

# The Priory School

## Inspection report

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<b>Unique Reference Number</b>	117499
<b>Local Authority</b>	Hertfordshire
<b>Inspection number</b>	358146
<b>Inspection dates</b>	2–3 March 2011
<b>Reporting inspector</b>	David Jones HMI

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

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<b>Type of school</b>	Comprehensive
<b>School category</b>	Community
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	11–19
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	950
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	150
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	The governing body
<b>Chair</b>	Charles Lacey
<b>Headteacher</b>	Peter Loach
<b>Date of previous school inspection</b>	13 March 2008
<b>School address</b>	Bedford Road Hitchin SG5 2UR
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<b>Email address</b>	head@priory.herts.sch.uk

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<b>Age group</b>	11–19
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## Introduction

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and four additional inspectors. The inspection team observed 48 lessons, taught by 46 teachers. Meetings were held with the headteacher, nominated staff, members of the governing body and a representative of the local authority. Inspectors observed the school's work, looked at a wide range of documentation and met with groups of students. The inspection team reviewed 492 questionnaires returned by parents and carers. A total of 172 student and 122 staff questionnaires were evaluated.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at a number of key areas.

- The nature of the academic standards secured and the current rate of student progress.
- The quality of teaching available and how it is impacting on student progress.
- The curriculum provided and its impact on standards.
- The quality of sixth form provision at the school and its relationship with the 'town-wide' sixth form consortium.

## Information about the school

The school is smaller than the average secondary school and draws students from across the town. There are two secondary schools locally providing single sex education. The percentage of students known to be eligible for free school meals is half that of the national average. The percentage of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is in line with the national figure, although the proportion of those who speak English as an additional language is half that of the national average.

The proportion of students registered by the school as having special educational needs and/or disabilities is above the national figure; school data notes dyslexia and moderate learning difficulties as the two largest groups. The proportion with a statement of special educational needs is less than half the national average. There are a few children who are looked after by the local authority.

The school specialisms are business and enterprise and a second specialism in applied learning was awarded in 2009. The school has received the following national accreditations: Artsmark, Sportsmark, Quality in Study Skills Support, Investors in People and the intermediate International School Award. The school is the 'hub school' for extended services locally and is part of the Hitchin Sixth Form Consortium.

**Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate**

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

## Inspection judgements

**Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?**

**3**

**The school's capacity for sustained improvement**

**3**

## Main findings

This is a satisfactory school. Many aspects of the school's provision are good, including an effective sixth form, and some are outstanding.

Care, guidance and support are good. As a result the school's work to keep the students safe and lead healthy lives is outstanding and attendance is high. The students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, their ability to make a positive contribution to the community, their behaviour and the development of their workplace skills are good.

The school's self-evaluation judges attainment as average, and inspectors agree. Results in English and mathematics have improved since 2009 and are in line with the national average. The proportion of students securing five A\* to C GCSE grades including English and mathematics is now marginally above the national figure.

Provision within the school's two specialist areas is good and has been a notable factor in rising vocational standards, although the numbers of students entering level two examinations in vocational subjects is lower than that found nationally.

Students make satisfactory progress overall. Students' progress in English and mathematics was in line with the national data in 2010, although outcomes in science were notably weaker. The students' current learning and progress show evidence of some improvement, however, the school's robust evidence base currently records variations in progress between the core subjects and underachievement for students in intervention groups. Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities make satisfactory progress overall, although evidence provided by the school shows that their progress varies considerably between year groups and between English, mathematics and science. Students from a variety of minority ethnic backgrounds make satisfactory progress; the school has identified some variation between the groups. The progress made and the standards secured by girls are significantly stronger than that made by boys; notable variations exist in the performance of lower-attaining students. Equality of opportunity is satisfactory and does not match the school's self-evaluation of 'outstanding' because of the variations in performance between students in the intervention groups and between subjects.

Inspectors agree with the school that teaching and learning in the main school are currently good overall. The school's self-evaluation notes the improvements to the quality of teaching that have been secured recently, notably in science. Teaching in the nine sixth form lessons visited was consistently good or better. The use of assessment to enhance teaching and learning is satisfactory but not good because of the variable quality of practice seen; similarly, marking ranges from satisfactory to exceptional.

The broad, balanced and innovative curriculum contributes positively to outcomes for most students, particularly in their personal well-being and development.

