

Alsager School

Hassall Road, Alsager, Stoke-on-Trent, ST7 2HR

Inspection dates 6–7 February 2013

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Good	2
	This inspection:	Good	2
Achievement of pupils		Good	2
Quality of teaching		Good	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Good	2
Leadership and management		Good	2

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school.

- Students achieve above-average results in their external examinations, at GCSE and at A level and AS level.
- Students have excellent attitudes to their learning, are very motivated and work well in lessons. Behaviour around the school site is mainly excellent which contributes well to students feeling safe.
- Much of the teaching is good and a significant proportion is outstanding.
- The cooperative learning ethos of the school has a very positive impact on the ability of students to work constructively, both independently and in groups.
- The care, guidance and support for students, including for those whose circumstances make them vulnerable, are exemplary.
- The sixth form is good and a real strength of the school. It provides students who join it with excellent opportunities. Teaching and attainment are consistently good across all subjects. Students make good progress and many are able to gain places at top universities.
- The headteacher and the relatively new senior leadership team have a very accurate picture of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Areas where improvements are needed are identified and suitable actions are quickly put in place.
- Weaker teaching has been targeted for improvement and training to improve it is having some impact.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- The progress that students make across Key Stages 3 and 4, in English and humanities subjects has been lower than it should be.
- There is still a small proportion of teaching that requires improvement or is inadequate.
- Sometimes, teachers do not expect enough from students and this can restrict their progress.
- The school recognises that some students who might benefit from staying on in their high-quality sixth form choose not to do so. Leaders are exploring widening the range of opportunities available to provide better for them.
- Some improvement initiatives, for example in assessment, need more time to show their full impact.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors spent 18 hours observing in 40 lessons, taught by 40 teachers. They observed the conduct of students around the school and at break and lunch times.
- Interviews were held with senior leaders, middle leaders, teachers and members of the support staff as well as members of the governing body.
- Formal and informal meetings were held with several groups of students from all year groups, and some students completed questionnaires about aspects of their school experience.
- Inspectors scrutinised students' work and school documents, including minutes of governing body meetings, policies, assessment information and student records.
- The inspection also took into account the responses on 67 staff questionnaires and the views of 143 parents who completed the online Parent View survey.

Inspection team

John Peckham, Lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
David Woodhouse	Additional Inspector
Peter McKay	Additional Inspector
Andrew Henderson	Additional Inspector
Derek Barnes	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- Alsager School is larger than the average secondary school.
- The proportion of students known to be eligible for additional funding through the pupil premium is significantly lower than average.
- There are very few students from minority ethnic groups and even fewer who speak English as an additional language.
- The proportion of students supported at school action is about average, but a much smaller proportion than nationally is supported at school action plus or has a statement of special educational needs.
- Very few students join or leave the school at times other than at the beginning of Year 7 or the end of Year 11. The number of pupils on roll has fallen slightly over the last four years.
- The school currently meets the government's floor standards for achievement. These set minimum expectations for attainment and progress.
- The school has foundation status and it is part of a cooperative trust with the local primary schools.
- Some students in Years 10 and 11 participate in courses offered by South Cheshire College, Reaseheath College of Agriculture or work placements provided through Changing Education Ltd.
- The present headteacher joined the school in September 2011.
- The school is a leading partnership school in initial teacher education and has the Cultural Diversity Gold Award, Inclusion Quality Mark and Healthy School Award.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the rates of progress in English and humanities across Key Stages 3 and 4 so that examination results at GCSE in these subjects at least match those in mathematics and science.
- Continue to develop marking and target setting procedures that focus on the progress made by students from Year 7 to Year 13 to ensure that:
 - students, teachers and parents can easily measure small steps in students' progress and quickly identify when students are failing to make expected progress
 - all students know clearly how to improve their work to achieve higher levels
 - marking is suitably frequent and of a consistent quality in: expecting high standards of work and presentation; indicating levels of attainment; pointing towards areas for improvement; and following this up to ensure progress.
- Eliminate teaching that is less than good by focusing in particular on:
 - ensuring that all teachers have sufficiently high expectations of how well students can achieve
 - reducing the time some teachers take in over-long explanations
 - improving the use of questioning to encourage deeper thinking and understanding
 - developing a wider range of learning activities for each lesson, so that learners with differing abilities and learning styles are all able to make good progress
 - ensuring that information on students' progress is used to adapt lesson planning from one lesson to the next.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils is good

