

Birchwood High School

Parsonage Lane, Bishop's Stortford, CM23 5BD

Inspection dates 1–2 July 2015

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected as an academy	
	This inspection:	Requires improvement	3
Leadership and management		Requires improvement	3
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Requires improvement	3
Quality of teaching		Requires improvement	3
Achievement of pupils		Requires improvement	3
Sixth form provision		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 make enough progress in some key subject areas. Although most students are increasingly achieving well in mathematics and English, there are some areas, most notably science, where achievement remains too low.
- Disadvantaged students make significantly less progress than other students in the school. Leaders' actions to improve achievement for this group of students are not demonstrating impact quickly enough.
- The quality of teaching varies too widely across the school and within subject areas. Not enough teaching is planned to ensure that all students are challenged sufficiently.
- Assessment and marking are not being used well enough. Too many students are unsure of how to improve their work or achieve at a higher level. The targets set for students are often too low, or specific areas for improvement are not made clear enough to them.
- School leaders and governors have not taken sufficient care to ensure that the relevant policies relating to the safety of students are robustly maintained and clearly accessible. Although students are safe in the school, insufficient priority has been given to ensuring that the administration and monitoring of this critical area is robust.

The school has the following strengths

- The overall attainment of students is higher than the national average, particularly in mathematics. In recent years the school has steadily improved its examination results and grown in size and popularity.
- Students are proud of their school and behave very well. They are kind and supportive of each other, both in lessons and around the site. A range of opportunities are provided for them to take on leadership roles and they rightly feel that their views are heard. Students feel safe; bullying is rare and is dealt with effectively.
- The sixth form is good and improving rapidly. Standards of teaching are high and students receive excellent support and guidance. As a result, an increasing number of students are entering higher education and top universities.
- The school promotes students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development very well. The school succeeds in preparing students well for life in modern Britain both in lessons and through the extensive range of clubs and activities it offers.
- Disabled students and those who have special educational needs receive good support and achieve well. A wide range of effective strategies and plans are implemented to help them learn effectively and participate fully in the life of the school.
- Staff are positive about their professional development and are proud of the school. The excellent facilities are well maintained and resources are managed effectively.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 42 full lessons and visited a further 19 lessons for short periods. Several of these observations were conducted jointly with senior leaders, who later gave feedback to teachers.
- On 1 July inspectors could not visit sixth-form lessons because the entire year group were out of school at a higher education conference. All sixth-form lessons observations were therefore conducted on 2 July.
- On 1 July Year 10 students were engaged in an all-day science experiment resulting in inspectors concentrating most of their observations of Year 10 lessons on 2 July.
- Inspectors met with a range of senior leaders, middle leaders, the special educational needs coordinator, wider staff, the school council and other representative groups of students from all year groups.
- The lead inspector met with governors and held telephone conversations with the school's improvement partner from the local authority and two separate parents who requested contact during the inspection.
- Inspectors scrutinised a range of school documentation including that relating to: policies, the minutes of governors meetings, annual review documents, self evaluation documents, student achievement, behaviour and attendance data, internal email communications and a range of pupil work.
- Inspectors took account of the 168 relevant contributions made by parents to the Parent View online survey and the 119 responses received from the staff survey.

Inspection team

Richard Spencer, Lead inspector	Seconded Inspector
John Daniell	Her Majesty's Inspector
John Greevy	Additional Inspector
Chris Ockenden	Additional Inspector
Brenda Watson	Additional Inspector

Richard Spencer is appointed as Additional Inspector, under the powers relating to additional inspectors, in paragraph 11 of Part 2 of Schedule 12 to the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

