

St James School

Summer Lane, Exeter, EX4 8NN

Inspection dates 24–25 March 2015

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Good	2
	This inspection:	Good	2
Leadership and management		Good	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Good	2
Quality of teaching		Good	2
Achievement of pupils		Good	2

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school.

- All groups of students make good progress during their time at the school.
- The school's work to support disadvantaged students is effective. The good development of their literacy and numeracy skills means they are very well prepared for the next stage of their education, employment or training.
- The school shares its approaches to using pupil premium funding with other schools in the region.
- Assessment information is used very effectively to help students to improve their learning.
- The support for disabled students and those with special educational needs is particularly strong.
- Students enjoy coming to school and get on well with each other and with staff. They respect the school and the opportunities it provides.
- The school is a safe environment for students and staff. Governors are rigorous in ensuring statutory requirements for safeguarding are met.
- Students say theirs is a friendly school, where bullying is rare. They are confident that staff will deal with any issues as soon as they occur.
- The quality of teaching is good, particularly in English and mathematics. Students who have struggled in the past are helped to make rapid progress and to achieve well.
- The headteacher and her staff are determined to improve the school further. Leaders have a strong track record of improving students' achievement in English and mathematics.
- The governing body brings a wide range of experience and skills to support the school. They are effective in challenging leaders to bring about further improvements.
- The school makes sure that students are well prepared for life in modern Britain. Its focus on inclusion and equality of opportunity is strong.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Sometimes, students' achievement in their other subjects is not as high as it is in English and mathematics.
- There is some inconsistency in the quality of teaching across the school. Actions taken by school leaders are tackling this variation.
- In a small number of lessons, the behaviour of a few students sometimes gets in the way of learning. Students say that staff usually deal with this well.
- The school's approaches to self-review and improvement planning do not focus enough on students' achievement across all their subjects.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed learning in 29 lessons and visited a further nine lessons to assess the quality of students' work and the accuracy of the school's assessment information. Fifteen lessons were observed jointly with members of the school's leadership team.
- Discussions took place with the headteacher, other senior leaders, middle leaders and various members of staff. Inspectors also spoke with many students, in meetings with them, at break and lunchtimes and during lessons. The lead inspector also met with six members of the governing body, including the Chair of the Governing Body.
- Inspectors scrutinised records of the school's self-evaluation, the checks on teaching quality, improvement planning and minutes of the governing body. Safeguarding documentation and records relating to students' behaviour and attendance were also examined.
- Inspectors looked at the 113 responses to the online questionnaire, Parent View. The views of staff were obtained and 30 responded to a staff written questionnaire.

Inspection team

Lee Northern, Lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

John Lamborn

Additional inspector

Richard Steward

Additional inspector

Teresa Gilpin

Additional inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- This is a smaller-than-average-sized secondary school.
- The proportion of students known to be eligible for the pupil premium, which provides additional funding for children in local authority care and for students known to be eligible for free school meals, is broadly average.
- The proportion of disabled students and those who have special educational needs is above average.
- The proportion of students from minority ethnic communities is broadly average. The proportion of students who speak English as an additional language is also broadly average.
- A small number of Year 7 students benefit from the nationally funded 'catch-up' programme, which is for students who do not achieve Level 4 in reading or mathematics at the end of their primary schooling.
- The school works in close partnership with other institutions as part of the Ted Wragg Trust. These institutions include Isca Academy, Cranbrook School, Exeter College and the University of Exeter. The governing body is currently considering proposals for the school to acquire academy status.
- The headteacher of St James School acts as executive headteacher across the trust. The head of school is increasingly taking responsibility for the day-to-day running of St James School.
- In 2014, the school met the government's current floor standards at Key Stage 4, which represent the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress. The school has received a national award for its use of pupil premium funding and is a lead school for behaviour.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve students' achievement in all their subjects to match that seen in English and mathematics by:
 - making sure all teaching is at least good, and more is outstanding
 - ensuring students' behaviour always makes a strong contribution to their learning
 - placing an equal emphasis across all subject areas when reviewing the effectiveness of the school's work and making plans for improvement.

