed the school’s many strengths and good practices. Sustaining these practices will benefit the school by helping to retain the positive ethos and meet the requirements of both the Investors in People standard and the Ofsted inspection framework (especially those aspects relating to the ‘Quality of leadership in, and management of, the school’). For the record, areas of notable strength are:

**Shared values:** people are evidently highly committed to the school’s vision and share its values; a number of people referred to the overall vision of providing a ‘good education’ (rather than focusing predominantly on results) and the Ashcombe ethos which they describe as inclusive, collaborative and caring towards both pupils and staff; as one person said:

“It’s a very friendly place…. I picked up on it at interview; the staff were smiling and spoke to the candidates”

**Professional development:** professional development is provided for all staff, both teachers and support staff; there are also regular development sessions for governors; learning and development (l&d) plans are focused and well-executed; the strength of commitment from the top (from governors and senior leaders) to investing resources (both time and money) in l&d remains undiminished and there is evidence of increasingly innovative methods being used for in-house training such as the teaching and learning (t&l) workshop programme and ‘teach meet’ concept; as people said:

“They’re supportive of people who want to progress”

“People grow quickly and gain a wealth of experience”

**Support for NQTs:** the level of support and professional development provided for newly qualified staff is impressive; the formal mentoring of NQTs is deemed highly effective as is the informal mentoring that takes place in the second year

**Equality of opportunity:** there are opportunities for all staff to develop within their roles and to advance and progress within the school; the practice of providing people with opportunities to ‘step up’ and try out new roles (for a fixed term) is well-established and valued; senior leaders and managers evidently understand and are keen to use staff skills and attributes; of note is the ever increasing use made of teaching assistants (TAs) and the desire to give individuals an opportunity to develop an area of specialism and enhance their roles; as people said:

“They make sure everyone has a chance to do curriculum and pastoral roles”

“X is very good at making you aware of the training available”

“There’s something for everyone, not just a select few”
Quality of leadership and management: people continue to believe that the school is well-led and managed; the senior leadership team structure is now well-embedded and working well; individuals are providing strong role models of leadership, management and development of people; there is a notably calm, considered and collaborative approach to dealing with internal issues and managing external change (such as the Government’s proposed reforms to education) which is valued by people; the low-key approach that has been adopted to the introduction of performance related pay is a specific example; one person summed up this approach by saying:

“The school is fairly stable in its direction, it’s an intelligent direction, it doesn’t jump on the band wagon of change”

Concern for staff well-being: there is strong desire emanating from the top to care for both pupils and staff and look after individuals’ welfare and well-being; as people said:

“X always asks how you’re getting on”

“X is aware of the key points in the year when people might be struggling”

Governor buy-in: governors are evidently highly engaged and involved in school life and buy into The Ashcombe ethos; they are committed to maintaining the Investors in People ethos and to deploying staff and resources effectively; within this context there is an understanding of return on investment and a strong belief that investing in people pays dividends in terms of maintaining levels of staff morale and retention

Sharing best practice: the practice of self-evaluation is well-embedded and there is an evident desire throughout the school to continuously improve and share practices, especially in terms of teaching and learning; the t&l workshop programme and ‘learning walks’ are examples of effective practice in this respect; there is also strong evidence of the exchange of best practice through work with other schools

3. Opportunities for continuous improvement

The following suggestions for continuous improvement are designed to help retain the high level of staff morale at The Ashcombe and the evident enthusiasm for teaching and learning. Actions in these areas will also help to maintain a strong evidence base to meet the requirements of both Investors in People and Ofsted.

Learning and development

There remains a strong and sustained commitment from the top to investing in people and their development. Maintaining this culture against a backdrop of reduced resources and potential threats from the government’s reforms to education (such as the national changes to performance management and pay) provides a challenge. With this in mind, and in line with your desire to provide more individualised support to people, there is an opportunity to further develop and extend the scope of the coaching and mentoring programmes and further develop the practice of peer observation.
Recognition and feedback

Overall, there is a strong praise culture at The Ashcombe. However, there appears to be some variation at middle leader level in giving feedback to individuals and thanking people personally for their efforts. Boosting efforts at this level will help to maintain the high level of staff morale and reassure people that their individual efforts are recognised and appreciated.

Further suggestions

Further ideas and suggestions that you may wish to consider to advance your practices in line with the wider Investors in People framework (and based on practices observed in other schools) are: to develop ‘formal’ coaching skills amongst a wider group of managers (of both teaching and support staff), widen the practice of 360 degree feedback and continually develop innovative methods of sharing best practice such as publicising a ‘teaching tip of the week’.

