

Cedars Upper School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	137462
Local Authority	N/A
Inspection number	386190
Inspection dates	23–24 November 2011
Reporting inspector	Ian Middleton HMI

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

Type of school	Academy
School category	Non-maintained
Age range of pupils	13–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1180
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	321
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Tim Alberry
Headteacher	Steven Palmer
Date of previous school inspection	N/A
School address	Mentmore Road Linslade Leighton Buzzard LU7 2AE
Telephone number	01525 219300
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Age group	11–18
Inspection date(s)	23–24 November 2011
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four additional inspectors. Inspectors visited 50 lessons, observing 47 different teachers. They held meetings with the headteacher, other school leaders and managers, representatives of the governing body, and staff. Discussions were held with groups of students in Years 9 to 13 with their work. Inspectors observed the school's work and looked at the improvement plan, assessment information, and school policies. They analysed 131 parental, 136 student and 65 staff questionnaires.

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

- How well are students, especially those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, progressing against their targets?
- How effectively do staff use assessment information to ensure that students' individual needs, interests and aspirations are met?
- How effective is the curriculum in contributing to continuity and progression in students' learning?
- How well is students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development promoted?
- How successful are recent strategies to improve the efficiency, accountability and impact of senior and middle leaders?

Information about the school

Cedars Upper School is a larger-than-average-sized school that became an academy in September 2011. Most students are White British and a below average proportion is from minority ethnic backgrounds. The proportion of students identified with special educational needs and/or disabilities and the proportion with a statement of special educational needs are below average. The percentage of students known to be eligible for free school meals is below the national average.

The predecessor school was awarded specialist status in mathematics and computing in 2006. The school's awards include Healthy Schools Status.

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

2

Main findings

Cedars Upper is a satisfactory school with a good sixth form. It has made significant improvements in the past year under new leadership and since becoming an academy. Standards are rising because of improvements in teaching and the curriculum, especially for older students. However, senior and middle leaders know that students' higher performance in recent examinations is only the first step in 'achieving excellence', the school's motto that embraces the headteacher's vision.

Students have positive attitudes to their learning and make a strong contribution to the school and wider community. The commitment of staff to students' personal development and well-being is consistently good. However, students' experience of teaching that promotes their enjoyment and high achievement is mixed; their progress from above average starting points is variable within and between subjects. More-able students and those with a statement of special educational needs make better progress because staff meet their needs more effectively. More comprehensive use of assessment data by senior and middle leaders is now targeting intervention work more effectively. However, in the classroom not all teachers use different forms of assessment sufficiently skilfully to inform or adapt their planning. Groups of teachers representing different subjects have started to work together to widen the range of teaching and learning styles they are able to use effectively. This work is also increasing teachers' awareness of opportunities to connect learning across the curriculum.

In 2011 an above-average proportion of boys and girls gained five or more A*- C grade GCSEs including English and mathematics. This followed a decline in the previous three years against the national trend of improvement. School data and inspection evidence indicate that students currently in Year 11 are on course to meet increasingly challenging targets. However, the rate of students' progress is faster as they move towards their examinations; progress is generally slower in Year 9. There are exceptions; in subjects such as mathematics and music, where students get off to a strong start, they make consistently good progress and many achieve the higher grades. Successful work with students while in their middle schools, early diagnosis of students' needs, and clear advice about how to follow up and prepare for lessons, contribute to good progress. Where courses are well suited to students' interests, needs and aspirations, and well supported by stimulating and clearly relevant subject matter in the classroom, they also do well. Progress in the sixth form is good, including students new to the school. Nevertheless, the proportion of A*-A grades is modest at A level. The school has good plans to widen curriculum opportunities

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further, and these are currently satisfactory in range.

The school's capacity for improvement is good. Self-evaluation is accurate and plans are firmly based on a systematic review of provision and analysis of progress data. Senior staff and middle leaders assure the quality of provision in their areas with increasing success. The governing body is beginning to complement its strongly supportive role with further challenge, to ensure that underachievement and a budget deficit remain in the past. Partnerships beyond the school extend the range of support, opportunities and responsibilities available to students, which have a positive impact on their personal development. However, tutor periods too often miss opportunities to capitalise on students' maturity, experiences and skills by promoting collaborative work between year groups to support higher achievement.