Full report

Information about this school

- Birchwood High School is larger than the average-sized secondary school.
- Most students are White British. The proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is about half the national average. The proportion of students who speak English as an additional language is about a quarter of the national average.
- The proportion of students who are eligible for the pupil premium, which provides additional funding for those known to be eligible for free school meals or who are looked after by the local authority, is below average.
- The proportion of disabled students and those who have special educational needs is below average.
- The school converted to become an academy school in February 2012. When its predecessor school, Birchwood High School, was last inspected by Ofsted in May 2010 it was judged to be good.
- The school meets the current government floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for students' attainment and progress by the end of Year 11.
- There are currently no students educated off site or through alternative provision.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of leadership and management by:
 - improving the administration and level of detail included in all records and policies, in particular those relating to child protection and safeguarding
 - ensuring that self evaluation takes fuller account of the progress made by groups of students across the school, particularly that of disadvantaged students
 - ensuring that self evaluation takes fuller account of the impact of teaching on achievement and learning over time.
- Improve the quality of teaching by:
 - ensuring that all teachers are planning effectively to meet the needs of all learners, particularly the disadvantaged
 - ensuring that middle leaders deliver more consistent approaches to planning, marking and the use of targets within their departments and areas of responsibility
 - developing deeper skills around how to use questioning effectively to challenge and support students
 - improving the consistency and impact of marking; sharing, reviewing and implementing the best practice in this area more widely
 - building on some of the existing good practice in English and mathematics to improve the information and guidance provided to other adults in the classroom to ensure they are more effectively deployed.
- Raise achievement, particularly in science, and ensure that disadvantaged students make better progress by:
 - strengthening the teaching and leadership of science to ensure greater consistency for students
 - identifying those lessons and subjects where disadvantaged students are making less progress and acting swiftly to monitor, intervene and make appropriate changes to provision
 - improving consistency in the ways in which target setting is used to challenge students, ensuring that they are understood and that they help to promote improved progress.

An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Inspection judgements

The leadership and management requires improvement

- School leaders and governors have not paid sufficient attention to the administration, monitoring and sharing of policies and records relating to child protection. The child protection policy has not been significantly reviewed or updated since the school became an academy. Although inspectors found no evidence that children were unsafe in the school, some of the record-keeping relating to child protection is not as systematic or thorough as it should be.
- School leaders have secured a culture of high expectations around good behaviour, but have not ensured that teaching is as consistent across and within subject areas as it should be.
- Self-evaluation in the school is detailed but overly optimistic; it does not sufficiently identify the correct areas for improvement. The school's evaluation of pupil achievement places too strong an emphasis upon the overall attainment of students, and not enough emphasis upon the progress different groups of students make from their respective starting points. Evaluations of the quality of teaching are too reliant upon checking the compliance of teachers to a set of agreed standards around planning and assessment, instead of evaluating the impact of teaching methods on students' achievement.
- The achievement of disadvantaged students in the school remains much lower than that of other students because leaders have not ensured that enough classroom teaching sufficiently meets their needs.
- The leadership of science has been inconsistent in recent years and the various changes the school has made have not delivered secure improvements. School leaders acknowledge the need to improve standards and practice within and across the department.
- The leadership of English and mathematics has successfully improved the achievement of students over recent years. Plans for curriculum changes to meet the needs of new GCSE specifications, along with plans for the implementation of a preferred method of assessment following the removal of National Curriculum levels, are at an early stage and will require careful attention in the coming months.
- The headteacher leads the school with energy, ambition and vision. Under his leadership Birchwood High School has improved substantially and is now heavily over-subscribed and growing. Students, parents and staff are overwhelmingly positive about the school. One parent wrote directly to the inspection team in glowing terms to emphasise that her son: '... says every day that he feels safe, happy and inspired. What more could a parent want from a school?' The overwhelming majority of parents who responded to the Parent View survey felt that the school was well led and managed and that they would recommend the school to others.
- The school is using performance management systems effectively to challenge teachers and to identify relevant training and support. For example, middle leaders drew up a set of ten priorities for the improvement of teaching across the school that teachers then used to develop targets for their professional development. Other targets are linked to achievement and ensure that pay progression is dependent upon successful outcomes for students.
- The additional funding the school receives to support disadvantaged students is not having enough impact in the classroom but it is carefully directed to support those for whom it is intended. Leaders have improved the range of resources available to students and provided additional tuition. Disadvantaged students have access to enrichment activities such as trips, visits or music lessons. As a result they feel well supported and included by the school and the large majority have attended a trip or visit this academic year.
- The school provides a very wide range of extracurricular and enrichment opportunities. Students gave inspectors a range of examples of how the activities and visits the school runs add to their enjoyment and engagement in school.
- The school provides excellent opportunities for students to take on leadership roles and contribute their

views. Students' views, delivered through the active school council, help to shape the school's policies on catering, homework and modifications to the school uniform. There is a clear link between students' leadership roles and the principles of democracy.

