

# Hitchin Girls' School

Highbury Road, Hitchin, SG4 9RS

**Inspection dates** 19–20 June 2013

<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected
	This inspection:	<b>Outstanding</b> <b>1</b>
Achievement of pupils	Outstanding	1
Quality of teaching	Outstanding	1
Behaviour and safety of pupils	Outstanding	1
Leadership and management	Outstanding	1

## Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

### This is an outstanding school.

- The headteacher, governors and staff have very high aspirations for students. Teachers create a lively and productive learning environment in which students thrive.
- Students' achievement is very high across subjects and key stages. Students make exceptionally good progress in English and mathematics.
- Teaching is consistently good and often outstanding. Students learn quickly and thoroughly as well as gaining high levels of enjoyment from their studies.
- Students' work is often of a very high standard. Students are enthusiastic, creative and imaginative as well as thoughtful in their work. They develop their personal and social skills very well.  
Students' behaviour is exemplary in lessons and around the school. They work very well together and are very proud of their school.
- Students' safety is given high priority. Students know how to keep themselves safe and who to go to for help. High levels of respect exist between students and staff and the atmosphere is harmonious and happy.
- The headteacher and senior managers manage the school very efficiently and ensure that teachers improve their practice including by using frequent lesson observations which inform rigorous performance management.
- Governance is highly effective. Governors are skilled and experienced. They monitor all aspects of the school's work closely.
- The sixth form is outstanding because students' achievement is very high, they are prepared very well for their next steps and many improvements have been made to the provision successfully.

## Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 44 lessons, of which five were joint observations with senior leaders.
- Discussions were held with the headteacher, the Chair of the Governing Body and a small group of governors, senior leaders, staff and groups of students.
- Inspectors took account of the 83 responses to the 'Parent View' online questionnaire and considered the school's results from surveys of parents and carers views during parents' evenings over the academic year.
- Inspectors scrutinised a range of evidence, including the school's self-evaluation report, the improvement plan, records relating to attendance and behaviour, safeguarding documentation, records of governors' meetings and samples of students' work.

## Inspection team

Philippa Francis, Lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Hermione Horn

Additional Inspector

Derek Wiles

Additional Inspector

Andrew Lyons

Additional Inspector

Kevin Morris

Additional Inspector

## Full report

### Information about this school

- The school is larger than the average-sized secondary school.
- The large majority of students are of White British heritage and speak English as their first language.
- The proportion of students supported through school action, school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is below average.
- The school makes early GCSE entry in mathematics.
- The proportion of students who are eligible for the pupil premium is below average.
- The sixth form is part of a consortium comprising three local schools which collaborate to offer the curriculum.
- The school meets government floor standards, which set the minimum expectation for attainment and progress.
- The school converted to become an academy school in August 2011. When its predecessor school, which had the same name, was last inspected by Ofsted, it was judged to be good.

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

- Increase the quality of written feedback on marked work by:
  - supporting heads of department to implement a marking policy rigorously
  - ensuring teachers give full and helpful written feedback on students' work including clearly-stated improvement points.

## Inspection judgements

### The achievement of pupils is outstanding

- Students have above average standards when joining the school. The proportion of students gaining five A\* to C grades including English and mathematics has increased and is very high. Most students achieve at least five GCSEs at A\* to C. Students' results in mathematics, English, humanities and science subjects are outstanding.
- Students' progress in English and mathematics is excellent. A high proportion of students make more than expected progress in these subjects compared with national figures. Students develop very good mathematical skill and highly effective communication skills. Their writing is often of a very high standard; they use a broad vocabulary and practise correct language use and pronunciation often.
- Students hone their analytical and evaluation skills well and use these regularly. They use self- and peer-assessment frequently which helps them take increasing responsibility for their learning and develops their independent learning skills well. As a result, they are well prepared for the next stage in their education.
- Students for whom the pupil premium provides support achieve well. The gap between their achievement and their peers is narrowing: in English and mathematics the difference in grades narrowed to half a grade and a third of a grade respectively in 2012. In the current year, this group has increased in number and, along with the very few students targeted for the Year 7 catch-up programme, is making very good progress in part because of the very effective one-to-one support provided by teachers and teaching assistants.
- Students who have special educational needs achieve very well, particularly in mathematics, science and humanities where they make exceptionally good progress. The school's monitoring of these students' progress in the current year shows that this high level of achievement is being sustained. The gap between the achievement of the very small group of students with lower than average starting points and their peers has decreased markedly and is small.
- In the sixth form, students achieve exceptionally well in Year 12 where the proportion of students who achieve higher grades has increased substantially. Almost all students stay on into Year 13 and their results at GCE A-level, including their achievement of high grades, are well above average. Around three-quarters of students move on into higher education with an increasing number to Russell Group universities. Sixth form students develop a wide range of highly useful skills including leadership skills developed through their roles in the main school such as House Captains.

### The quality of teaching is outstanding

- Teaching is consistently good and often outstanding across all key stages and subjects. Because of this consistency, students' learning is secure and developed very well across subjects and over time across the academic year ensuring their very good progress.
- Teachers plan their lessons well and use a wide range of activities, including very effective use of information and learning technology. Teachers set relevant and challenging objectives to make sure that students' learning is thorough and deep. Their lessons include good strategies to consolidate students' learning, for example, teachers often require students to self- or peer-assess their work and insist that improvement points are identified as a result. In a very few

lessons, teachers focus too much on whole group tasks and do not provide enough stretch for more able students.

