

Bury St Edmunds County Upper School

Beetons Way, Bury St Edmunds, IP32 6RF

Inspection dates 18–19 September 2013

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected
	This inspection:	Outstanding 1
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

- Students' achievement is outstanding. Higher ability students, those who speak English as an additional language and those who have special educational needs all make rapid progress, regardless of their starting points and abilities. The gap between the achievement of students supported by additional government funding and others is closing steadily. They are now less than a GCSE grade behind by the end of Year 11.
- The quality of teaching is outstanding. Teachers have very high expectations and students rise to the challenge. No time is wasted and activities are imaginative, creative and enjoyable.
- Students' behaviour is excellent, both in lessons and around the school. They are excellent ambassadors for their school at external events. Excellent relationships create a relaxed yet purposeful, happy atmosphere. As a result, students' attendance is high and none are excluded.
- The curriculum is excellent and supports the outstanding spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the students well.
- Leadership and management are outstanding, driven by the dedicated and visionary headteacher. Skilled school leaders, recognised both locally and nationally for their expertise, support her. Together they have ensured that standards have continued to rise steadily.
- Governors support and challenge the school well, bringing a wide range of expertise to their roles. They have a very good understanding of the school's priorities.
- The sixth form is outstanding. Students' achievement is outstanding and the proportion who gain places in sought-after universities is well above average.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 40 lessons, involving 39 teachers. Three were jointly observed with school leaders. In addition, other sessions were visited to look at the quality of marking.
- Meetings were held with the headteacher and other leaders, four groups of students, the Vice-Chair of the Governing Body and three other governors, two newly qualified teachers and a representative from the local authority. The lead inspector also had a telephone conversation with the Chair of the Governing Body.
- Inspectors took account of 53 responses to Parent View, the online questionnaire, plus one letter from a parent.
- There were 58 staff questionnaires returned and considered by the inspection team.
- Inspectors scrutinised a range of documentation including the school's own information on students' attainment and progress, records of attendance and behaviour, and information about governor meetings, safeguarding, school planning and performance management.
- During this inspection, inspectors asked additional questions designed to ascertain the school's view of the impact and effectiveness of local authority services to support school improvement. This information will contribute to work being carried out by Ofsted to assess the use, quality and impact of those services.

Inspection team

Elaine Taylor, Lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Angela Podmore

Additional Inspector

Terence Cook

Additional Inspector

Ian Starling

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The school converted to become an academy in August 2011. When its predecessor school of the same name was last inspected by Ofsted, it was judged to be outstanding. It is part of the Bury St Edmunds Academy Trust that includes Horringer Court and Westley Middle Schools and Barrow Primary School.
- The school is an average-sized secondary school that serves the western part of Bury St Edmunds and the villages to the west. Pupils also come from a wide area by parental preference.
- The proportion of students for whom the school receives additional government funding through the pupil premium is below average. This additional funding is provided for certain groups, including students in the care of the local authority those known to be eligible for free school meals.
- The vast majority are of White British heritage, and the proportion who speak English as an additional language is low.
- The proportion of disabled students and those who have special educational needs supported at school action is below the national average, as is the proportion supported at school action plus or through a statement of special educational needs.
- A very small number of students attend off-site courses at West Suffolk College. Sixth form provision is in collaboration with St Benedict's Catholic School, which is next door.
- The school meets the current government floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for students' attainment.
- The school collaborates with the Suffolk and Norfolk Initial Teacher Training provider as part of the School Direct programme and became a Teaching School in March 2013.
- The school has received a large number of national awards covering all curriculum areas. These include Artsmark Gold, International School status and PE Quality Mark with Distinction.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure gaps in achievement between students eligible for additional government funding and others continue to close, by further sharpening the way leaders, including governors evaluate the cost effectiveness of their decisions about spending.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils

is outstanding

- Students enter the school with attainment that is broadly average to below average. They make outstanding progress and achieve results in GCSE examinations that are well above the national average across a wide range of subjects. Attainment has risen steadily over the last two years.
- All students achieve exceptionally well because the school has very high expectations and supports them very well to meet them. Every student gains five GCSE passes, including mathematics and English. Over three quarters of the students gained these five passes at grade C or above.
- More-able students achieve well; nearly one third of students gain five or more passes at the very top grades.
- The gap between the achievement of boys and girls has closed. Disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs all gain five passes including mathematics and English, and for half of them these passes are at grade C or above.
- Students for whom the pupil premium funding is intended still achieve slightly less well than others in the school, but the attainment gap halved between 2011 and 2012 and closed even further in 2013. In English, the proportion making expected progress is higher than for all students nationally.
- The school does not make use of early entry for examinations, except in the case of a very small number of students who are judged to be at the borderline between grades C and D in mathematics. They take the examination in March in Year 11, so that they have a second chance if they are not successful at gaining a grade C.
- In lessons, students work hard and make rapid progress. The small numbers who attend courses at West Suffolk College go on to gain useful practical skills and work-related qualifications.
- Students read widely and write extensively across all subjects and apply a wide range of skills very effectively to ensure they are well prepared for the next steps in their education. The extensive opportunities provided by extra-curricular activities ensure they develop many useful personal qualities such as organisational skills, confidence and the ability to work in teams. Students are very articulate and express themselves well when speaking.
- In the sixth form, progress is also outstanding, well above local and national averages. In 2012, the school was one of the most successful comprehensive schools in the country at sending students to Oxford or Cambridge universities. Attainment in A level and AS level is above national averages, in some cases significantly so.
- In the lessons seen, learning was never less than good and often outstanding.

The quality of teaching

is outstanding

- Teaching in many lessons is outstanding, and it is consistently good or better. Teachers have very high expectations, to which students rise. Teachers use their excellent subject knowledge to interest, inspire and motivate students. They plan creative activities based on a clear

understanding of what each student will need in order to succeed.

- Relationships in lessons are excellent and teachers use humour appropriately, adding to students' enjoyment. Social development is strongly supported through regular opportunities to discuss ideas in pairs or work collaboratively in groups.
- Teachers check and monitor students' progress in lessons and adjust their teaching as needed. For example, in a music lesson students learning to play the steel drums made excellent progress because the teacher explained very clearly, used questions to recap prior learning and then followed up on answers to add more challenge. Students were given instruments that had the correct level of challenge to suit their ability. They were supported to assess their own and their classmates' performances and so developed resilience and perseverance to master the techniques.
- Students are supported to develop a range of basic skills across the curriculum. A particularly strong feature of their development is the ability to speak with confidence using correct English. Teachers model this, as they use their excellent subject knowledge to articulate clearly when giving instructions or introducing new topics. They ensure students understand and can use the correct technical vocabulary the subject requires.
- Teachers mark students work regularly and give helpful feedback on how to improve it. Students appreciate that teachers also give additional verbal feedback and support to individuals and groups of students. Students make very good use of this feedback to improve their work.
- Other adults support disabled students and those who have special educational needs exceptionally well. They understand the aims of the lessons and coach and challenge those who need additional help, so that their progress matches that of other groups. More-able students are also challenged extremely well with extension tasks routinely provided to take them further. Students from all groups, including those known to be eligible for the pupil premium funding, are encouraged to aim high, given challenging targets and then supported to meet them.
- Homework builds well on the learning in the classroom. Well-constructed homework booklets allow students to explore the work for the term at their own pace.
- Teaching in the sixth form is also outstanding. Students are given opportunities to work independently and in groups. In an outstanding history lesson, the teacher enabled them to be highly reflective and developed their curiosity about diversity in religion, adding greatly to their spiritual development.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are outstanding

- Across the school, there is a culture of mutual trust and respect. One student said: 'Everyone is equal and included and we are encouraged to think that we can do anything we want. Teachers always have time for us.'
- Students have highly positive attitudes to learning and are very keen to learn. They enjoy going to school, as indicated by the high attendance of all groups. No students are persistently absent.
- These positive attitudes start immediately because of very good transition arrangements and excellent communication. This includes between schools and with parents and students. One parent who wrote to the inspection team about the excellent start her son had made finished by saying: 'Thanks County Upper. You take a lot of worry out of a new parent. I could not be

happier and every day I know more and more that this is the right school for my child.'