Up to 40% of the 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 attainment further by ensuring that:
 - students make consistently good progress in all lessons
 - all subjects sustain standards above national averages
 - the proportion of A*-A grades increase at GCSE and at A level.
- Improve the consistency in the quality of teaching by ensuring that all teachers:
 - use assessment to match work to students' differing abilities
 - use a range of teaching styles to promote students' enjoyment in learning
 - use opportunities to reflect, refine, share and embed best practice.
- Improve the coherence of the curriculum by ensuring that:
 - form time contributes positively to students' study skills
 - the curriculum in Year 9 enables students to build on prior achievement
 - collaboration between different subject teachers extends to the curriculum.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

3

Students enter the school with attainment which is above average. Satisfactory progress made by Year 11 students in 2011 led to a similar profile of above average performance, indicated by the proportion attaining 5 or more A*-C GCSE grades including English and mathematics. More-able students and those with a statement of special educational needs made better progress than their peers. Based on the school's latest assessment data, students' progress across all groups is improving. However, taking into account trends in students' performance in the predecessor school, variations in the rate of progress exist between subjects. Data show

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inconsistent achievement in science, physical education, modern foreign languages and design and technology. In English, English literature, mathematics, music, history and business studies, students consistently attain above average standards. Despite students’ positive attitudes when starting Year 9, their progress is less rapid here than it is in the approach to examinations in Years 10 and 11, or in the sixth form.

In lessons, students make satisfactory progress; attentive, considerate and compliant behaviour is the norm. Progress is accelerated when students enjoy learning through active engagement, taking opportunities to show initiative and using their intellect to move their learning and that of other students on. They cooperate well in group work and are able to follow-up and prepare for lessons independently. Students respond to questions thoughtfully and solve problems creatively when given the opportunity, particularly when teaching is stimulating and learning is open-ended. Visiting Year 8 students demonstrated these qualities in response to a mathematics challenge during the inspection, indicating that early expectations should be higher. Students’ continuous record of high attendance, their positive attitudes in school and success in subjects such as English and mathematics show how well prepared they are for their future economic well-being. However, in form time and lessons some opportunities are missed for students to develop and apply employability skills.

Responsible behaviour in and out of lessons contributes to students feeling safe and supported in school, including physically disabled students, students whose circumstances make them vulnerable, and those from minority ethnic and traveller backgrounds. Support begins before they start at the school through effective bridging projects and continues with the additional help of older students acting as mentors. Students understand that bullying can take different forms but say that incidents are rare and show confidence in the policies and procedures they have helped develop. They show trust in the student support services available. Many students consciously nurture their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development through different roles and responsibilities, their interest in issues explored in their personal, social and religious education course, and through their involvement in extra-curricular activities. This represents an improvement on the inspection findings of the predecessor school. Students develop a clear understanding of healthy lifestyles, supported by the acquisition of Healthy School Status, although over a third of students surveyed thought that more could be done to ensure that all students take the advice given.

These are the grades for pupils’ outcomes

Pupils’ achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	3
Taking into account:	
Pupils’ attainment ¹	2
The quality of pupils’ learning and their progress	3

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

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

How effective is the provision?

The impact of teaching on students' learning and progress is satisfactory. Teachers know their subjects well and the most effective lessons promote enquiry through interesting stimuli and resources, engage students actively through questioning and team work, and develop independence through challenges that bridge class and homework. Where weaker teaching is overly teacher-led, lesson pace is slower and the purpose is limited to satisfying examination objectives. Although students remain conscientious, progress satisfactorily and sometimes reach high standards, a quarter of those whose views were surveyed did not find learning enjoyable and this reflects the narrow range of teaching styles observed in some lessons. Professional development is beginning to spread best practice; senior staff accurately predicted the exemplary lessons seen by inspectors and shared examples of successful coaching. Improved availability of assessment information has also increased opportunities for staff to tailor teaching to students' needs and interests more precisely. Remaining variability is particularly acute in Year 9 where there is too little knowledge of students' prior achievement, acquired too late.

