

# Bedford Free School

Caldwell Street, Bedford, MK42 9AD

## Inspection dates

26–27 February 2014

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected	
	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		Good	2

## Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

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

- Students do not sustain good progress within and between subjects often enough. In most subjects boys make better progress than girls.
- Students for whom the school receives additional pupil premium funding do less well than their peers in English and mathematics. However the gap in attainment between eligible pupils and others is closing.
- Too often, teaching does not expect enough of students and does not capitalise sufficiently on their positive attitudes to learning. Students' books are allowed to be untidy and disorganised.
- Feedback and marking provided by staff do not give students enough information about how to improve their work. Students' poor handwriting, spelling and punctuation is uncorrected by too many teachers.
- Teachers' assessments are sometimes too generous. Assessment information is not used well enough, so work is not always pitched at the right level.
- Inspectors observed no evidence of outstanding teaching, and there is a dearth of top quality work on display. Although students are attentive they are not inspired often enough.

### The school has the following strengths

- The school has been led well through some challenging times since it opened. Senior leaders and governors share a strong commitment to providing a broad and balanced education for the students.
- Effective self-review and well-focused planning have quickly helped to strengthen teaching and increase attendance. These improvements have started to raise achievement.
- Relationships between students and with staff are very supportive. Students feel safe, well cared for and confident about their futures as a result. Very positive attitudes are the norm.
- Parents and carers are very positive about the school. Most agree that the opening has been managed well and that routines have become established quickly.
- All students participate in enrichment activities that contribute positively to their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. A growing proportion of students sustain these interests out of school.

## Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 25 lessons, of which eight were seen jointly with senior leaders. In addition, inspectors visited a sample of lunchtime activities, and tutor periods, and observed an assembly.
- Meetings were held with senior and middle leaders, and four representatives of the governing body. Telephone discussions were also held with two parents and carers.
- Inspectors talked with many students about their learning and about life at the school. They held meetings with two groups of students and reviewed their work in a range of subjects.
- Inspectors took account of the 19 questionnaires completed by staff, 127 responses to the online questionnaire (Parent View) and nine letters received from parents and carers.
- The inspection team observed the school's work; reviewed current data about students' achievement; examined records relating to safeguarding, behaviour and attendance; and looked at documents used by leaders in monitoring and evaluating the school's work.

## Inspection team

Ian Middleton, Lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Marion Wallace

Additional Inspector

Rosemarie McCarthy

Additional Inspector

## Full report

### Information about this school

- Bedford Free School is smaller than the average-sized secondary school.
- The school was founded by the Bedford and Kempston Trust, with the aim of establishing a small school serving families from across the socio-economic range.
- The school opened in September 2012 with students in Years 7 and 9, including a high proportion of girls. There are currently students in Years 7, 8, 9 and 10.
- Students will first take external examinations in summer 2015.
- Four Year 10 students attend off-site provision part-time at Bedford College.
- Most students are White British. The proportions of students from minority ethnic backgrounds and those who speak English as an additional language are below average.
- The proportion of students eligible for the pupil premium (extra government funding to support particular groups of students, including those known to be eligible for free school meals) is above average.
- The proportion of disabled students and those who have special educational needs supported at school action is below average, as is the proportion supported through school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs.

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

- Improve the quality of teaching so that it is consistently good or better by:
  - inspiring students from the start of lessons, for example by showing what is special about different subjects
  - using assessments of students' capabilities to ensure that they are suitably stretched, their skills are refined and their knowledge deepened
  - raising expectations of presentation and handwriting, spelling and punctuation
  - exploiting students' positive attitudes to learning, for example, by encouraging them to research and read widely as preparation or follow-up to lessons
  - making sure that students know how to organise their work, for example, in order to reflect on and review their progress or revise systematically.
- Raise standards in all subjects by:
  - closing gaps in achievement between different groups of students, including boys and girls and those supported by pupil premium funding
  - sharing examples of high quality work
  - collaborating with other schools to assess students' work accurately
  - providing clearer feedback to students about how to improve their work
  - making sure that students respond to guidance provided through feedback and marking.