- Students enter the school with prior attainment that is significantly above average. At the end of Year 11, attainment in GCSE subjects is also mostly above average. A high proportion of students achieve the very highest grades in many subjects. Students are well-motivated, they apply themselves well to study and behave exceptionally well in their lessons. In the majority of lessons observed, students made good or outstanding progress.
- The curriculum offers a good range of opportunities to enable students at Key Stage 4 to be successful. The vocational courses provided at South Cheshire College and Reaseheath College are popular, successful and often a route into a full-time college programme. Evidence of the school's commitment to cooperative learning showed in a wide range of lessons observed where students were able to work with confidence, independently and in groups.
- There were no students who completed Year 11 in 2012 who did not find a successful placement in the sixth form, at a college or in employment. The school's support and guidance for students to ensure successful progression, is exemplary. Some students, who face particularly challenging circumstances, have quite individually tailored programmes which support their learning and progress.
- In 2012, the GCSE results in English dipped. For the first time, progress that students made from Year 7 to Year 11 was below the national rates. The school has undertaken a very detailed analysis of the reasons for this, and implemented a range of measures to prevent it from happening again. Very careful scrutiny of the work and grades of students currently in Year 11, however, shows that they are now making good progress.
- In the sixth form, students starting A-level programmes generally have qualification levels that are slightly above the national average. A higher proportion of these students than in most schools or colleges are able to complete their programmes successfully, and their attainment at both AS and A level is above average.
- A particular strength of the sixth form is the consistency across all subjects. With the exception of English, where attainment is significantly above average, all other subjects perform just above average. There are no under-performing subjects.
- Sixth-form students receive well targeted and very effective guidance and support, as well as good advice and help in completing university applications. There is currently limited provision in the sixth form for students who are not ready for A level. Beyond academic study, opportunities for sixth-form students to develop wider skills and extend their interests are relatively limited.
- Students known to be eligible for the pupil premium achieved an average points score of 405 in 2012, compared with 481 for those not eligible. Overall, these students make good progress, although it is much stronger in mathematics than in English. Students who are disabled or who have special educational needs perform well compared to similar students in other schools.
- Most students achieve high standards in literacy and numeracy. There are effective procedures to support students who join the school with low levels of literacy, and these are applied well across all subjects.

The quality of teaching is good

- The school has some excellent teachers, and the large majority of teaching is good or better. In many of the good and outstanding lessons, what students are going to learn is made clear at the start; expectations are high and are matched appropriately to the abilities of the students. Pace is maintained and students are provided with good opportunities to evaluate their own and other students' work in order to improve.
- In one outstanding Year 7 German lesson observed, for example, students were fully engaged in a variety of tasks chosen by the teacher, based on their previous progress. As soon as one was

completed, another task, with a slightly higher degree of challenge was provided, and students quickly gained confidence in how to apply what they already knew to new vocabulary. When the teacher indicated the end of this lesson, one of the students said: 'Oh no, I don't want this lesson to end, I really like German.'

- In many subjects, students are provided with excellent information about what they need to do next to improve. They told inspectors that they appreciate this and were complimentary about teachers who mark using 'a star and a wish'. In some lessons, teachers are very skilled at using questioning to encourage deeper thinking and at judging when students are ready to move on in their learning. An excellent example of peer assessment was seen in an information technology lesson, where students were asked to provide careful written feedback to other students about a website that they were constructing. Students were then given time to reflect and act upon this feedback.
- Teachers' subject knowledge is strong. It provides frequent opportunities for students to become engaged and absorbed in their learning. In an outstanding Year 10 English lesson, for example, the well-planned activities enabled students to demonstrate a real depth of understanding about sentence construction and apply a detailed critical analysis to their own work.
- A small minority of lessons, however, either require improvement or are inadequate. Often in these lessons, all students progress at the same pace or, if they are able to work faster, complete work ahead of the class and then have to wait for others to catch up. Some teachers talk for too long or interrupt the learning of all with explanations that only some students need. The planned curriculum is not always adapted properly for each class in the light of students' abilities or previous progress, which means that sometimes students are not able to learn well.
- The marking of books in some subjects is not always helpful. Frequently opportunities to ensure that students take note of teachers' advice and corrections are missed. In some cases, too much attention is devoted to 'ticking the boxes' of examination assessments rather than exploring the depth and quality of work.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are good

