

The Nobel School

Mobbsbury Way, Stevenage, SG2 0HS

Inspection dates

13–14 March 2013

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Satisfactory	3
	This inspection:	Requires improvement	3
Achievement of pupils		Requires improvement	3
Quality of teaching		Requires improvement	3
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Good	2
Leadership and management		Requires improvement	3

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement. It is not good because

- Not enough students achieve well across a range of subjects. Despite recent improvement, progress in English is slower than that in mathematics. Students' overall GCSE attainment is average.
- There is not yet enough consistently good or outstanding teaching throughout the school to promote good progress.
- In some lessons work is not set at the right level for students and this slows progress.
- Teachers' written marking does not always show students how to improve their work.
- Students are not always given enough opportunities to learn without the help of the teacher and so they do not make as much progress as they could.
- The checks on the school's work by subject and year leaders do not always lead to improved progress for students.
- The sixth form requires improvement because too few average-ability students achieve well.
- Until recently, governors have not challenged leaders rigorously enough about the school's performance or developed a more independent view through gathering information for themselves.

The school has the following strengths

- The new executive headteacher has a clear and accurate view of the strengths and weaknesses of the school and knows exactly how to make it better.
- Teaching is improving and more good and outstanding practice can be found across the school.
- Students behave well in class and around the school. They get on well with each other and with the teachers.
- The school provides a caring, safe environment for the students.
- The school has begun to raise the achievement of students whose circumstances mean it is given additional funding.
- Sixth form students receive good information, support and guidance, which help them to make well-informed decisions about future employment, education and training.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 47 lessons, including joint observations with members of the senior leadership team. In addition, inspectors made short visits to other lessons and scrutinised students' work.
- Meetings were held with groups of students, the headteacher and other members of the senior leadership team, heads of subject departments, year leaders, teachers, members of the governing body, and a representative of the local authority.
- Inspectors scrutinised a variety of school documents, including the school's self-evaluation, the school development plans, safeguarding records, behaviour records, governing body documents, and documents relating to the management of teachers' performance.
- The inspector also considered the views expressed in 82 questionnaires returned by school staff, along with the 44 responses submitted by parents to the online Parent View survey.

Inspection team

Keith Brown, Lead inspector	Additional Inspector
Bruce Clark	Additional Inspector
Chris Ockendon	Additional Inspector
Hermione Horn	Additional Inspector
Helen Bailey	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The substantive headteacher is overseeing the completion of a complete rebuild on the school site and has announced his intention to leave at the end of April 2013, as soon as the final phase of the buildings project is completed. The recruitment process to secure his replacement is well under way.
- Since July 2012 the school has been in close partnership with an outstanding school in the locality. The headteacher of this school is a national leader in education. She became executive headteacher of The Nobel School in January 2013 and is responsible for the day-to-day running of the school.
- The school is larger than the average sized secondary school.
- The proportion of students for whom the school receives the pupil premium (additional funding for those, in this school, who are known to be eligible for free school meals and the very few looked after by the local authority), is below average.
- The proportion of students receiving extra support through school action is broadly average. The proportion supported at school action plus or through a statement of special educational needs is above average.
- The school meets the current government floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for the attainment and progress of students by the end of Year 11.
- A very small number of students are taught in alternative provision away from the school site at the Stevenage Educational Support Centre.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve teaching throughout the school so that it is more consistently good or better by:
 - making sure teachers use assessment information to provide work that is closely matched to students' needs and abilities
 - ensuring that marking in all subjects informs students about how well they have done and what they need to do to improve
 - giving students more opportunities to learn actively and without direct help from the teacher.
- Improve leadership and management by:
 - making sure that subject leaders and year leaders identify from their monitoring and evaluation of the school's work, clear and precise actions which will lead to improvements in students' progress
 - ensuring the governing body finds out for itself sufficient information about the school's effectiveness in order to rigorously hold it to account for its work.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils requires improvement

- Students' achievement requires improvement because too few students make good progress over time. This is because there is too much variation in the quality of teaching: not enough is good or better.
- Students join the school in Year 7 with levels of attainment in English and mathematics which are typically around average. By the end of Year 11, their attainment is still around average in many subjects. Too few students gained five or more GCSE grades at A*- C, including English and mathematics, in 2012 because results in English were below the national average.
- This year the school is tackling weaknesses in reading in Key Stage 4 by introducing a more systematic approach to make sure students really understand what they are reading. They are consequently becoming more confident about reading fluently and on their own. An increased focus on grammar and spelling this year is leading to improvements in students' writing.
- GCSE mathematics results last year were broadly average. However, school records of students' current attainment in mathematics show that progress has accelerated this year, following new initiatives, such as small group work focusing on calculation skills.
- In other subjects, such as art, design and technology, drama and religious education, students make better progress and their attainment is above the national average. Students respond enthusiastically because the lessons in these subjects are often more engaging.
- The school does not enter students early for any GCSE examinations.
- More-able sixth form students make good progress in their chosen subjects and gain exceptionally high AS and A level grades. Average-ability students do not make such good progress.
- Disabled students and those who have special educational needs make similar progress to other students, with an increased number making good progress this year. Their needs are identified early and the work that they are set is matched closely to their abilities. Teachers and teaching assistants demonstrate the skills they need to learn, and provide both support and challenge.
- The school is developing well-focused strategies to support the students eligible for pupil premium funding. Extra staffing, small-group work, additional teaching resources and funding for educational visits are becoming increasingly effective in helping students to overcome the barriers they face in their learning. As a result of better progress, the one GCSE grade gap in English and mathematics attainment between these students and their classmates last year is now closing.
- The school has recognised that some students enter the school with reading abilities well below those of their peers. It is using additional funding for Year 7 literacy well to provide additional help for these younger students. In a short period of time, they have made good progress in improving their reading skills.
- The progress and welfare of the very small number of students who attend sessions at the local education centre is monitored carefully. Their needs are met well through tailored support and they make expected progress.

