

Cedars Upper School

Mentmore Road, Linslade, Leighton Buzzard, LU7 2AE

Inspection dates 17–18 September 2013

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Satisfactory	3
	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 make good progress in most subjects, including English and mathematics, and reach standards that are well above average by the end of Year 11.
- The sixth form is good and benefiting from strong new leadership. Sixth form students achieve well and make a valuable contribution to the life of the school.
- Teaching is mainly good and sometimes outstanding. Students said, 'Teachers are enthusiastic and lessons are not boring.' Teachers have strong subject knowledge and have established respectful and purposeful relationships with students.
- Disabled students and those who have special educational needs are helped to thrive and make good progress. Teaching assistants support these and other students extremely well in lessons.
- The school's approach to ensuring students' safety, care and welfare is meticulous and effective. Pupils' attendance has improved steadily over the last two years and is now above the national average.
- Students behave sensibly and courteously in lessons and around the school. They get on well with each other and appreciate the school and their teachers. Students' positive attitudes make a significant contribution to the quality of their learning and progress.
- The leadership team is ably led by the headteacher, who is held in high regard by students and staff. The team is relentless in its drive for improvement, through regular monitoring of lessons, tracking of students' progress and by holding subject leaders and teachers to account for the progress of students and the quality of teaching.
- Leaders have an accurate view of the school's strengths and weaknesses and have successfully brought about improvements in the quality of teaching and standards.
- The governing body makes a significant and effective contribution to the strategic management of the school and provides a good level of challenge and support to the school leaders.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- The quality of written feedback to students is not consistently good. Not all subject teachers give students clear guidance on how to improve further.
- The most able students are not always challenged enough in lessons, so that their progress is not as rapid as it could otherwise be.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 42 lessons or part lessons, small-group work, tutorial sessions, and an assembly. They undertook joint observations and a learning walk alongside members of the leadership team and observed them feeding back to teachers.
- Inspectors held discussions with students during lessons, around the school and in three organised meetings. They spoke with the headteacher, other members of the leadership team, the Chair of the Governing Body and three other governors, teachers with subject and other responsibilities, other teachers and support staff.
- The team looked at students' work in lessons and as part of the learning walk.
- Inspectors analysed the 51 responses to the staff questionnaire, the 122 responses to the online Parent View questionnaire, and held a telephone conversation with a parent.
- Inspectors looked at a range of documents provided by the school, including examination and internal assessment data, minutes of meetings of the governing body, the school improvement plan, the self-evaluation summary and full report, raising achievement plans for subjects, safeguarding documents and records, policies, records of the monitoring of lessons and documents relating to teachers' performance management and professional development.

Inspection team

Helena McVeigh, Lead inspector	Additional Inspector
Louise Lee	Additional Inspector
Rosemarie McCarthy	Additional Inspector
Heather Housden	Additional Inspector
Stuart Gray	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- Cedars Upper School is an above average-sized secondary school. The school converted to academy status on 1 September 2011 and was inspected shortly afterwards in November 2011.
- The school admits students into Year 9, which is the last year of Key Stage 3, from over eight different middle schools.
- The proportion of students for whom the school receives the pupil premium (additional government funding for those known to be eligible for free school meals, looked after children and other specific groups) is well below the national average.
- The proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is well below average. The largest ethnic group is of White British heritage. There are small numbers of students from a very wide range of other ethnic groups. A very few students have English as an additional language, which is well below the national average. None is at an early stage of learning English.
- The proportion of disabled students and those who have special educational needs supported at school action is lower than the national average. The proportion supported through school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is well below average.
- The school makes use of alternative provision at the new Academy of Central Bedfordshire, which is managed by local headteachers, to support five students with behavioural, social and emotional needs.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for students' attainment and progress.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of teaching further by:
 - ensuring that there is greater consistency in the way that teachers give written subject-specific feedback to students to indicate how they can improve their work
 - ensuring that students respond to teachers' written feedback
 - ensuring that the most able students are always given work that is suitably demanding and which enables them to make more rapid progress in lessons.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils is good