## Inspection judgements

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

- Students join the school having attained broadly average standards in reading, writing and mathematics when tested at the end of Key Stage 2. However, the school's own baseline assessments, particularly in English, indicate that pupils join with below-average standards for their ages.
- Teacher assessments indicate that, in the school's first year, most students made or exceeded the progress that might be expected nationally in English and mathematics. However, not enough students develop and apply their literacy, mathematical and communication skills within different subjects.
- Most parents who responded to Parent View, or who wrote letters, consider that their children make good progress at the school. Some students do make good progress, but inspectors found inconsistencies between the progress made by different groups of students and by the same students in different subjects.
- Work seen in lessons and discussions with groups of students indicate that they do not sustain good progress. Disorganised and poorly presented work, leading to inaccuracies, is a contributory factor. The most able students do not always pursue their work to the best of their capability.
- The school uses its pupil premium funding to help eligible students through additional one-to-one and small-group support in English and mathematics. The school's tracking data indicate that students supported by additional pupil premium funding make less progress than their peers, but that this gap is narrowing.
- Use of the Year 7 catch-up funding is having a positive impact on students who did not achieve the expected Level 4 in English at the end of Key Stage 2. These students make good progress in improving their literacy skills.
- The most obvious disparity in the achievement of different groups of students is that, in most subjects, boys make better progress than girls in relation to their starting points. In Year 10 there are far fewer boys than girls. An exception to this gap in achievement is humanities subjects where pupils' learning lesson observations, scrutiny of students' work and students' views indicate that stronger teaching promotes good progress for girls and boys.
- Disabled students and those who have special educational needs make progress similar to that of their peers. The use of paired or small group work in many lessons supports students who find learning difficult.
- The students taking a work-related option at Bedford College are making the progress in line with national expectations. Specialist facilities and teaching by suitably experienced staff increase students' understanding of workplace skills. All students have received helpful feedback about the personal qualities required to succeed. This contributes to students' clear and positive plans for their futures.
- The school does not use early entry to examinations, conscious that students should not settle for lower grades than they might otherwise achieve at 16.

**The quality of teaching****requires improvement**

- Not enough teaching is consistently good for students to sustain good progress. Students progress well where they are learning new skills and knowledge, but they are not always stretched. They are not taught enough about how to refine their skills or deepen their knowledge. As a consequence, standards are not as high as they could be.
- Not enough teaching exploits students' positive attitudes to learning. Too few lessons get off to a strong start or use approaches distinct to the subject. When students are expected to research or read in order to follow-up or prepare for lessons, they are all keen to contribute to the opening discussion. Where expectations are lower, discussion engages only a small minority of students so their progress is uneven.
- The quality of teaching has improved since September. The most effective teaching makes the subject stimulating, so that students are inspired to learn from the minute they start the lesson. This was evident in humanities subjects, where resources to observe or handle immediately attracted students' interest, and also in a Year 7 design and technology lesson where students swiftly explored their ideas in three-dimensions.
- Until recently, feedback and marking have had too little impact on improving students' work. Good examples of marking in mathematics ensure that students respond by correcting mistakes or by trying an additional challenge. Students' progress in mathematics is accelerating as a result. However, marking in most subjects shows that teachers' expectations of students' presentation, handwriting, spelling and punctuation remain too low.
- Teacher assessments are sometimes too generous; not all tasks and tests challenge students sufficiently. There is also insufficient high quality work available against which students' current work can be assessed. In English, students have valued opportunities to analyse good quality writing by other students.
- Staff enjoy very good relationships with the students, particularly evident in the 'electives' sessions. These mixed-age group options are taught with great enthusiasm and promote enjoyment in learning. Many staff successfully draw on their personal interests or pursuits to make learning practical but purposeful.