- The curriculum the school provides prepares students well for life in modern Britain. The school has developed strong links with international schools through its participation in the 'International Ambassador Programme'. Regular visits to different places of worship and the exploration of a range of topics in lessons make a strong contribution to students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural education.
- The curriculum is broad and balanced. As well as a wide range of traditional academic subjects, the school offers some vocational qualifications in both the main school and the sixth form. There are a good range of subject options available and the school allows students to select some of their subjects at the end of Year 8.
- Careers education is well coordinated. Inspectors saw Year 10 students in tutor time excitedly discussing their plans for the work experience they were all undertaking the following week. This focus reflects the strong commitment the school has to ensuring that all students enter appropriate employment, education or training.
- Leaders are effectively identifying any rare incidences of bullying, discriminatory behaviour or intolerance and are challenging them robustly. As a result, such incidents are rare and good relations among students and staff flourish. The school is committed to giving every student an equal opportunity to succeed.
- This is a stand-alone academy and is not linked formally to the support of any outside agency. However, the school has retained good links with the local authority and has made use of their support and advice in evaluating the school. The school has strong links with other schools and universities in the area that provide a number of opportunities for staff training and professional development.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - Governance is not fully effective. Governors have not ensured that they review policies and arrangements such as those around child protection and special educational needs in sufficient detail. They have relied upon the information provided to them by school leaders without sufficiently checking or challenging the detail behind them. For example, the annual report presented by school leaders on safeguarding was criticised by governors for not being 'user-friendly', but no follow up actions ensured that such an important document was improved.
 - Governors are well informed about the overall attainment of students and subject areas. However, they have less knowledge of the progress groups of students are making throughout and across the school. Consequently, they are not holding school leaders to account in these areas as effectively as they should be.
 - The personnel and finance committees keep a close eye on the performance management systems and finances of the school. They effectively challenge school leaders to ensure that pay is linked securely to improved student achievement and that value for money is secured in all purchases and contracts. They know what is being done to tackle any underperformance. Changes to leadership and staffing structures are challenged and school leaders are made to justify their actions and decisions.
 - Governors demonstrate great passion and a commitment to the school. They are proud of the improvements the school has made in recent years and have high aspirations. The attendance of the head boy and head girl at meetings as associate governors is just one example of their commitment to ensuring that they represent a wide range of views.

The behaviour and safety of pupils

requires improvement

Behaviour

- The behaviour of students is good. They are polite, welcoming and supportive of each other. Because their behaviour is effectively managed, the school is a calm and pleasant environment. This inspection was conducted during one of the warmest days recorded for a number of years. Despite the often uncomfortable temperature, students remained well mannered and worked diligently.

- Students arrive to school and lessons punctually and are ready to learn. Little time is wasted and expectations around the start of lessons are very clear.
- Students take care around the site and wear their uniform with pride. Inspectors saw very little litter and a number of examples of students holding open doors and moving calmly around the school site.
- Students demonstrate positive attitudes to learning and are willing to contribute to discussions. Inspectors saw strong examples of students supporting and mentoring each other within groups. In mathematics, for example, students worked in small groups to help each other master a challenging mathematical problem.
- The school rewards good effort regularly and students are proud of their achievements which are celebrated through displays around the school. The displays also help to raise aspirations by celebrating former students who have secured jobs or higher education places in, for example, computing or business studies.
- Parents, students and staff all display very high confidence in the behaviour of students. Students told inspectors that the consequences for not behaving well were clearly understood and that teachers generally applied the systems consistently. A group of recently qualified teachers felt that the well developed systems had given them the confidence to succeed in the classroom because incidences of poor behaviour are rare.
- The school closely tracks the frequency with which students are removed from lessons and such incidences have reduced significantly over the last couple of years.
- Examples of students not working hard or engaging in low level disruption are rare. When inspectors did see such behaviour, it was generally because less effective teaching was not providing students with sufficiently challenging or engaging work. For example, in some lessons students' attention drifted and they became disengaged when they were working in groups without clearly assigned functions or roles.

Safety

- The school's work to keep students safe and secure requires improvement. Although inspectors found students to be safe in the school, the administration and records kept around child protection and safeguarding are not always as detailed or systematic as they should be. For example, records kept around vulnerable children do not always feature clear chronological logging of actions and lack detail.
- Records kept of the rare incidences of bullying do not detail the outcomes of school actions clearly enough or track the full range of different types of bullying to enable full analysis and evaluations to be made in this crucial area. Reports prepared for governors on child safeguarding matters are brief and under developed and records of staff training on child protection are poorly coordinated.
- Students are well informed about the different forms of bullying and have confidence in the school to manage the infrequent examples of bullying effectively. Students feel safe in the school and feel that examples of racist or homophobic language being used are rare and not tolerated.
- Students have a clear understanding of e-safety. The school has a strong programme in place for educating students about staying safe online combining work in lessons, presentations from visiting speakers and planned tutorial sessions.
- The school has successfully directed additional resources and staffing to improve the attendance of students. Overall attendance is now comfortably above national average and the proportion of students who are persistently absent (with overall attendance below 85%) is now lower than the national average.