The curriculum contributes satisfactorily to meeting students' needs and plans to increase vocational opportunities further are sound. The range of options currently available provides adequate choice, supplemented by work-related learning and basic skills courses. There are good examples of curriculum provision enhanced by partnerships, for example the industrial links established in design and technology. There are also strengths in relation to the breadth of extra-curricular opportunities, which are well supported by students. Provision that extends and enriches learning in the classroom has a positive impact on achievement, for example in history. Where the relevance of subject matter is clear, students' interest is heightened. The personal, social and religious education course is popular with students. However, the use of form time is not always purposeful or productive in relation to students' individual or collective needs, for example through the development of study skills. The specialism has a positive impact on curriculum continuity in mathematics. However, it is too early to evaluate the recently redesigned curriculum in Year 9 on promoting continuity and progression more widely.

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Good pastoral support eases students’ transition from middle school and supports their personal development at upper school. All groups of students are given good quality care and guidance including those whose circumstances make them vulnerable and students with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Consequently, students feel safe, supported and positive about school, reflected in their high attendance in all years. The student support centre is valued by students. Effective information, advice and guidance help students make informed choices about options at different stages of their education. Exceptionally low numbers of students are neither in education, employment or training post-16. The contribution of form tutors to monitoring students’ academic progress, probing any inconsistency and reviewing their targets, is an area to strengthen. Regular communication with parents and carers help most of them to feel adequately informed. Parents and carers who responded to the questionnaire appreciated the system of sharing the school’s praise of students, but a small minority thought that reports could be more informative, meetings more regular, and the school’s website more effective.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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

How effective are leadership and management?

The headteacher has worked effectively with senior leaders to arrest the decline in standards that met his arrival in January 2011. Working swiftly, sensitively and judiciously, he has shared a vision that embraces higher aspirations while building on existing best practice. This is now strongly supported by the governing body and staff, who expressed their pride in being part of the school. Through effective communication with students, parents and carers, understanding about the rationale for change is widespread. Accurate evaluation has resulted in clear and relevant priorities. The action taken to improve the quality of provision has been effective in raising standards in Years 10 and 11 but staff are well aware that there is more to do, particularly in relation to making best practice more consistent. For those strategies at an early stage of implementation, it is too early to evaluate the full impact. Nevertheless, recent work to improve assessment tracking, widen curriculum opportunities and increase active learning have sharpened the focus on meeting students’ individual needs, interests and aspirations more effectively.

The school ensures that students are safe and this is endorsed in students’, parents’ and carers’ feedback. There are exemplary safeguarding policies and practice that involve all who contribute to the school community. Students are very positive about

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the level of care and support provided when they experience difficulties, including effective work with external agencies. The inclusive ethos contributes to a strongly cohesive school community. Attention now being given to ensure that different groups of students progress equally well complements the good pastoral work to tackle discrimination and promote equality of opportunity. Students are encouraged to reflect on these principles, contributing to a positive school identity within the local community, for example through charity work and leadership initiatives. The sixth form, and in particular the innovative training academy in partnership with Luton Town Football Club, successfully attract students from diverse communities into the school. International links, for example with a school in Kenya, also contribute to students’ understanding of schools working in contrasting contexts.

The governing body supports the school well. Policies are reviewed regularly and rigorously. Governors’ effectiveness in challenging the school, where underachievement or inefficiency are identified, has improved recently. The roles and responsibilities of senior and middle leaders have changed significantly, in order to address priorities more effectively whilst building on strengths. For example, specialist status has been used well to raise achievement in mathematics and information and communication technology both in the school and more widely. Improvements in the leadership and management of teaching and learning have secured higher proportions of good lessons than in the past. Current initiatives to increase the quality and consistency of teaching and learning are proving effective.