- Most students, parents and staff confirm the inspectors' judgement that behaviour at the school is good. There are relatively few disruptions to learning and very few serious incidents of misbehaviour. Most staff use the reward system well and students respond positively to the praise and encouragement that they receive through it. However, some staff and students report that not all members of staff apply the school behaviour policy equally well.
- Behaviour in lessons makes a strong contribution to students' learning and progress. In some cases, even where the teaching is poor, students cooperate with one another and the teacher and so maintain a good learning atmosphere.
- There is very little evidence of bullying, although students are fully aware of the different forms this might take, including cyber bullying and prejudice-based bullying. Not all students were confident, however, in the school's ability to deal with bullying and most reported that some potentially offensive language was sometimes used in banter between friends.
- Attendance is well above national averages and improving. The school has some very effective strategies to improve the attendance of the small number of students whose attendance is poor. Punctuality to school and to lessons is good.
- Students are provided with good opportunities to learn the facts around risks to their health and well-being, such as from tobacco or alcohol misuse, and the potential consequences of sexual activity. Several commented, however, that they did not feel they had sufficient opportunities to discuss the feelings, behaviours and moral dilemmas which they might have to face in the future.

The leadership and management are good

- The headteacher has now been in the school for nearly 18 months. Many members of the senior leadership team are also relatively new to the school. The team is, however, very effective and a range of new strategies have been and are being implemented in order to accelerate the school's improvement. Leaders have a very accurate understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Precise targeted improvement plans are in place where needed, such as in English and the humanities subjects.
 - The majority of staff are very positive about the leadership of the school. The school's priorities for improvement are appropriate and timely, especially in shifting the focus from attainment to the progress that students make over time. Several students are unhappy with the way in which the school has used home background to help set targets, and feel that on occasions these targets are too low. A new system, currently working through from Year 7 uses a different system, based just on previous attainment.
 - The school is now in its second year of adopting the TEEP (Teacher Effectiveness Enhancement Programme) approach to teaching and learning. Several teachers described how this had had a positive influence on their teaching. Very clear expectations have been set for all teachers about the quality of planning and delivery of lessons. Where teaching needs to be improved, the school has applied good systems for professional development, including observation of good practice and coaching. Targets for improvement are closely linked to the performance management process and decisions regarding pay.
 - The school's curriculum at Key Stage 4 is good. Courses provided by local colleges are monitored well and there is an appropriate mix of academic and vocational routes available. The broadly academic programme in the sixth form is well suited to the students who currently choose it.
 - Procedures for ensuring the safeguarding of students are thorough, as are those for promoting equality of opportunity and tackling discrimination.
 - The school has benefited from a 'light touch' support for school improvement from the local authority and has received specific and highly effective guidance when required on personnel and finance matters.
 - The effectiveness of the school's promotion of the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of students is good overall. Social and moral aspects are well developed through the cooperative learning programme and evident in the way that students conduct themselves around the school. Cultural awareness, an area for improvement identified at the last inspection, has received special attention and now has a number of very successful elements across the curriculum. This was recognised in the achievement of the Cultural Diversity Gold Mark in January 2012. Opportunities for spiritual development are much less evident.
 - **The governance of the school:**
 - Governance is good. The governing body has a good range of skills and experience and is provided with excellent information about the school by the headteacher. This includes a very clear understanding of the quality of teaching and where it needs to be improved. Members of the governing body now have accurate ways to ensure that the best teachers are rewarded with pay progression and inadequate teaching is robustly dealt with. Governors have approved the use of the pupil premium funding to help support the 'back on track' programme which helps students who have fallen behind. Governors receive regular monitoring reports on the progress of students eligible for the pupil premium funding. Scrutiny of the records of governing body meetings indicates that they frequently ask challenging and probing questions of school leaders and take their responsibility for holding the school to account very seriously.
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What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>

School details

Unique reference number	111404
Local authority	Cheshire East
Inspection number	413439

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1,289
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	233
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Allan Ward
Headteacher	Richard Middlebrook
Date of previous school inspection	23 September 2009
Telephone number	01270 871100
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