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Inspectors found behaviour to be good and noted a calm and civilised atmosphere as students moved around the school. Parents and carers, as well as students, are full of praise for the wide range of pastoral support available, the work of mentors and the transition arrangements from primary school. The school judged care, guidance and support as 'outstanding' because of the quality of the pastoral support provided. Inspectors agree with students, parents and carers and the school that pastoral support work is of high quality. However, the impact of the academic guidance available to sustain learning and development is satisfactory, a judgement related to the students' satisfactory progress.

Senior staff have a robust assessment database and use it to refine the intervention strategies provided. Information from this system provided to the inspection team fully supports the concerns expressed in the pre-inspection briefing provided to the school by HMI and the judgement given in this report that students make satisfactory progress overall.

The overall effectiveness of the sixth form is good. Outcomes are good. Provision is good, with the impact of the outstanding working partnership within the Hitchin Sixth Form Consortium a very significant factor. Leadership and management of the sixth form are good.

Governance is good and the governing body is passionate about the school. The governing body and the leadership team have done well to improve behaviour, attendance, the quality of teaching, and the effectiveness of the sixth form. Sufficient funding has been secured to plan major enhancements to the school's sixth form facilities. Given these improvements, the school's capacity to improve is satisfactory.

The recently restructured senior leadership team has significant strengths. However, the school's self-evaluation is overly positive, most notably regarding achievement which, although satisfactory, has declined slowly for the last three years. The school has focused on improving areas of weakness in teaching, other provision and outcomes and there is a trend of improvement in key areas despite a few remaining weaknesses. Self-evaluation lacks a realistic view of achievement, attainment on entry, the variations in progress between subjects and groups of students.

Up to 40 of schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory may receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

## **What does the school need to do to improve further?**

- Improve achievement, notably in science, for lower-attaining students and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities by:
  - utilising the current strengths in teaching and deploying them to the greatest effect
  - ensuring intervention support for lower-attaining students secures good progress
  - making sure that assessment for learning is used consistently to help students make good progress.
- Address the inconsistent application of the consequences behaviour management system raised by parents, carers and students.
- Improve attainment and progress by:

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- matching target setting to accurate evaluations of attainment on entry,
- ensuring that marking and assessment for learning are used consistently and effectively.
- Ensure that the recently enhanced quality of teaching improves the proportion of students securing five higher grade GCSE subjects including English and mathematics.
- Review curriculum provision so that the school's specialist status in applied learning becomes a significant factor in securing higher standards and achievement.

**Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils****3**

Attainment on entry has been above average for four of the last five years, a factor confirmed by inspection evidence and the school's own data. Standards at the end of Year 11 have been close to or above average in alternate years since 2008. The proportion of students securing five A\* to C GCSE grades, 69%, was below the national average in 2010. However, the proportion of students securing five such higher grade GCSE passes that included English and mathematics, 55%, was marginally above the national figure.

Standards in science have declined for the last three years and were significantly below the national average in 2010, however, science modular results for 2011 are already more positive. The school's analysis of the 2010 examination data presented to inspectors confirms that girls made notably greater progress and secured higher standards than those gained by boys. The examination results secured by students known to be eligible for free school meals were similar to those of their peers. Overall, students progress has declined slowly over the last three years to a point just above the national figure in 2010. However, the progress made by lower-attaining students, those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, and those who speak English as an additional language was less than that of their peers. Although good and often better teaching was seen during the inspection where students' progress was at least good in the large majority of lessons observed by inspectors, the erratic progress of various groups of students receiving intervention support as recorded by the school, makes progress for the school as a whole, no higher than satisfactory.

In those lessons where inspectors observed good teaching, learning was more positive than the school's current assessment information indicates. The students' positive attitude to learning was a key factor in all lessons. Outcomes are strongest where there is a clear focus on what the students are expected to learn and students respond well to this challenge. In an outstanding Year 11 English lesson, the teacher revised similes and metaphors as she built the students' use of emotive language to explain the reaction of key characters in the text. A scrutiny of the students' books revealed significant recent progress because of a very strong match of task to the students' learning needs and to that of the boys in particular.

