

St Birinus School

Inspection report

Unique reference number	123259
Local authority	Oxfordshire
Inspection number	380631
Inspection dates	25–26 January 2012
Lead inspector	Ian Hodgkinson HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Boys
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1,250
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	200
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Chris Turton
Headteacher	Alwyn Richards
Date of previous school inspection	24–25 March 2009
School address	Mereland Road Didcot Oxfordshire OX11 8AZ
Telephone number	01235 814444
Fax number	01235 512258
Email address	reception@st-birinus.oxon.sch.uk

Age group	11–18
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Introduction

Inspection team

Ian Hodgkinson

Her Majesty's Inspector

Wendy Boulter

Additional inspector

Tom Morrison

Additional inspector

Simon Rowe

Additional inspector

Gill Walley

Additional inspector

This inspection was carried out with two days' notice. Inspectors observed 33 teachers teaching 37 lessons, of which 10 were joint observations with members of the senior team. In addition, the inspection team made short visits to a number of other lessons and activities, for example to look at the quality of marking and provision for disabled students and those with special educational needs. Meetings were held with four groups of students, with members of the governing body and with school staff, including senior and middle managers. A meeting was held with the joint leaders of the school's sixth form partnership, including those from Didcot Girls' School. Discussions were also held with the school improvement adviser from the local authority. Inspectors took account of the responses to the online questionnaire (Parent View) in planning the inspection, observed the school's work and looked at a number of documents, including school development plans, the safeguarding and equality policies, and minutes of meetings of the governing body. They analysed 200 questionnaires from parents and carers and others completed by pupils and staff.

Information about the school

The school is larger than the average-sized secondary school, educating boys from the town of Didcot and surrounding villages. Together with Didcot Girls' School, it jointly manages the Didcot Sixth Form College consortium, and sixth form students can follow courses on both schools' sites. Most students are White British. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is below average. The proportion of disabled students and those who have special educational needs is broadly average. Their main needs relate to specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, moderate learning difficulties or behavioural, social or emotional difficulties. The school meets the current floor standard.

The school is designated as a specialist language and technology college. The headteacher has been in post since September 2010 and the two deputy headteachers took up their posts in September 2011.

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness	2
Achievement of pupils	2
Quality of teaching	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils	2
Leadership and management	2

Key findings

- St Birinus is a good school. The headteacher, supported by an able and effective team of senior and middle leaders, has an ambitious vision for school improvement which is widely shared across the school. Self-evaluation is rigorous and transparent, so that staff are highly reflective on how to improve their own practice and outcomes for students. A trend of rising attainment is therefore set to continue, reflecting the good learning and progress of current groups of students. Higher attainers make particularly good progress in English and mathematics.
- Past weaknesses in the progress of those students in groups vulnerable to underachievement, including lower attainers, those known to be eligible for free school meals, disabled students and those who have special educational needs, have been overcome. Much clearer tracking of their progress, effective mentoring arrangements and improved curriculum arrangements have sharply improved the attainment and progress of students in these groups.
- Students' punctuality to school and to lessons is good and they behave very well around the school site. Most students feel safe. Students' behaviour is good in the large majority of lessons. Students' attendance, however, has not shown a trend of improvement and has been broadly average since the last inspection. In the very small minority of students with poor attendance records, the achievement of some is weak.
- Students are well taught by teachers who typically have high expectations and manage their classes effectively to ensure that learning proceeds at a swift pace. However, tasks are not always adapted to suit the different range of abilities in each class. The quality and frequency of teachers' marking of students' work also varies widely.
- The sixth form is good. Partnership arrangements are well managed to ensure that students have access to a broad range of courses and achieve well.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve students' attendance, especially for the very small minority of those who are persistently absent, by:
 - improving the systems for the collation and analysis of data on the attendance of key groups of students

- using attendance data more effectively to devise interventions which address factors underlying weaker attendance for key groups of students
- developing more effective strategies to engage with students and the families of those who are persistently absent.
- Ensure that the quality of teaching consistently matches that of the best by:
 - ensuring that marking is always regular and helpful in letting students know how well they have done and what they need to do to improve
 - ensuring that teachers plan tasks that are always well matched to the abilities of individual students.

Main report

Achievement of pupils

The proportion of students attaining five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C including English and mathematics has risen significantly since the last inspection and moved ahead of the national average. Current groups of students are on course to continue that rising trend of above-average attainment. Parents and carers are strongly of the view that their children make good progress in school, and inspectors agree.