- The school tracks students' progress well, using data from the middle schools and its own testing early in Year 9 to set aspirational targets for students in each subject. All groups of students make good progress through Years 9 to 11 in most subjects. In 2012, attainment in GCSE subjects was well above average and the proportions of students making and exceeding expected progress was higher than average, particularly in English. Results in mathematics improved further in 2013, with a higher proportion exceeding expected progress. The school only rarely uses early entry for mathematics.
- The unvalidated 2013 GCSE result in English language came as a shock to the school as it was below the school's own predictions and below the result attained last year, mainly because several students were awarded a D grade instead of the C that the school had expected. The school has sent papers away to be remarked and has also responded swiftly with an action plan to secure improvements for 2014. The current assessment data for Year 11 and observation of students' work indicate that results should be back on track to reach previous good levels this year.
- Leaders were previously concerned about the relatively low percentage of students gaining the top grades at GCSE. As a result of a concerted focus by senior and subject leaders, there was an increase in 2013 in the proportions gaining A or A* in nearly all subjects, including mathematics and science. Over half the students entered for social history were awarded A and A* grades.
- Achievement in the sixth form is good. The school's leaders identified under-performing subject areas based on the 2012 results, with improvements seen in 2013. The proportion of students gaining A to E (pass) grades increased in AS and A-level examinations, with an increase in the proportion of highest grades, A and B, by 10% at A level. Results for the small numbers of students entered for applied A and AS examinations were above average, with 100% pass rate.
- Students eligible for the pupil premium have achieved less well than their non-eligible peers in the past two years, but the gap is closing. For example, the gap of approximately one grade in both English and mathematics in 2012 has been reduced to around half a grade in 2013. The school has used its pupil premium funds well to support eligible students by, for example, one-to-one tuition, after-school support, breakfast clubs, the provision of school uniform and the purchase of equipment for different subjects. A teacher has responsibility for overseeing the progress of students eligible for the pupil premium and the impact of the funds is monitored regularly by a link governor.
- Students with a statement of special educational needs, including those who are disabled, make particularly good progress and attained well above the national average in external examinations in 2012. While other students with special educational needs did less well in 2012, their results improved considerably in 2013. All students who are disabled and those who have special educational needs are making good progress because of the effective support they receive. The gap between their attainment and other students is narrowing in most subjects.

The quality of teaching is good

- There are some common strengths in the quality of teaching across the school, which is mainly good and sometimes outstanding. Teachers have secure subject knowledge and are enthusiastic about what they are teaching. Relationships with students are very good, with clear respect on

both sides. Students usually enjoy their lessons and feel confident enough to ask questions.

- Teaching assistants provide effective support in lessons mainly, but not exclusively, to disabled students and those with special educational needs. They are deployed well, being attached to specific subject departments with dedicated time to plan lessons with teachers.
- Teachers question students effectively to assess their understanding. They include a good range of practical activities that engage students' interest and encourage them to think and to discuss ideas with their peers. Some teachers ask students to reflect on their learning so they can identify who needs more help.
- Some teachers provide a good level of challenge for all students and aim to ensure that the most able are given work that really stretches their thinking. This is particularly evident in the 'top sets' in subjects such as mathematics and science. Sometimes, especially in mixed-ability classes and in the sixth form, the most able students are not making as rapid progress as they could because they have to do the same work as everyone else and it is too easy for them.
- The quality of written feedback to students is inconsistent. Some subject teachers provide detailed comments showing students how to improve their work. Other teachers are using 'what went well' and 'even better if' to identify strengths and weaknesses and, in the best practice, giving students time to respond. This good practice is not universal. Not all teachers regularly include enough subject-specific feedback that tells students how to improve or allow time for students to respond to their comments. The school has identified this as an area for improvement.
- A literacy coordinator has been appointed to promote the development of literacy across all subjects and this has started to have an impact. Literacy and numeracy activities are included in skills sessions during tutor periods. An initiative called 'books for boys', which involves sixth formers helping Year 9 boys, has resulted in most of the targeted group making very good gains in their reading ages.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are good