Students and their parents and carers are very positive that students feel safe in school and inspectors observed good staff/student relationships to support this view. The school provides outstanding support for a healthy lifestyle; a wide range of school meals is available and the number of students taking part in sport is high. All those over age 16 have discounted fees to access the local sports facilities. The students' contribution to the school and wider community is good with significant sums raised for charity, however,

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those students who the school put forward for interview by the inspection team felt that they could do more if the school provided greater opportunities.

The students' workplace and other skills are good because, although standards are average and achievement is satisfactory, behaviour and punctuality are good and attendance is high. The students' computer skills are a positive factor in the improving outcomes from the school's specialist subject areas. The students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. They respect others' needs and interests and make responsible judgements as they move around the school. Students have a strong sense of common values across the different ethnic, religious and socio-economic backgrounds that they encounter in school.

*These are the grades for pupils' outcomes*

<b>Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning</b>	<b>3</b>
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment <sup>1</sup>	3
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	3
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	3
<b>The extent to which pupils feel safe</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Pupils' behaviour</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being</b>	<b>2</b>
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attendance <sup>1</sup>	1
<b>The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development</b>	<b>2</b>

<sup>1</sup> The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low

## How effective is the provision?

Inspectors judged more than three-quarters of lessons to be good or better. This strong teaching performance is addressing the weaknesses in learning revealed in the school's attainment and achievement data. The good working relationships established between staff and students build confidence. As a consequence, the majority of students have very positive attitudes to learning. The common features that contribute to good and, sometimes, exceptional learning are underpinned by the teachers' high expectations and detailed planning to take account of the students' individual learning needs. In the best lessons, pace and challenge are well matched to students' abilities and the range of

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activities ensures that students make rapid progress. Although most lessons are well planned, the plans are not always implemented effectively, sometimes failing to secure the context of the learning required sufficiently clearly so that student progress varies too much. The quality of teaching is not as effective when learning outcomes are not identified accurately enough. The use of assessment to inform learning is a feature of the strongest lessons but the quality of practice varies excessively.

The school has useful assessment systems to check students' progress but the information presented to inspectors showed inconsistent progress across English, mathematics and science in Years 7, 8, 9 and 11. Marking is completed regularly but varies between adequate and exceptional.

The school provides a wide range of GCSE and an increasing range of applied and vocational courses derived from its specialisms. There is a strong focus on developing literacy and mathematical skills across the curriculum. Effective use of information and communication technology promotes learning. Students benefit from an excellent range of popular extra-curricular activities and this is reflected in high participation rates. Specialist status in business and enterprise and applied learning permeates the work of the school and has a positive impact on students' personal development.

Students have a positive view of the school and the pastoral care it provides and inspectors agree. They comment that they feel very secure and can ask any adult for support. They value the role of their older peers who act as mentors, the transition support provided as they move from primary school, the work of external mentors, and the support provided for young carers. Strong multi-agency work and clear expectations have significantly reduced the risk of exclusion.

*These are the grades for the quality of provision*

<b>The quality of teaching</b>	<b>2</b>
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	3
<b>The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness of care, guidance and support</b>	<b>2</b>

## How effective are leadership and management?

The senior team has embedded ambition and driven improvement in behaviour, attendance and in the current quality of teaching, but not successfully in attainment and achievement. However, the core misconception regarding student progress remains and has been the dominant factor in this inspection report. The school judged equality of opportunity as outstanding but the inspection team found it to be only satisfactory because of the inconsistency of student progress evident in the school's documentation presented to inspectors. Senior managers were invited to join inspectors in the joint observation of teaching where the improvements secured in teaching and learning were evident.



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Community cohesion is good, particularly locally, and although there is an international dimension to this work, the school was unable to provide evidence of any impact derived from the headteacher's visit to Rwanda.

The governing body is effective with a clear focus on enhancing provision and working within the community, although they have accepted the school's evaluation of progress. The governing body has put significant effort into securing outstanding partnership working with the other secondary schools in the town and has a positive impact on post-16 outcomes and provision.

The school's safeguarding procedures are good, particularly on staff recruitment and the training provided for school bus drivers, although inspectors had to guide the school in completing some of the administrative details required. Engagement with parents and carers is good, although 18 of those who responded to the inspection questionnaire felt the school did not take account of parental and carers' concerns. Many took the time to write positively to the inspection team.