Leaders have taken effective action to close gaps in performance between subjects and key groups of students. In particular, students in groups more vulnerable to underachievement, including lower attainers, those known to be eligible for free school meals, disabled students and those who have special educational needs, are now offered a curriculum which successfully challenges them to succeed in their core subjects of English and mathematics. In previous years, these students were often entered for courses where expectations for academic success were too low. Most students in these groups now make good progress. They learn well in lessons, and the school's well-organised mentoring systems ensure that students' needs are quickly identified and that they get the help they need. Students who join the school with weak literacy skills have made rapid improvements in their reading as a result of special teaching and learning programmes. In addition, students' literacy skills are well developed through lessons in most subjects.

Students' attainment and progress have shown strengths over time in English and especially in mathematics, history and music. Marked improvements have also been made to students' learning and progress in subjects where performance has been weaker. Such improvement has been particularly evident in the sixth form, where students are making strong progress in an increasingly large majority of subjects. In the specialist subject of design and technology, students across all years have a good understanding of industrial aspects of design and manufacture, and of the need to incorporate wider considerations, for example sustainable use of resources, into their designs. This is a significant improvement on the findings of an Ofsted subject survey report on the school in 2011. Students' progress and attainment in the modern foreign languages specialism remains too variable, although improvements are being made.

The language specialism does, however, promote students' broad engagement in cultural activities across the school, allowing students to explore aspects of foreign

language and culture through a regular and well-attended breakfast club, special international days and a series of links and visits. Across the school, students work together very constructively in teams, take leadership responsibilities seriously, reflect carefully on local, national and global issues, and show a good capacity for independent learning.

Quality of teaching

Eighty per cent of teaching observed on this inspection was good or better. This corresponds closely to the school's own evaluation of teaching which indicates a marked improvement over time. Ninety-five per cent of parents and carers who responded to the Ofsted survey think that teaching is good, and inspection evidence supports this view. A few parents and carers felt that homework was not well managed. Inspectors found a homework policy and timetable in place and its implementation monitored, and that most students recorded regular homework in their planners. The quality and regularity of teachers' marking of students' work is, however, highly variable.

Teachers have high expectations for their classes and mostly ensure that lessons proceed at a rapid pace. Activities often involve small groups solving problems collaboratively, and working with a good deal of independence. Such activities are precisely timed to maintain a sense of urgency for the completion of specific tasks. A particular strength across the school is the use of strategies by teachers throughout lessons to check students' understanding and that they are making appropriate progress. These often involve students assessing their own work or that of their peers against specific criteria, and sharing the outcomes of these assessments with the class or the teacher. Outstanding lessons seen in English, mathematics, history and physical education had all developed students' independence to such high levels that the teachers' interventions were minimal, giving the students time to make excellent progress in thinking through solutions themselves to problems or to ways of improving their performance. Teaching often promotes students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development effectively by addressing important moral or social issues, but planning is less systematic to develop opportunities for spiritual reflection.

Such strategies underpin the very effective progress made by higher attainers and mark a significant improvement in this respect since the last inspection. Lower attainers, too, benefit from such approaches. For example in a lower-attaining mathematics set in Year 10, in which all students had a disability or special educational needs, the teacher had planned group tasks very effectively with teaching assistants to ensure that students were engaged in tasks that were well matched to their prior attainment and making good progress. However, teachers do not always adapt tasks well enough to suit the full range of abilities in the class. Higher attainers, for example, are sometimes expected to work through more routine exercises before getting onto more challenging activities.

In the sixth form, while teaching demonstrates the strengths evident in the main school, there are instances where not enough account is taken of students' prior attainment in planning tasks for the full range of abilities in the group. Nonetheless, boys are well taught in mixed-gender classes across the partnership, and benefit from clear feedback from teachers on how to improve, together with good support in

and out of lessons.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Most parents and carers who responded to the Ofsted questionnaire feel that their children are safe in the school. Students are aware of different types of bullying and the strategies they can take to resolve such issues, and have confidence that the school will tackle such matters effectively. Most parents and carers also feel that there is a good standard of behaviour in the school, and inspectors agree. Students are polite and courteous to visitors and engage readily and openly in discussion. The school site is orderly and calm. Students are punctual to school and to lessons, and engage quickly on tasks when they enter the classroom. Students, including those in the sixth form, exercise a wide range of leadership roles within the school and wider community.