Inspection judgements

The leadership and management are good

- Leaders are passionately committed to ensuring the very best for St James School and its students. The headteacher in particular has been a galvanising force that has driven the school forward. The ethos of the school is one where students feel valued and have every opportunity to succeed. As a result, students from all backgrounds and walks of life get on well with each other and discrimination of any kind is not tolerated.
- A strong focus on developing leadership is seen in the many opportunities for staff to take on positions of responsibility. In response to difficulties in recruiting excellent staff from outside the school, leaders and governors are committed to developing the best talent from within.
- The curriculum makes a good contribution to achievement, particularly in English and mathematics. It is flexible enough to meet the particular needs of different year groups. Although some students need additional time to develop their literacy and numeracy skills, this sometimes limits the learning time for other subjects.
- There is a strong focus on students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. A detailed tutor programme is supplemented by a range of assemblies that celebrate diversity and promote cultural understanding. The school orchestra is highly regarded, and through the curriculum and events such as mock elections, students develop an understanding of the importance of democracy, the rule of law and the right to free speech. For example, a small group of older students were inspired by their visit to Berlin, where they had delivered a presentation about the impact of the Scottish referendum.
- The leadership of teaching is good. Teachers value the support they receive that helps them to improve. Checks on teaching quality are regular and involve leaders at all levels. Although some are relatively new to their roles, most leaders with responsibility for subject areas are making an effective contribution to improvement.
- Senior leaders have a strong track record in improving students' achievement in English and mathematics. However, their overall evaluation of students' achievement does not always give enough weight to subjects other than English and mathematics. As a result, improvement planning sometimes lacks a sharp enough focus on raising students' achievement across all their subjects.
- The school makes effective use of pupil premium funding, particularly in English and mathematics. This funding supports a wide range of activities, including those designed to raise participation and aspirations. As a result, in 2014, all disadvantaged students went on the further education, employment or training when they left school. The school is supporting other schools in the region in developing good practice in the use of this funding.
- The local authority provides very little direct support for school improvement. However, the school does make use of local authority legal services and support for finance, safeguarding and inclusion. The school uses an external provider to support its self-review.
- The careers advice and guidance provided to students is very effective. For example, partnership working with other institutions in the trust – particularly with the University of Exeter and Exeter College – is having a good impact on raising students' aspirations and in supporting their progression to further education and training. As a result, the proportion of students leaving St James who secure education, employment or training has increased rapidly over the last few years.

■ The governance of the school:

- The governing body brings an effective blend of skills and experience in support of the school. They ask searching questions of school leaders in order to understand and improve the school's performance. For example, following a strategic review of development planning, they asked that school leaders ensure a greater focus on improvements in science. In a similar way, a safeguarding audit, led by governors, had identified how safer recruitment checks could be further strengthened. Their work alongside that of school leaders has ensured that safeguarding arrangements are effective and meet current government requirements.
- More recently, governors' minutes show that much time has been spent considering issues to do with finance, with possible academisation and changes to trust arrangements. This has reduced the opportunity governors have had to fully understand the broader picture of the school's performance beyond headline measures. Nevertheless, they are proactive in their involvement with the school and work hard to understand the quality of teaching, how leaders ensure weaker teaching is tackled and how stronger teaching is rewarded. This includes asking some leaders of subject areas to provide a presentation on students' outcomes to the governing body.

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

- The behaviour of students is good. They are proud of their school and want to do well. They get on well with their teachers and with each other. At break and lunchtimes, the large atrium area, where most students congregate, buzzes with happy conversation as students catch up with their friends and grab a bite to eat.
- Students' attitudes to learning are good. They enjoy their lessons and like the opportunities they get to work together on tasks and in practical subjects. Staff who responded to the inspection survey agreed that students' behaviour is usually good around the school.
- However, on rare occasions, the behaviour of a small number of students does get in the way of learning, including in some lessons taken by temporary teachers. Although staff deal with these incidents well, this is the main reason why behaviour is not outstanding.
- Leaders have recently raised their expectations of students' behaviour even further. Although exclusion and the school's 'on-call' unit are still used as a sanction in a small number of instances, the overall number of repeat incidents is falling.
- The school works hard to support those students with specific behavioural needs. Many settle successfully into school life and go on to achieve well.