4. Feedback against your objectives

At the planning stage we discussed your objectives for this year’s assessment and agreed that, in addition to providing a health check on the overall state of staff morale, the visit would seek specific feedback from two groups of staff: teaching staff who have worked at the school for 3-5 years and those who have returned from maternity leave.

3-5 year staff

The school’s leaders continually strive to retain staff and are successful in this respect. A key contributing factor to the high level of staff retention is the support for development and advancement. Within this context senior leadership is keen that teachers who have worked at The Ashcombe for 3-5 years don’t feel that they have become stagnated. Reassuringly this group was positive about (and valued) the efforts to retain them. Contributing factors cited included: the opportunities for development and promotion; the friendly, social atmosphere; the opportunities to do extra-curricular activities; “the people you work with”; the support for work life balance and the flexibility in accommodating personal and family issues.

Returners

A number of people have returned from maternity leave this year and the school has tried to find innovative ways of accommodating individuals’ needs e.g. in terms of working hours, roles and opportunities for continuing professional development (cpd). People acknowledged the efforts to accommodate their needs and valued the level of support and flexibility at an individual level. For example, the on-site nursery is perceived as a “massive bonus” in terms of supporting child care.

There are however evidently some concerns regarding the school’s policy on part-time working (in terms of its potential impact on individuals’ finances and career progression) and the opportunities for flexible working such as job share. Other aspects that you may wish to review are: the information given to people in advance of their maternity leave regarding benefits (such as any payment for attending
‘keeping in touch’ days) and the way in which people are ‘eased back’ back into school life when they return.

5. Findings

The following findings are presented within the context of the key themes of the Investors in People framework. They are also aligned to the school’s development priorities and Ofsted where appropriate. Where numbers appear in brackets these relate to the IiP indicators.

School improvement planning (1) - ‘leaders and managers demonstrate an ambitious vision for the school and high expectations of all pupils and teachers’

The Ashcombe has a clear vision and a well-defined strategy and plan for achieving it. This year’s plan for continuous improvement centres on nine key areas:

- achievement and quality of teaching
- teaching and learning (and pupils’ attitudes to learning)
- skills (reading, writing, communications and maths across the curriculum)
- interventions and support
- assessment
- behaviour and safety
- leadership and management
- engagement with parents and carers (and the wider community)
- safeguarding.

The practice of self-evaluation is well-embedded and this process shapes the annual school development plan (‘school developments and areas of focus’) outlined above. Departmental development plans are closely aligned to the school’s priorities and it was noted that there are plans to strengthen the self-evaluation process at this level.

There was evidence that staff (and other stakeholders) are involved in improvement planning e.g. through discussion at Inset days and departmental meetings.

Consequently people are aware of what the school is trying to achieve and how they are expected to contribute. Interviewees referred to the focus on improving standards of teaching and learning (in line with Ofsted requirements) and empowering students at all levels (e.g. regarding what they need to do to improve). They were also aware of plans for improvement and confirmed that they had an input into the planning process at a level appropriate to their role. As people said:

“We have an input into how we can achieve standards”.

“They’re open to suggestions on areas to progress; it’s an annual thing; they encourage it”

The topic of ‘clear core values relate to the vision and strategy’ was included in the scope of this year’s IiP review. Within this context, people evidently believe in and share the school’s vision and values. For example, interviewees referred to the overall vision of ensuring that every child has an opportunity to reach and exceed their potential. One person summed this up by saying: “The school is run for the children”. There was also an understanding of core values with reference to: hard work, inclusivity, equal opportunity, fun (atmosphere) and trust.
Developing people (2, 3 and 8) - ‘ensure that all (teaching) staff benefit from appropriate professional development and that performance is rigorously managed’

The priorities for staff learning and development (l&d) are clear and closely aligned to the school’s development priorities. In recent times there has been a particular focus on improving standards of teaching and learning (e.g. ‘what makes an outstanding lesson?’) and on behaviour management training. L&d activities are well-planned and executed and there is an understanding of how the impact will be evaluated e.g. by observing staff performance and reviewing pupil data. Despite financial constraints, senior leadership has maintained its commitment to making resources available. It was noted that the school has focused more on in-house training in recent times to ensure value for money. Initiatives such as the ‘teaching and learning’ workshop programme (which is in its second year) are well-attended and evidently providing an effective method for engendering learning and the sharing of ideas.

The commitment from the top to providing all staff with an equal opportunity for development and support also remains undiminished and this was confirmed by interviewees. Of note are the efforts to provide teaching assistants with more opportunities for continuing professional development (cpd) by enhancing their roles.

Interviewees confirmed that their l&d needs were being met through the range of opportunities for internal and external training, coaching etc. Newly qualified teachers (NQTs) commented on the level and quality of training and support they had received in terms of mentoring and in-house training and people’s willingness to share ideas. The fact that NQTs are assigned a mentor from outside of their department is deemed especially valuable in terms of providing a “fresh perspective”.