A small minority of parents and carers feel that behaviour in lessons is not always good. Through observation and discussion with students, inspectors found that most lessons are very well managed and students apply themselves constructively. However, instances of off-task behaviour do occur in the few lessons where students are unclear about tasks or where the pace of learning is slow. The new behaviour policy, introduced last year after detailed consultation with staff, students and parents and carers, is widely understood and consistently applied. Permanent exclusions are rare. Fixed-term exclusions have been relatively high but are falling.

Students' overall attendance has been broadly average. However rates of persistent absence are above average, leading to some underachievement within this very small proportion of students. The school has not analysed the patterns of absence, particularly among key groups of pupils, in sufficient detail to help it construct a coherent strategy for a sustained improvement in attendance.

Leadership and management

The headteacher and senior team have established a highly cohesive and confident school community, which increasingly involves staff, students, parents and carers shaping important strategic decisions and policies. A positive culture of reflection and self-improvement has been created, which permeates the school at every level. The capacity to improve further is strong. Self-evaluation at whole-school and especially at subject level is exceptionally thorough, drawing on a wide range of monitoring information about the quality of teaching and students' progress. Actions that have been taken as a result of self-evaluation have been highly effective in closing gaps in performance between subjects and key groups of students, thereby promoting greater equality of opportunity. Teachers engage in constant dialogue about improving all aspects of pedagogy, for example through the 'teaching and learning communities' that have been established across and within faculties. This has underpinned sustained improvements in the quality of teaching and learning.

The governing body is highly supportive of the school's work and ensures that statutory requirements, including those for safeguarding the well-being of staff and students, are met. It has not, however, always used performance information, for example on students' achievement and attendance, sharply enough to hold the

school to account.

The school, including its sixth form, offers students a broad curriculum, which is generally tailored effectively to meet students' interests and aspirations. A few lower-attaining students in Key Stage 4 who follow a specially adapted curriculum, including some disabled students and those with special educational needs, have too little time to complete some of their options successfully. The curriculum is supported by highly effective partnerships, including with other schools and business organisations, to ensure that students are well prepared with skills for later life. Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is promoted effectively. Sixth form leadership is well focused on further improvement, and has put in place increasingly effective quality assurance procedures to ensure consistency in the quality of provision across the partnership.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	46	46	8	0
Primary schools	8	47	40	5
Secondary schools	14	38	40	8
Special schools	28	48	20	4
Pupil referral units	15	50	29	5
All schools	11	46	38	6

New school inspection arrangements have been introduced from 1 January 2012. This means that inspectors make judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2010 to 31 August 2011 and represent judgements that were made under the school inspection arrangements that were introduced on 1 September 2009. These data are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2010/11 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Primary schools include primary academy converters. Secondary schools include secondary academy converters, sponsor-led academies and city technology colleges. Special schools include special academy converters and non-maintained special schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning and development taking account of their attainment.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Attendance:	the regular attendance of pupils at school and in lessons, taking into account the school's efforts to encourage good attendance.
Behaviour:	how well pupils behave in lessons, with emphasis on their attitude to learning. Pupils' punctuality to lessons and their conduct around the school.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving based on its self-evaluation and what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the governors and headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.
Safety:	how safe pupils are in school, including in lessons; and their understanding of risks. Pupils' freedom from bullying and harassment. How well the school promotes safety, for example e-learning.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



27 January 2011

Dear Students

Inspection of St Birinus School, Didcot OX11 8AZ

Many thanks for the welcome you gave to me and my colleagues when we visited the school for its recent inspection. We greatly appreciated your time in discussion about life at the school.

St Birinus is a good school. You are well taught and make good progress in most of your lessons and achieve well. You have a good capacity to work together in teams, and often show a good deal of independence in completing tasks and solving problems. You behave well, and most of you feel safe in the calm and orderly environment. The school is well led. Leaders at all levels have developed very effective systems for checking on your progress and on the quality of teaching you receive. They have made a number of improvements, and are increasingly consulting you as well as staff, parents and carers in the changes they make.

There are two key ways in which the school can improve further.

- Improve attendance, particularly for those of you with poor attendance records. Attendance has yet to show a trend of improvement over time.
- Ensure that the quality of all teaching matches that of the best, particularly in making sure that tasks are always well matched to your abilities and that your work is regularly and helpfully marked.

I am sure that you will play your part in helping the school to improve further, by attending regularly, working hard and behaving well. I wish you every success.

Yours sincerely

Ian Hodgkinson
Her Majesty's Inspector

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