

# Fearnhill School

Icknield Way West, Letchworth, SG6 4BA

**Inspection dates** 17–18 September 2013

<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	Previous inspection:	Satisfactory	3
	This inspection:	<b>Requires improvement</b>	<b>3</b>
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

- Students' attainment in English is below average and boys do not achieve as well as girls. Students' progress in English, while improving, is slower than in mathematics.
- Teaching in the main school is not consistently good or better.
- Work is not demanding enough in some lessons, especially for the most able students.
- The quality of marking is inconsistent and students do not always act upon teachers' guidance to improve their work.
- School leaders have correctly identified those areas requiring improvement but the impact of their careful planning is not yet fully apparent across the school.
- The school's evaluation of how good it is does not take enough account of the progress students are making.
- Members of the governing body do not have a clear understanding of how to hold leaders to account for the impact of teaching over time on students' progress.

### The school has the following strengths

- Both the quality of teaching and students' achievement in the sixth form are consistently good. The overall effectiveness of the sixth form is good.
- Behaviour is mostly good and students feel safe, valued and able to share any problems with adults.
- Overall, the number of exclusions has fallen and attendance has improved.
- Systems for checking students' progress and setting targets are much improved. The school is better at identifying and providing for students who require additional help to achieve their target grades.
- Leaders have a clear plan for improving the school which is beginning to result in improvements in the quality of teaching and students' progress, including English.

## Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 38 part lessons taught by 38 different teachers, of which five were joint observations with senior leaders. In addition, inspectors attended some registration periods that take place in the afternoon.
- Meetings were held with three groups of students, five members of the governing body, and senior and middle leaders. A meeting was also held with two representatives of the local authority.
- Inspectors took account of the 30 responses to the online questionnaire (Parent View) and the outcomes of the school’s own parental surveys.
- Inspectors scrutinised a number of documents, including the school’s own data on current progress. Inspectors looked at documentation relating to: school development, management of the work of staff, school self-evaluation, checks on teaching, students’ behaviour and attendance, the safeguarding of students and governance.

## Inspection team

Nasim Butt, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Genevieve Usher

Additional Inspector

Alan Jarvis

Additional Inspector

Jackie Jackson-Smith

Additional Inspector

## Full report

### Information about this school

- This school is smaller than the average-sized secondary school and has reduced in size since the previous inspection. It has a small sixth form that shares some teaching within a consortium with Highfield School, a local 11–18 high school.
- The school formed a cooperative trust with Highfield School in April 2013. This is a partnership arrangement but with two distinct governing bodies each responsible for their own school. Fearnhill School is a specialist mathematics and computing college.
- An above-average proportion of the students are known to be eligible for the pupil premium (additional government funding for those known to be eligible for free school meals or who are looked after by the local authority).
- The proportion of disabled students and those who have special educational needs supported through school action is above average, as is the proportion at school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs.
- Nearly three quarters of students are of White British heritage and the remainder are mostly of Indian heritage.
- The school meets the government's current floor standard for students' attainment by the end of Year 11.
- A few students attend full-time or part-time alternative education at the North Hertfordshire Education Support Centre.
- The school went into special measures in February 2011 and came out of this category and was judged satisfactory in the inspection of March 2012.

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

- Improve the quality of teaching so that it is consistently good or better in order to raise students' achievement by:
  - making sure that the level of challenge and expectation in lessons is consistently high
  - ensuring that assessment information is always used effectively by teachers to enable students to make at least good progress
  - refining marking so that it is consistently good in showing students how to improve their work, and ensuring that they act upon the comments made
  - providing teachers with opportunities for sharing classroom skills to promote improvements in teaching across the school.
- Raise attainment and accelerate progress, particularly in English, by ensuring that the gaps in achievement between boys and girls are narrowed significantly so that they both achieve equally well.
- Improve the effectiveness of leadership by:
  - improving the accuracy of the evaluations of teaching by taking greater account of the evidence about student progress
  - ensuring that improvement plans give greater emphasis to the progress made by all groups of

students and indicators are identified that allow leaders to check more frequently on the improvement being made

- providing governors with further training in the use and analysis of data so that they can fully evaluate the impact of teaching over time.