Effective leadership and management (4 and 5) - ‘Improve the school and develop its capacity for sustained improvement by developing high quality teaching, leadership capacity and high professional standards among all staff’

The desired leadership and management culture for The Ashcombe is well-defined. Support is provided to ensure that leaders and managers have the desired capabilities and this includes the in-house middle management course (previously ‘leading from the middle’) and coaching.

Leaders and managers are clear about the capabilities they need to lead, manage and develop people with interviewees referring to aspects such as: “keeping staff happy”, passing on information from the top, distributing leadership, delegating, having emotional intelligence, being able to hold difficult conversations and embracing change. As one person said:

“We’re expected to be embracing and positive regarding changes and training…”

People know what effective leaders and managers should be doing. As one person said he/she needs to “handle issues and support us, fight our corner”.

Leaders and managers explained how they are effective in leading, managing and developing people and referred to behaviours such as: “doing what you say you’ll
do”, “being trustworthy and consistent”, “giving people positive feedback”, coaching and leading by example.

Overall, people believed that leaders and managers at The Ashcombe were effective in leading, managing and developing people and commented on the open culture, accessibility of senior leaders and supportive, collaborative style of leadership and management. Interviewees made a number of complimentary comments about their direct line manager and members of the senior leadership team including:

“You can speak to anyone… it comes from the top”

“SMT listen and try to help”

“X is a really good manager, lets you do things how you want, good at acknowledging your efforts, is a collaborative person, approachable …”

“There’s no ‘them and us’. …they’re working with you”

“All of SMT is approachable”

People also confirmed that they receive regular constructive feedback on their performance both formally (through performance management) and informally as part of the praise culture.

Coaching was another topic included in the scope of this year’s IIP review. This is providing an effective method of developing people to support teaching and learning, especially at middle leadership level. For example, this is the third year that the school has run its own, in-house middle leadership development programme and this is supported by in-house coaches. People confirmed that coaching was becoming part of the culture and that informal, frank and open discussions took place about individuals and their work.

**Reward and recognition (6)**

Senior leadership is keen to retain staff and continues to be successful in this respect. It employs a range of methods to recognise and reward people’s individual contributions to the school and there is a thank you culture where people’s efforts are recognised both verbally and in writing. A notable example of good practice was the way in which a senior leader sets time aside each week for sending out thank you emails to his staff. As he said “It’s important for staff morale”.

Within this context, people believe that they make a positive difference to the school and that their contribution is recognised and valued, especially in non-financial terms. Interviewees commented on the praise culture and the level of support and back-up from senior leadership:

“You get feedback from learning walks”

“SMT thanks people at the end of every half-term…in the corridor….it’s very personal to you”

The relationships between teachers and TAs appear especially effective. As one person said:
“We enable the students to access the curriculum….we feel respected and needed…there’s a warmth to the TA team”

There were some suggestions for continuous improvement in this area. For example, some people were seeking more personal thanks and feedback from (middle) leaders to recognise their efforts. There were also some discussions regarding the impact of ad hoc gestures (such as providing biscuits on occasions) on staff morale and well-being and the merits of providing free tea/coffee in the staff room.

**Culture and Communication (3 and 7)**

The school has successfully created an environment where people feel engaged, involved and that they can contribute ideas for improvement. Within this context there is a strong sense of empowerment where leaders and managers promote a sense of ownership and responsibility by encouraging people to be involved in decision making. It was noted that teaching assistants in particular are becoming more involved in decision making and being encouraged to take on more responsibility. They evidently value this style of leadership and believe that that their suggestions are listened to and taken notice of. The Assessor sensed that there is now an appetite amongst this group for even more empowerment.

Interviewees commented on the effectiveness of communications overall. They valued the range of methods used (such as briefings, bulletins and Inset) and the amount of information they received from the top regarding changes. By contrast some people felt that information regarding changes/plans appeared to be communicated at short notice on occasions.

Another topic that was included in this year’s review was ‘work life balance’. A number of people are evidently working even harder and longer hours this year as a result of increased pressures and some teams appear more stretched than in the past. However, people acknowledged the support for alleviating the pressure and achieving a work life balance. For example, they appreciated the way in which senior leaders ‘keep an eye on’ people’s hours to avoid a ‘long hours’ culture (and provide a role model in this respect), listen to individuals’ concerns and afford flexibility to accommodate personal/family issues. There were some suggestions for improving this aspect even further that included extending the opening times of the on-site nursery and planning timetables to avoid lunchtime lessons.