- Students' positive attitudes and behaviour in lessons and around the school are strengths in all year groups, and make a significant contribution to their good learning and progress.
- Students are polite and courteous to adults and each other. They work collaboratively and respectfully in class and respond well when given responsibility.
- Occasionally, a few students are less motivated in lessons and do not work as hard as they could. Examples of low-level disruption are rare and handled very sensitively and effectively by staff. The number of exclusions has reduced in the past two years, and staff and students commented on the improvement in behaviour under the leadership of the current headteacher. Parents and carers were also mainly very positive about behaviour.
- There are a few students who attend alternative provision at the newly opened Academy of Central Bedfordshire (ACB). Their attendance and progress is being monitored closely by Cedars staff who liaise regularly with the ACB.
- Students say that they feel safe in school. They know about different forms of bullying and say that it occurs rarely and is dealt with well.

- Students' attendance has improved steadily over the past two years and is now above the national average. The attendance of students in Years 12 and 13 is also particularly good. Students are punctual to school and to lessons. The addition of five minutes movement time between classes helps to ensure that lessons start promptly.

The leadership and management are good

- The headteacher has established a strong team ethos in the school and his achievements have been recognised and warmly welcomed by students, staff, parents and governors. Students described him as 'fantastic' and staff said he is 'an excellent headteacher'. His approach has included a relentless yet sensitive approach to improving the quality of teaching in order to raise standards.
- The improvements noted in the 2011 inspection report have been sustained. The school's evaluation of its own strengths and areas for improvement is accurate and used well to inform an appropriate school development plan that is monitored regularly by governors.
- Leadership of the sixth form has been strengthened this year, with more rigorous monitoring of lessons and improved professional development for staff. The range of subjects offered is also being widened to meet the needs of students for whom the current mainly academic curriculum is inappropriate.
- Arrangements for performance management are effective and the school has been accredited by Investors in People for a second time. Teachers described the appraisal process as 'rigorous'. There is an appropriate link between performance management, the quality of teaching and movement of teachers up the pay scale. Staff engage in a good range of professional development both in school through, for example, the 'teaching and learning conversations' and in external sessions, such as with other schools in the local cluster.
- Heads of subjects are increasingly held to account for students' performance. They are involved in monitoring teaching and learning, and regularly meet with senior leaders to review students' progress and attainment and the quality of teaching. Concerns about the 2012 results in science and modern foreign languages, for example, resulted in raising achievement plans which are having a positive impact.
- The leaders engage well with parents. There are, for example, regular parent surveys to gauge their views and concerns are followed up. The mathematics department conducts its own survey of parents and students' views, which is good practice. The school's website includes a good range of information for parents, including how they can support their children's learning in different subjects.
- The school takes care to ensure students' welfare, health and safety and all aspects of safeguarding are managed meticulously. Staff work hard to promote equality of opportunity, foster the good relations evident throughout the school, and to tackle discrimination.
- Students are offered a good range of subjects and extra-curricular activities in the main school and in the sixth form. Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is promoted well through lessons, tutor periods, assemblies, and a wide range of educational visits and trips. There are good opportunities for students to develop leadership and coaching skills and qualifications, for example as sports and subject leaders. The needs and interests of individual students are considered carefully, and students comment positively on the advice that they have been offered in terms of subject choices and the next stage of their education.

■ The governance of the school:

- The governing body makes a significant contribution to the strategic management of the school. The governors are reflective and constantly seeking new ways to improve their own performance and to provide effective support and challenge to the school. They use their expertise well in areas such as finance, information technology and have introduced strategies to make the school more energy efficient and thereby save money.
- Governors have a good understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement based on knowledge of school data and through visits to the school. They are provided with a good amount of information by the headteacher, for whom they have the highest respect and describe as, 'Having gained the confidence and respect of students and staff.' They hold the leadership to account and offer a good amount of challenge.
- Members of the governing body are kept well informed about the school's new approach to performance management, the link to professional development and contribute to decisions about movement up the pay scale. They are very aware of the quality of teaching and how under-performance has been tackled, including the use of capability where necessary.

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	137462
Local authority	Central Bedfordshire
Inspection number	425336

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Academy converter
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	1131
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	357
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Paul Denvir
Headteacher	Steven Palmer
Date of previous school inspection	23 November 2011
Telephone number	01525 219300
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