The quality of teaching requires improvement

- Lesson observations, analysis of the work in students' books, monitoring undertaken by the local authority and the school's own checks all indicate that teaching is improving. There is now more good or better practice in classes across the school. However, there is not enough consistently good teaching to ensure good achievement over time.
- Teaching requires improvement because the information teachers have on students' progress is not always used well enough to ensure that the work in lessons is closely matched to students' different needs and abilities. This is one reason that progress in English still requires improvement. When the tasks given are either too difficult or too easy, progress slows.
- The quality of marking varies considerably. The best contains high-quality written feedback, which gives students a clear indication of the level that they are working at, together with detailed and helpful guidance on how to improve their work. However, some consists only of brief comments, with very little guidance.
- Teachers do not include enough opportunities for students to learn actively and without direct input from the teacher, especially in written work and research tasks, so they do not learn as quickly as they could.
- Where students are not making good progress in the sixth form, teaching requires improvement for similar reasons. Sometimes middle ability students are not challenged to make more rapid progress, and the work they are given does not demand that they learn independently.
- Teachers have secure subject knowledge and many convey their enthusiasm for their subjects to their students, which helps to motivate them. The recently-opened new school buildings provide a very stimulating state-of-the-art learning environment.
- Where high-quality teaching was observed, teachers had high expectations, used questioning well to test students' understanding and were very successful in encouraging students to work together to accelerate their progress. In a Year 7 French lesson, for example, the students worked very hard to answer questions about where they lived. They then showed high levels of confidence when they marked each other's work.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are good

- The school has clear expectations for good behaviour and this is seen in the vast majority of lessons, where students are keen to participate and have a good attitude to learning.
- Students' behaviour around the school is good. They are courteous, polite, and friendly, offering help and assistance to visitors and other students. Relationships are positive throughout the school.
- Attendance is consistently above average because of robust actions by the school. Students are punctual and break times end promptly so that lessons start on time.
- Bullying is rare and students are confident that staff would deal promptly with it. Students have a good understanding of the different kinds of bullying, including prejudice- and cyber-based bullying.

- Students say they feel safe at school. It provides a safe and secure environment and the new buildings are valued and appreciated by the students. The vast majority of parents agree that the school keeps their children safe.
- Sixth form students receive well-focused information, support and guidance. They note that their teachers are always willing to give individual help. Students in the sixth form have good opportunities to contribute to the school, for example on the school senate, as sports leaders, or as mentors to younger students.

The leadership and management requires improvement

- The school is improving, but the rate of improvement has not been fast enough to raise its effectiveness to good. This is largely because there remain pockets of teaching that still requires improvement, in all subjects and year groups, and this has held back students' progress.
- Many initiatives are still 'works in progress' and there has not been time for them to show full effect. For example, procedures are becoming established for subject leaders to monitor and evaluate the quality of teaching, including regular lesson observations and more rigorous training for all staff. However, some teachers need to implement effective teaching strategies to improve students' progress.
- Year leaders are now using tracking systems better to check on the progress made by students. Students who need extra support are now being identified more quickly. However the actions taken to improve these students' attainment are not always sharply defined. Although the school has some way to go, the school's current data show that students in all year groups are now making better progress than in recent years.
- The executive headteacher's leadership is clear and purposeful and she has quickly identified the strengths and weaknesses in the school. She is working relentlessly to ensure that teachers focus more sharply on improving the quality of teaching. She is also making sure that the considerable support provided by staff from the nearby outstanding partner school is well targeted.
- Governors and staff share the executive headteacher's determination to swiftly improve the school and ensure that all students achieve what they are capable of.
- This year, the school is ensuring that teachers' pay and promotion are linked better to the contribution that individual teachers are making to the raising of standards. Teachers are being held more accountable for the progress of the students in their classes and for the subjects they lead.
- The broad range of GCSE, AS and A level subjects offered meets students' needs in Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form. There are also a number of work-related options available which promote greater student engagement. Visits and visitors, together with a wide range of arts, music and sports activities, promote students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development effectively.
- The local authority provides good support. The adviser linked to the school works in the school one day a week to help improve the quality of teaching. Governors noted that local authority training has given them a better insight into their roles.
- Safeguarding arrangements meet current requirements.

■ **The governance of the school:**

- Governors are increasingly holding the school to account. However, until recently, they relied too much on the information provided by the school. They now regularly review their effectiveness and have attended training to improve their ability to challenge the school's leaders. Some governors visit the school regularly, so that they know more about the school's teaching and performance. They are aware that more needs to be done to improve the quality of teaching, raise attainment and accelerate students' progress. Governors know about the use of additional funds from the pupil premium to improve the achievement of the students entitled to it. They are increasingly ensuring that the salary progression of staff is justified.

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	117530
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	401672

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Maintained
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	1305
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	220
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Richard Aggus
Headteacher	Alastair Craig
Date of previous school inspection	9 February 2010
Telephone number	01438 222600
Fax number	01438 222606
Email address	admin@nobel.herts.sch.uk

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