- Teachers make sure that every minute of lessons is used productively. Because of almost all students' excellent attitudes to learning, they respond very well to the snappy starts to many lessons and get down to work quickly. Teachers nearly always set a brisk pace in lessons which challenges students and develops their confidence and resilience. However, on a few occasions, teachers move on too quickly without ensuring all students have fully grasped all the key points.
- Students' imagination and creativity are often stimulated well by teachers' interesting and engaging strategies. Teachers challenge students to think deeply and laterally, for example by brainstorming ideas at the start of topics, as well as helping them to make connections between theory and practice. Teachers' use of questioning is highly developed and very effective; their questions are often demanding and targeted appropriately at different students. However, in a few lessons, teachers do not direct their questions fully effectively based on their knowledge of students' abilities.
- Teachers provide a wealth of verbal feedback to students and almost all students are well aware of how well they are doing, what grade they should aspire to and how to get there. Students' workbooks include clear information about the levels they are working at and their targets. However, the quality of teachers' marking varies considerably across subjects. In some subjects, marking is of high quality, but inspectors found other examples where marking was infrequent and lacked detail.
- Teachers provide very good support for vulnerable students, students who are disabled or who have special educational needs. Teachers use a range of information to plan and implement interventions where needed carefully to ensure that these students learn well alongside their peers.

### **The behaviour and safety of pupils are outstanding**

- Students have excellent attitudes to learning as shown by the enthusiasm with which they engage with activities in lessons and their response to teachers' directions. Students' attendance and punctuality are very good and they are courteous and respectful. Staff support them well to find a good balance between working hard, achieving challenging goals and having fun as shown, for example, by the many educational school trips students enjoy and learn from.
- No differences exist in the behaviour of groups of students. For example, the behaviour of Year 7 students is very good and consistent with other older groups of students. Students are highly positive about behaviour and safety within school. They show very good awareness of safety and are well informed about modern day risks to their safety such as cyber bullying. Although the school site is open access, robust risk assessment and fully implemented control measures mean that the school is a safe place.
- Staff implement consistently a comprehensive behaviour policy that students know, understand well, and respect. On the rare occasions where behaviour is poor, staff deal with this quickly and effectively. They pay particular attention to exploring with students the moral and social implications of their behaviour to help them avoid future occurrences. Bullying is rare and staff tackle this robustly where it occurs.
- Staff and parents are very positive about both behaviour and safety. Senior managers survey parents' views about behaviour and safety regularly through very well-attended parents'

evenings. Inspectors noted that a very few parents are dissatisfied with the schools' approach to behaviour management and that managers are instigating an action to raise parents' and carers' awareness of their stance and impact on promoting excellent behaviour.

## **The leadership and management** are outstanding

- The headteacher, well supported by the governing body, provides clarity of vision and has implemented a range of strategies that have ensured improvement in the provision. These actions have sustained and increased the very good reputation of the school and developed the sixth form very well, including through the consortium arrangements.
- Senior managers, led strongly by the headteacher, are determined to sustain and further improve the high quality teaching. The management structure reflects this with two senior posts focused on teaching and learning and a high emphasis on improving assessment and increasing the sharing of best practice in the improvement plan.
- Managers observe lessons frequently and use their findings constructively. Teachers benefit from regular feedback and many opportunities to undertake appropriate and helpful professional development activities. Inspectors observed lessons with all the members of the senior team and agreed with their judgements about the quality of lessons. However, inspectors' scrutiny of written records of lesson observations showed an over generous evaluation of a few lessons, particularly those graded as outstanding.
- The curriculum meets students' needs very well. An early entry policy for GCSE mathematics works well to maximise students' potential to gain the highest grade: students are encouraged to resit if they have underachieved. A particular feature of the Key Stage 4 curriculum is an emphasis on careers advice and guidance including one-to-one interviews with senior staff to discuss progression opportunities.
- Heads of department and other middle managers are highly effective in almost all respects. They monitor students' performance carefully and keep comprehensive records. Senior managers insist that challenging targets are set for each individual student and progress compared to these targets is considered regularly. Planned and imminent improvement to information systems will increase managers' immediate access to data.
- Senior managers ensure that policies and procedures are sound and regularly updated. For example, the equality of opportunity policy has recently been thoroughly reviewed. However, an explicit policy to ensure a consistent approach to marking is not in place with the result that variation in approach exists and not all marking is of high quality. This area for development has been identified through self-evaluation and an action is included in the improvement plan.
- Pupil premium funding is used carefully to ensure that students receive the most effective support. In particular, students in this group receive one-to-one tuition in English and mathematics and individual mentoring and, as a result, their rate of progress has increased markedly.
- **The governance of the school:**
  - Governors are experienced and skilled. They use their experience well in supporting the school, for example in performance management activities. Governors are self-critical and active in improving their practice. They regularly challenge the headteacher and senior managers to justify their proposals and make sure that these remain in line with the school's core values.

- Governors support the strong focus on teaching and learning and promote this very well through their links with subject departments. They know the school's strengths but also are aware of where improvement is needed. They have a high involvement in overseeing the implementation of the improvement plan.
- Governors ensure that statutory regulations are met. They take a keen interest in the achievement of students who are eligible for the pupil premium including linking this group's success to the headteacher's personal objectives and set challenging targets for improvement.

## 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

<b>Unique reference number</b>	137288
<b>Local authority</b>	Hertfordshire
<b>Inspection number</b>	422220

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

<b>Type of school</b>	Academy converter
<b>School category</b>	Community
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	11–18
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Girls
<b>Gender of pupils in the sixth form</b>	Girls
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	1065
<b>Of which, number on roll in sixth form</b>	256
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	The governing body
<b>Chair</b>	Colin Minton
<b>Headteacher</b>	Frances Manning
<b>Date of previous school inspection</b>	Not previously inspected
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