## Inspection judgements

### The achievement of pupils **requires improvement**

- Although most students make the expected progress by the end of Year 11, particularly in mathematics, not enough are making good progress. The proportion of students making good progress in English does not compare well with national figures, especially for boys in English.
- Students' attainment in mathematics is broadly average by the end of Year 11 and below average in English. There was a rising trend in attainment and progress in 2011 to 2012 but the school experienced a dip in 2013, partly due to staffing difficulties in the English department. Robust assessment data and inspection evidence suggests that current Year 11 students are on track to reach better standards than last year, with over half of the cohort expected to achieve five A\* to C grades including English and mathematics on the basis of current performance.
- Students' progress is more variable in other subjects, with humanities a notable strength. In general, progress is now more rapid because of work now underway to raise levels of challenge across the school, but data are not always used quickly enough to identify and address underachievement and to monitor rates of improvement.
- Progress in Key Stage 3 is improving, with an increasing number of students in Years 8 and 9 on target to meet their predicted grades. The school's closer focus on these year groups ensures that students are being increasingly well prepared for transition to Key Stage 4.
- The few students who attend courses at the local education support centre make good progress and achieve appropriate qualifications.
- Students' achievement in the sixth form is consistently good as a result of good and outstanding teaching over time. Courses have been tailored to meet their specific needs resulting in very low drop out rates and almost all students progressing into higher education.
- All students are entered early for GCSE examinations in mathematics. This practice has had a variable and sometimes adverse impact on students' motivation to do better, for example the most able who did not meet their target as well as the students who joined the school with average levels of attainment and failed to achieve a grade C pass.
- There are clear strategies in place to meet the needs of disabled students and those who have special educational needs. As a result, these students make similar progress to the rest. Indian students make better progress than the majority who are White British.
- Carefully targeted pupil premium and Year 7 catch-up funding supports eligible students through additional pastoral support and by careful withdrawal work, such as reading catch-ups. As a consequence, gaps are showing some signs of closing in English and mathematics; the attainment of students eligible for the pupil premium at GCSE is two thirds of a grade lower than their classmates.
- Students are assessed for their skills in reading in Years 7 and 8. Those below age-related expectations are identified and many have made good progress. They have become confident readers as a result of the school's strategic approach to improving standards in reading across the curriculum.

**The quality of teaching requires improvement**

- Although there have been clear improvements in teaching over time, there is a significant proportion of teaching that still requires improvement. The impact of this is that some students, particularly boys in English, are not making good progress.
- Where teaching requires improvement, the pace of learning is too slow to ensure rapid progress. Expectations are too low and activities are not demanding enough, especially for the most able students who do not always achieve as well as they should. The assessment information available is not always used effectively by teachers to make sure that students make good progress.
- In the most effective teaching, the match of work to students' abilities is carefully considered resulting in them making good and, at times, outstanding progress. Such practice is not consistent across the school, resulting in students' specific needs not being met. Too often there are insufficient opportunities for students to explain the reasons for their responses and demonstrate deeper learning.
- Assessment procedures across the school are now sharper, an area for improvement identified in the previous inspection. Books are regularly marked and feedback given to students on how to improve their work. However, the quality of marking is inconsistent, being better developed in English and humanities than in some other subjects. Students do not always act upon comments made by teachers to improve their work and this slows their progress over time.
- Teachers generally have good subject knowledge and this is often put to good effect in stimulating students' thinking and deepening their learning. This is particularly evident in the sixth form where teaching is consistently good or better. Teaching in mathematics and computing, the school's specialist areas, is improving at the same rate as the rest of the school.
- Teaching is effective in promoting good attitudes to learning, partly the result of good relationships between students and teachers, which teachers take time to cultivate.
- In some lessons, for example Year 13 chemistry and Year 10 drama, questioning was used very well to assess students' understanding and lead them into deeper reflection about, respectively, organic reaction mechanisms and creating audience moods using soundscapes. Leaders recognise the need to extend opportunities for sharing of teachers' best classroom skills across the school to improve the quality of teaching.
- Both teachers and support staff are effective in helping students who are disabled or who have special educational needs to make at least similar progress to other students. In addition, progress rates of students supported by the pupil premium are improving because of the quality of extra support, which is well targeted and monitored for impact.
- The teaching of literacy is improving fast because of the drive across the school to improve students' reading and writing skills. For example, students are required to complete an extended writing task in every subject which is assessed against clear criteria.

**The behaviour and safety of pupils are good**

- Students affirm that there have been big improvements in behaviour over the past 18 months as a result of school leaders' focus on creating a more positive climate for learning.