- Students participate readily in an extensive extra-curricular programme including sporting, social, artistic, musical and dramatic activities.
- Students have a very good understanding of the different types of bullying and report that bullying is a rare occurrence that is dealt with efficiently and effectively should it occur. Students in an information and communication technology lesson spoke knowledgeably about cyber-bullying. Homophobic bullying is covered sensitively through personal, social and health education lessons and in sessions led by external specialists.
- Students know how to keep safe. They pay close attention to health and safety issues in practical lessons.
- The school is a friendly and harmonious community where different groups get on well together and are respectful of differences. There are no reported racist incidents.
- Students in the sixth form are strong advocates for the school. They support younger students and give of their time to organise additional events and opportunities for them. They are punctual to lessons and engage fully in the work.
- Parents agree that the school cares well for the students and keeps them safe, as do staff. Openness and trust underpin relationships. One member of staff described it thus: 'Students will generally be honest and upfront with staff, knowing that they are important as are their opinions.'

The leadership and management are outstanding

- Staff are proud to be part of the school, feel supported and share in the vision and high aspirations for all students of the headteacher and her wider leadership team. Staffing is very stable and teachers give generously of their time beyond the school day. Leaders support their development well and many are recognised for their expertise, locally and nationally. One staff questionnaire contained the following quote: 'The team ethos is established from the top and runs through the school, its staff, governors and students.' Students are thriving, have a real commitment to their community and are achieving at the highest levels.
- The school has an accurate understanding of its performance and plans carefully for future developments. Regular monitoring in a climate of mutual trust and support has led to improvements in the quality of teaching so a very high proportion is good or outstanding, and a year-on-year rise in standards.
- Visitors to the school, examination invigilators and supply teachers comment positively about the excellent atmosphere that is business-like yet relaxed.
- The quality of teachers' work and its impact on students' progress are clearly linked to pay and progression and to the national standards for teachers.
- Every student is known as an individual and the headteacher has a thorough knowledge of each one. The system for tracking individual students' progress has received external recognition as a model of best practice. It is highly personalised, ensures none fall behind and allows parents to be involved in and support their children's progress.

- The pupil premium funding is used well and gaps are closing between the achievement of the intended group and that of all students in the school. The impact of the use of the money is evaluated but would benefit from even sharper analysis in order to accelerate the improvements.
- The curriculum is excellent and supports students' spiritual and cultural development with opportunities to engage in artistic pursuits, study literature and music and engage in a wide range of cultural visits. These include links with other countries such as Japan and through the work of the modern language department. There are links with business and students develop skills that will support them in their working lives. The continuity of students' learning is supported very well through the academy trust, providing education from age three to 19.
- Safeguarding arrangements are rigorous and meet government requirements fully.
- Leadership of the sixth form is also outstanding, resulting in excellent and improving outcomes. Links with a neighbouring school enhance the opportunities for students, and regular meetings ensure that their progress, attendance and welfare are kept under regular scrutiny.
- The local authority uses an appropriately light touch approach to this successful school and has a good awareness of its performance. Links with the local authority are mainly to support the governing body through buying in payroll and human resources services. Governors also take part in local authority training. The school provides expertise to other local authority schools as examples of best practice.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - Governors make regular visits to the school and to the external provision sometimes used at the local college. They visit lessons and talk to staff and students, focusing on areas of the curriculum where they have a special interest or expertise. They know how pupil premium funding has been spent but are less clear on the cost-effectiveness of the different strategies.
 - Students are represented on the governing body and parental views are sought informally at open evenings. Governors are fully aware of the staff performance management process and are involved in all interviews, internal and external. They support the headteacher in decisions about promotion or on the very rare occasion that weaker performance needs to be tackled.
 - Governors have a range of skills which they use to benefit the school. They were particularly useful during the conversion to academy status, especially in relation to finance, business and construction.
 - Governors know the local community well and challenge the analysis of examination results, drawing on the training they have had on analysing data. They have ensured that the school's rigorous safeguarding arrangements meet government requirements fully. They have contributed to the strategic development of the school, most recently in the creation of the Academy Trust.

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	136990
Local authority	Suffolk
Inspection number	427214

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

Type of school	Foundation
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	962
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	209
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Richard Fletcher
Headteacher	Vicky Neale
Date of previous school inspection	28 September 2011
Telephone number	01284 754857
Fax number	01284 767313
Email address	info@bsecus.org

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