*These are the grades for leadership and management*

<b>The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement</b>	<b>3</b>
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	2
<b>The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money</b>	<b>3</b>

## Sixth form

The inspection team agreed with the school's evaluation that the overall effectiveness of the sixth form is good. Senior pupils support their younger peers effectively within the pastoral system and the head boy and head girl are full members of the governing body. Standards and achievement are rising rapidly. This is a result of the school's outstanding partnership working with the Hitchin Sixth Form Consortium. The vibrancy of discussion generated by groups of students representing all three schools was a significant factor in the quality of learning. As a result the average points scored by students has risen steadily for the last two years. The sixth form is well led, coordinated effectively across the three schools and, as a result, provides an outstanding range of courses for the young people

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attending it. One of the strengths of governance is the working relationships secured between the three schools and the quality assurance procedures that related to sixth form teaching. Inspectors visited nine sixth form lessons and found teaching to be good or better on every occasion. The working dynamic between staff and students from the three schools was a positive factor and those individuals from the two partner schools who spoke to inspectors consistently noted the quality of support they received.

*These are the grades for the sixth form*

<b>Overall effectiveness of the sixth form</b>	<b>2</b>
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	2
The quality of provision in the sixth form	2
Leadership and management of the sixth form	2

## Views of parents and carers

The response to the questionnaire was more than double the usual national return. In addition, 128 parents and carers took the time to write personally to the inspection team, an unusually high proportion of the 492 inspection questionnaire responses. A number of questionnaire responses from parents and carers expressed reservations regarding the consistency with which homework was provided, and the support provided for their children. However, many others were very positive on these matters. A third of the parents and carers who wrote to inspectors expressed reservations regarding the consistent application of the school's 'consequences' behaviour-management system and this was a view echoed by the students chosen by the school to speak to the inspection team. Although the system has helped secure good behaviour, the level of reservations expressed and examples offered by some parents, carers and students point to an inconsistency of approach that the school is aware must be addressed.

## Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at The Priory School to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school. The inspection team received 492 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 950 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	133	27	292	60	50	10	12	2
The school keeps my child safe	193	40	285	58	7	1	2	0
My school informs me about my child's progress	156	32	307	63	19	4	2	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	155	32	281	58	41	8	7	1
The teaching is good at this school	127	26	326	67	28	6	6	1
The school helps me to support my child's learning	112	23	310	64	50	10	10	2
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	84	17	326	67	57	12	6	1
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	137	28	298	61	28	6	2	0
The school meets my child's particular needs	142	29	296	61	37	8	11	2
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	164	34	268	55	40	8	12	2
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	78	16	303	62	62	13	21	4
The school is led and managed effectively	153	31	288	59	32	7	12	2
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	188	39	262	54	27	6	11	2

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

## 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	59	35	3	3
Primary schools	9	44	39	7
Secondary schools	13	36	41	11
Sixth forms	15	39	43	3
Special schools	35	43	17	5
Pupil referral units	21	42	29	9
All schools	13	43	37	8

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2009 to 31 August 2010 and are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)).

The sample of schools inspected during 2009/10 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

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

Sixth form figures reflect the judgements made for the overall effectiveness of the sixth form in secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units.

## Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on 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 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:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement.</li><li>■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils.</li><li>■ The quality of teaching.</li><li>■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships.</li><li>■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.</li></ul>
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.

**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.**



4 March 2011

Dear Students

**Inspection of The Priory School, Hitchin SG5 2UR**

You may remember inspectors visited your school just after the February half term. We were impressed by your behaviour, attitude to learning, attendance and punctuality. Overall, we consider your school is satisfactory.

You told us how highly you value the pastoral care and support you receive but how you feel the 'consequences' system is applied inconsistently. Your views on these matters were supported by your parents and carers and inspectors believe these inconsistencies should be removed.

Your attainment is in line with the national average, however, the rate at which you progress could be better. Inspectors were pleased to see the improvements secured in teaching in recent times. The inspection team was impressed with the quality of outcomes and provision in the sixth form.

I have asked your school to focus its efforts on:

- helping you all, but particularly the boys, to make better progress and raise standards by making better use of marking, assessment for learning and securing the most effective teaching available
- reviewing curriculum provision so that the school's specialist status in applied learning becomes a significant factor in securing higher standards and achievement.

Yours sincerely

David Jones

Her Majesty's Inspector

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