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

- The behaviour of students is good. The school has high expectations of students' behaviour and clear policies and procedures for managing rewards and sanctions. Students grow in maturity while at the school. They earn their 'golden time' on Fridays by showing positive attitudes to learning and school life. Students develop good working relationships with staff and their peers.
- Since the school opened, attendance has improved and is now average. The school has good systems for monitoring attendance and works effectively with parents and carers to resolve any concerns. As a consequence, many students have improved their attendance since starting at the school. Students are keen to learn and are punctual to lessons.
- The school's work to keep students safe and secure is good. Students behave well in lessons and around the school. Those with responsibilities take them seriously. This

contributes to students feeling safe and supported by their peers. Students are aware of different forms of bullying and feel confident that incidents of bullying are resolved quickly and fairly by staff. The number of exclusions has reduced significantly.

- Students cooperate well and collaborate productively when working together in pairs or small groups. When given opportunities, they often contribute confidently and constructively in lessons, but this is not always the case. When teaching is less well managed, the girls tend to be less actively involved than the boys.

## **The leadership and management are good**

- Good leadership and management have secured strong commitment from staff, students, parents and carers, and led to improvements in attendance, the quality of teaching and student achievement. Senior leaders and governors addressed considerable challenges in order to manage the opening of the school in what was previously an office block.
- The curriculum gives students a broad experience of different subjects that promote academic, technical and physical development. School leaders are aware of the difficulties in providing a broad curriculum in a small school. For example, some staff are required to teach more than one subject. Professional development is rightly focused on improving weaker aspects of teaching.
- Students value their learning, for example, about 'global communities' because the topics studied are clearly relevant to their lives. The 'electives' sessions offer a wide range of enrichment which strengthens provision, particularly for students' moral, social and cultural development. An increasing proportion of students add to their wider achievements by continuing with these pursuits out of school.
- The school improvement plan provides a suitable foundation for continued improvement. The plan makes clear the roles, responsibilities and accountability of staff, many of whom are new to senior or middle leadership. Subject planning is inconsistent in quality. In particular, middle leaders have not all scrutinised students' work sufficiently critically when making judgements about the quality of teaching and learning. However, senior leaders are accurate in their evaluation of middle leaders' effectiveness. Professional development, including the support of the local teaching school, is matched to the middle leaders' needs. A recent subject review in physical education had evidently improved the quality of teaching in the subject.
- Leaders know that some areas require further improvement and steer this well. Underpinning this is good communication with parents and carers, most of whom support every opportunity to discuss their child's progress with the school. A high proportion of parents and carers responded to the online questionnaire, or wrote letters of support by making reference to their child's improved progress or attitudes to school.
- The leadership of teaching has improved since the appointment in September of an assistant headteacher with responsibility for teaching and learning. Senior leaders' joint observations of teaching agreed with inspectors' judgements. A suitably wide range of evidence is used by senior leaders to evaluate the quality of teaching: lesson observations; scrutiny of work; progress data; attendance and students' views. This informs the process of managing teachers' performance, which has been made more rigorous as a consequence.
- School leaders are committed to providing equality of opportunity, whatever students'

backgrounds or circumstances. Closing gaps in the progress of different groups of students is a high priority. Use of pupil premium funding is now judicious. Through experience of the workplace and university visits, school leaders are making sure that all students develop suitably high aspirations.

■ **The governance of the school:**

- The governing body has played a central role in opening the school, and contributing financial, commercial and educational expertise to its development. The recruitment of parent governors met with high levels of interest and support. The governing body has a secure grasp of the school's strengths, weaknesses and priorities for further improvement. Governors are helping to shape the development of the school and hold its leaders to account. They are confident about challenging senior leaders about the quality of students' work and the standards they achieve, but are less well-informed about subject-specific issues and priorities. Governors know how resources are allocated, including the pupil premium funding, and how to check the impact on students' achievement. The procedures for performance management are understood. Governors ensure that all statutory requirements relating to safeguarding and child protection are met.

## 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>	138228
<b>Local authority</b>	Bedford
<b>Inspection number</b>	408954

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

<b>Type of school</b>	Secondary
<b>School category</b>	Free School
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	11–16
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	393
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	The governing body
<b>Chair</b>	Nigel Syson
<b>Principal</b>	Mark Lehain
<b>Date of previous school inspection</b>	Not previously inspected
<b>Telephone number</b>	01234 332299
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