- The school is a community where individuals are known and valued. Students say they feel safe, and parents and carers agree. The very few episodes of challenging behaviour are well managed and extremist behaviour or attitudes are not tolerated. As a result, both permanent and fixed-term exclusion rates have been falling fast.
- Students are polite and respectful to each other and the adults working with them. They enjoy working in groups and pairs where they listen respectfully and contribute willingly. They show good understanding of right and wrong. These reflect students' good social and moral development.
- Sixth form students show high levels of maturity and are good role models for younger students. In discussion with inspectors, they spoke positively about the guidance they receive and enthused about the increasing opportunities they have to make a positive contribution to the school.
- School records show a decline in instances of poor behaviour over time. Students say that the school policy on behaviour is applied consistently in most classrooms and that this has had a strong input on improving behaviour over time.
- Students say that bullying is rare. They are familiar with the different types of bullying, including cyber-bullying and homophobic behaviour, know what actions to take and are confident that issues will be addressed.
- Attendance is in line with national averages and shows an improving trend across the vast majority of groups. The school has robust strategies which are influencing attendance positively. The school carefully monitors the attendance of those students who attend courses at the local education support centre.
- In the few lessons where students are not fully engaged, low-level poor behaviour sometimes occurs. While this is usually quickly addressed, teachers' responses are occasionally inconsistent.

### **The leadership and management** requires improvement

- Although there have been clear improvements in teaching since the previous inspection, the school has had an overly optimistic view of the quality of teaching because it has relied too heavily on the observation of lessons that teachers have specially prepared. Not enough emphasis is given to the evidence the school has about the progress students are making over time to help to assess the impact of teaching on students' learning.
- Although current students are making better progress, school leaders have not secured consistently good achievement in English and mathematics. However, they have a clear understanding of what needs to be improved and how this can be achieved.
- The school has an accurate view of its performance and has identified the right priorities for the future. Key developments since the previous inspection are already having a positive impact and demonstrate the school's capacity to improve further.
- The headteacher has accelerated the rate of improvement by focusing on raising the bar for teaching and learning. Systems to track students' progress and identify those who are not making enough progress are now more effective, and this is helping to secure improvements in

achievement.

- Learning in lessons is improving because leaders are tackling weaknesses directly. Staff are keen to participate in a range of professional development activities, and were particularly keen to receive feedback about their teaching during the inspection.
- Most subject and other leaders are aware of the weaknesses to be overcome to further improve teaching. Better leadership is resulting in students making more progress, including in English where staffing difficulties have been largely resolved.
- The school's improvement plans identify the correct key issues for further improvement, in particular raising the achievement of boys and improving the quality of teaching. However, current targets are not clear enough, particularly those related to closing the gaps in attainment between different groups.
- The range of subjects and courses offered meet the needs, interests and aspirations of the students, while allowing sufficient time for the study of English and mathematics. A good range of trips, visits and special events, for example to the holocaust memorial, ensure that students' spiritual moral, social and cultural development is promoted effectively. The school makes suitable arrangements for providing independent information, advice and guidance to prepare students for the next stage of their education and the world of work.
- The school is using its pupil premium funding well so that it is having a greater impact on the students for which it is intended. The management of teachers' performance is now more rigorous and appropriately linked to salary progression.
- Good leadership of the sixth form has enabled students to access a wide range of courses that better meet the needs of all students of all abilities. As a result, students' achievement in the sixth form has been consistently good.
- The local authority has provided a significant level of support across a range of subjects. This, coupled with good support from the local partner school, has been instrumental in ensuring improvement in English, though there is more to do.
- **The governance of the school:**
  - Governors demonstrate a good awareness of the school's strengths and priorities. They know the challenges ahead and the areas for development in governance. Key members of the governing body are aware of the school's performance and what these results indicate about the progress students make. However, not all governors have a clear understanding of how to use data about students' progress to ask sharper questions of school leaders about the quality of teaching over time. The governing body has taken action to ensure the falling rolls have not resulted in financial difficulties. Governors know how the pupil premium funding is being deployed and how to evaluate its impact on the outcomes for the students who are eligible. Although there has sometimes been insufficient challenge in the past, the governing body now has procedures place to ensure that salaries paid match teachers' performance.



## 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>	117504
<b>Local authority</b>	Hertfordshire
<b>Inspection number</b>	425328

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

<b>Type of school</b>	Comprehensive
<b>School category</b>	Maintained
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	11–18
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Gender of pupils in the sixth form</b>	Mixed
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	650
<b>Of which, number on roll in sixth form</b>	110
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	The governing body
<b>Chair</b>	Paul Vaughan
<b>Headteacher</b>	Jeremy Whelan
<b>Date of previous school inspection</b>	6–7 March 2012
<b>Telephone number</b>	01462 621200
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