These are the grades for leadership and management

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

Sixth form

The sixth form provides a good quality of education and care. Recruitment into the

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sixth form is strong within the school and local area. Students make good progress from the start. They attain above average standards in AS and A-level examinations. The school is rightly focused on improving the proportion of A*-A grades, which is higher at AS level. Retention between Year 12 and Year 13 is high, as is attendance. The proportion of students progressing into higher education in 2011, at 85%, was also high. Students have a good track record of success in gaining places on higher education courses that attract strong competition.

The predominantly academic curriculum is enhanced by a breadth of enrichment and extra-curricular opportunities that are enjoyed by sixth form students. Through a wide range of roles and responsibilities they make an excellent contribution to the school and local community. Many teachers are at their best teaching sixth formers. Their good subject knowledge is used well to challenge students and deepen their understanding. In art and design, and design and technology technicians with industrial experience add considerably to the expertise available. Relationships between students and staff are professional and personable.

Leaders and managers track students’ academic progress and personal development effectively within their courses. Comprehensive induction procedures provide clear analyses of students’ individual starting points. Senior staff recognise that monitoring and evaluating students across subjects has further potential to help students identify and exploit their strengths and address common concerns, individually and collaboratively. Students speak very positively about the sixth form, value the support of teachers and the inspiration and direction provided by the 16–19 leader.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	2
Taking into account:	2
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 small proportion of parents and carers who responded to the Ofsted questionnaire, expressed their satisfaction with the school. They feel that the school keeps their child safe and are positive about their child’s experience. A small minority of parents and carers believe the school does not encourage their child to be healthy. The inspection evidence shows that many students take advantage of healthy food options available and the majority of them participate in healthy extra-curricular activities. Parents and carers valued the system of sharing praise but thought the level of detail in students’ progress reports is too limited for them to support their child’s learning and preparation for the future. The school is reviewing its communications with parents and carers, including the use of the school website which attracted some criticism.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted’s questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of students registered at Cedars Upper 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 131 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 1180 students registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	48	37	73	56	6	5	3	2
The school keeps my child safe	43	33	80	61	5	4	1	1
The school informs me about my child’s progress	40	31	71	54	15	11	3	2
My child is making enough progress at this school	35	27	82	63	7	5	4	3
The teaching is good at this school	29	22	82	63	14	11	1	1
The school helps me to support my child’s learning	24	18	79	61	18	14	2	2
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	15	11	84	64	18	14	5	4
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)	27	21	72	55	19	15	2	2
The school meets my child’s particular needs	27	21	83	63	11	8	2	2
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	23	18	76	58	14	11	5	4
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	24	18	70	53	19	15	1	1
The school is led and managed effectively	32	24	81	62	9	7	1	1
Overall, I am happy with my child’s experience at this school	42	32	79	60	3	2	5	4

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	43	47	10	0
Primary schools	6	46	42	6
Secondary schools	14	36	41	9
Sixth forms	15	42	41	3
Special schools	30	48	19	3
Pupil referral units	14	50	31	5
All schools	10	44	39	6

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 2010 to 08 April 2011 and 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.

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"> ■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement. ■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils. ■ The quality of teaching. ■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships. ■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
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.



25 November 2011

Dear Students,

Inspection of Cedars Upper School, Leighton Buzzard, LU7 2AE

On behalf of the inspectors who visited your school on 23 and 24 November, I would like to thank you for the welcome you gave us. We valued the opportunity to share your achievements and talk to you in discussion groups and lessons.

The school is improving and provides you with a satisfactory education. The sixth form is good. We particularly liked these features of your school.

- You show positive attitudes to learning, including excellent attendance.
- You get good care, guidance and support, which many of you give to others.
- You participate well in optional activities, including leadership awards.
- You make an excellent contribution to the school and wider community.
- Your headteacher has raised aspirations and has secure plans for the future.
- Your examination results have improved and are on track to continue rising.
- Your teachers are knowledgeable and the best ones promote your enjoyment and independence in learning effectively.

We have asked the school to improve some areas. These include:

- improving attainment further
- improving the consistency in the quality of teaching
- improving the coherence of the curriculum, to support your progress.

The inspection team wish you well for your continued enjoyment and success.

Yours sincerely

Ian Middleton
Her Majesty's Inspector

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