Safety

- The school's work to keep students safe and secure is good. Almost all parents and carers feel students are kept safe at school. The arrangements for safe recruitment and child protection are thorough and detailed. Governors keep a close eye on these matters.
- Most students attend regularly and arrive at school on time. Overall attendance is higher than for secondary schools nationally. However, a very small number of students are sometimes late to school. Students know that punctuality is taken seriously by the school and staff take prompt action to tackle lateness when this occurs.
- Students report that bullying is rare and that the school's systems for dealing with it when it occurs are good. They understand that bullying can take many forms, and recognise the negative impact of discriminatory language on different groups of people. Students have a good understanding of the safe use of the internet and mobile devices, and this aspect is a strong focus of the school's work.

The quality of teaching is good

- Across the school, the quality of teaching is good. From a wide range of different starting points, students make good progress in most of their subjects. The support provided for low-attaining students, including through the work of teaching assistants, helps them to catch up quickly with other students in the school.
- In English and mathematics, teaching is particularly effective in developing students' skills, knowledge and understanding. The use of regular assessment and detailed feedback, coupled with a strong focus on examination skills, contribute to students' excellent progress in both these subjects. Younger pupils in particular are helped to rapidly improve the quality of their reading and writing.
- For example, in a Year 9 English lesson, students made good progress in their descriptive writing skills. The teacher encouraged the students to articulate their thinking and ideas, and to empathise with the characters in their writing. Through her highly effective questioning, the teacher made sure all the students were involved and challenged appropriately.
- Most teaching provides high levels of challenge for all groups of students. For example, in a Year 8 history lesson, the teacher checked students' understanding carefully as the lesson developed. The progress of a small group of students with English as an additional language was supported very carefully, while the most able in the class were challenged to develop more extended answers.
- However, in some other subjects, teaching is not as consistently strong as this. For example, sometimes students are held back because their work does not inspire them or require them to think hard enough about their learning. Leaders have identified these weaknesses and there are indications that the quality of teaching is improving in response to the support and challenge being provided.
- Throughout the school, relationships between students and their teachers are positive and productive. Most students try hard and take a good deal of pride in their work. Students' books are regularly marked and teachers usually write helpful comments on the work. This is ensuring a good focus on developing students' literacy skills. However, in a few cases, teachers do not insist that students respond to their comments about untidy or incomplete work.

The achievement of pupils is good

- Students' achievement in English and mathematics is a real strength of the school. From their starting points at the beginning of Year 7, most students make good progress in these subjects, and many make outstanding progress. The skilful use of assessment information and a focus on meeting examination requirements make a strong contribution to students' achievement. Students also achieve very well in computing, product design and some vocational courses.
- However, achievement is not as strong as this in some other subjects, such as in science, modern foreign languages, humanities and in physical education. This is because teaching does not have as much impact in these subjects. Some staff and students feel there is not always enough teaching time for students to learn as effectively in all their subjects as they do in English and mathematics.
- In English and mathematics, disadvantaged pupils make rapid and sustained progress, whatever their starting points. For example, in 2014, the difference between their achievement and all students nationally, and with other students in the school, was less than half of one GCSE grade in each subject. Leaders keep a close eye on the progress made by disadvantaged students.
- In a similar way, many of the most able students excel in English and mathematics. This is because teachers provide more opportunities for students to develop their thinking and deepen their understanding. In some other subjects, however, the most able students are not always pushed as hard to achieve this well. The school no longer makes use of early entry to public examinations.
- Disabled students and those with special educational needs achieve well, as do students who speak English as an additional language. In addition, many students who have struggled in their primary schools are helped to catch up quickly and go on to reach much higher levels of attainment. All of these students benefit from the precisely targeted support provided by staff at the school. The quality of care and guidance makes a significant contribution to their achievement.
- Younger students benefit from a strong focus on improving their reading, writing, speaking and listening. Students who have struggled in the past with these skills are helped to catch up quickly, including through the use of additional government funding to boost the support they receive. However, older students say that less attention is paid to encouraging reading once students are in Key Stage 4.
- Almost all students move on successfully to the next stage of their education, employment or training when they leave the school. The success of the school in developing students' literacy and numeracy skills makes an especially strong contribution to this.

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	113507
Local authority	Devon
Inspection number	449602
Type of school	Secondary
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	698
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Andrew Mulcock
Headteacher	Moira Marder
Date of previous school inspection	11–12 November 2009
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