**Continuous improvement (9 and 10) - ‘accurately evaluate the school’s strengths and weaknesses and use their findings to promote improvement’**

The school is able to quantify its investment in people e.g. in terms of financial costs of external training and lesson observation. There remains a shared belief amongst governors and senior leaders that this investment continues to pay dividends in terms of school improvement and a perceived correlation between inspired staff and inspired pupils and well trained staff and staff retention.

As in previous years, people were complimentary about the level of support and range of opportunities for development and the impact it has not only on their performance at The Ashcombe but also on their career prospects.
Self-evaluation and continuous improvement are part of the culture at The Ashcombe. Within this context there was evidence of improvements being continually made not only to teaching and learning practices but also to the way staff are managed and developed. Key developments since the previous IiP review are the enhancement of the roles of teaching assistants and the increased focus on more cost-effective methods of delivering training (such as in-house training and the use of learning resources such as books and videos). It was also noted that the teaching and learning workshop programme has been fine tuned as a result of evaluation (e.g. sessions are held on different days) and that a new template has been introduced for lesson observations.

6. Recommendation and Next Steps

Having carried out the assessment process in accordance with the guidelines provided for IiP Specialists by Investors in People – United Kingdom Commission for Employment and Skills, the IiP Specialist is totally satisfied that The Ashcombe School meets the requirements of the Investors in People National Standard.

Investors in People accreditation is granted indefinitely, with a proviso that an interaction is undertaken within 18 months of accreditation and a full assessment takes place no greater than 3 years apart. Assessments can be undertaken at any time and more frequent assessments are recommended to maintain levels of good practice and continuous improvement.

Client Feedback

Both the IiP Specialist and IBP would welcome your feedback on this assessment and you will shortly be supplied with a Client Feedback Questionnaire to complete. We would very much appreciate it if you would complete and return this questionnaire.

Should you wish to contact an Account Manager at IBP for any reason, please telephone 0800 612 3098, use the contact option on our website www.inspiringbusinessperformance.co.uk or send an email to info@ibp.uk.com

7. Options for the future and support available

The Health and Well-being award – the senior leadership team and governing body is evidently aware of and sensitive to the increased pressures on staff and the potential threats to morale of changes such as performance related pay — to provide some ideas for advancing your practices in terms of monitoring staff health and well being you may wish to consider the Health and Well-being award which complements the Investors in People standard - there is a free health and wellbeing diagnostic tool that may provide a useful starting point - visit www.investorsinpeople.co.uk/healthandwellbeing for more information.
Promoting Continuous Improvement

IBP offers an integrated advice and assessment support service, workshops, surgeries and networking events to promote continuous improvement and maximise the benefits of working with The Standard. We also work with a team of highly experienced consultants to offer an extensive range of tailored business support and organisational development solutions to help improve business performance. Details of the support available to you can be found on: -

Internet: www.inspiringbusinessperformance.co.uk
Telephone: 0800 612 3098
Email: info@ibp.uk.com

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### Core Standard
Total number of core evidence requirements assessed - 37
Total number of core evidence requirements met - 37

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### Wider Framework
Total number of additional evidence requirements assessed 2013 - 6
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✓ = additional ERs met in 2010
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Annex B: Summary of evidence

PLAN
- Clear vision, strategy and plan
- School development planning process well-embedded
- People understand their roles/what is expected of them in line with the school’s vision and development priorities
- Clear strategy for staff learning and development (L&D)
- Range of L&D methods used - more focus on in-house training
- People involved in identifying their personal development needs at their annual performance management review and consequently clear what L&D activities should achieve
- Equality and diversity is well-managed – teaching and support staff believe they have an equal opportunity to learn and develop
- Leaders and managers are clear about the generic capabilities they need to lead, manage and develop people

DO
- Positive feedback regarding L&M effectiveness throughout the school
- Coaching culture becoming embedded
- Performance management takes place for all staff
- Evidence of a strong ‘praise’ culture overall although some variations at middle leader level
- Empowering culture where people are encouraged to take ownership and responsibility – leadership distributed throughout the school
- People confirmed that their L&D needs are being met – people encouraged to cascade their learning and share good practice
- Thorough induction process that starts at the selection stage

REVIEW
- Self-evaluation process is well-embedded
- Understanding at SLT level of overall investment in learning and development in terms of direct and indirect costs
- Perceived correlation between investment in people and the school’s performance e.g. in terms of pupil progress, staff retention and Ofsted rating
- Interviewees able to give examples to show how their training had benefited them (e.g. in terms of increased knowledge, skills and confidence) and the school (e.g. in terms of pupil progress and achievements)
- Evidence of continuous improvement since the last iIP assessment especially in terms of methods of staff L&D and development of TAs