The quality of teaching

requires improvement

- Teaching requires improvement because too many lessons are not suitably adapted or modified to meet the varying needs of students. In too many lessons students' progress is limited by the task set either

lacking challenge or the support and guidance required for some to access it. In some lessons, for example, poorly structured groups tasks limit the ability of some students to participate meaningfully.

- The quality of advice and feedback being given to students through marking varies too widely. Although it is rare to find books that have not been marked, the quality and impact of the marking teachers are undertaking differs significantly across the school and within departments. Very effective marking, for example, can be found in many mathematics lessons where students act upon clear guidance and suggested actions to improve their work. This has a marked impact on their progress.
- The most effective teaching uses assessment to plan carefully for the needs of all students by providing different activities to challenge and extend the learning of those who grasp concepts quickly. In one very effective mathematics lesson, for example, the teacher combined the knowledge they had gained through thorough marking with a constant use of 'thumbs up' and directed questioning in lesson to check how well students had grasped factorisation. Because assessment was being used in this way, tasks and questions were reshaped to pick up on gaps in understanding and ensure all students were making strong progress.
- Students receive homework regularly in some subject areas but less frequently or consistently in others. This leads to some confusion about its purpose and importance. Students have raised concerns through their student council and it has been highlighted by some parents in a consultation last year as an area for development.
- Teachers do not always deploy other adults effectively in the classroom to support learning. The school encourages teachers to share a planning liaison sheet with teaching assistants but this is not always completed. Teaching assistants were seen to be having most impact when they were working within specialist subject areas and receiving clear guidance.
- Some of the most effective teaching was seen in the expressive and performing arts where students are provided with a wide range of challenging activities. In one very effective music lesson, for example, the most able students deepened their understanding of chord structures to striking effect by identifying more complex melodic patterns while also creating their own original composition.
- Questioning is used very effectively by some teachers to challenge and ensure probe students' understanding. Elsewhere, in lessons where achievement was less secure, questions are used more superficially to simply confirm answers or check that the students have listened.
- The most effective teaching inspectors saw encouraged students to read aloud and routinely identified common spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors through marking. However, in too many lessons insufficient emphasis was placed upon developing these skills.

The achievement of pupils

requires improvement

- The progress made by disadvantaged students in the school differs too greatly from that made by other students. In English in 2014, disadvantaged students achieved almost a grade and a half less on average than other students in the school, and a grade less than other students did nationally. In mathematics in 2014, disadvantaged students achieved nearly two grades less on average than other students in the school, and a grade less than other students did nationally. Across their subjects, disadvantaged students achieved more than a grade and a half less on average than their peers in school, and more than a grade less on average than other students did nationally.
- School predictions for 2015 suggest that the difference between the achievement of disadvantaged students and others will be less this year and that, overall, disadvantaged students will achieve at a higher rate than the national average. However, the differences in progress remain wide, particularly in mathematics, and are not improving rapidly enough. Data presented for Years 9 and 10 indicate a similar pattern, with improvements not secure enough to demonstrate that a convincing and rapid narrowing of the gap in attainment has been achieved.

- The achievement made by students in science has been too low for some time when compared to national averages for progress and attainment. The school is predicting that some improvements will be made in 2015, but the progress inspectors saw students making in too many science lessons, alongside scrutiny of the work in their books, indicates that achievement in science remains too low.
- Observations of lessons presented an inconsistent picture of achievement and progress over time. Some teachers were using pupil targets effectively to challenge students and to help them track their progress and assessments over time. Where achievement was less strong, students typically seemed unsure of what their targets meant, or of the specific areas they needed to focus upon to improve. In some cases students have already hit or exceeded their targets, but targets have not been adjusted to provide further challenge.
- Students arrive at the school with attainment that is broadly average based upon their Key Stage 2 tests. In 2014 the proportion of students securing at least five A* to C grades at GCSE, including English and mathematics, was significantly higher than the national average. In 2015 the school is predicting that this figure will rise further and remain significantly higher than the national average.
- Overall achievement in mathematics is very high and significantly better than national averages. This has been the case for a number of years and it is forecast to improve even further in 2015, particularly in terms of those making more progress than might be expected when compared with national figures.
- Overall achievement in English has been improving since 2012 and is predicted to improve further in 2015. Students achievement overall is in line with national averages and slightly above national averages in terms of the progress students make from their starting points.
- Disabled students and those who have special educational needs make good progress and are well supported. The special educational needs coordinator provides teachers with clear information around how to meet their needs and a range of well planned levels of both classroom and external support are provided to ensure that they achieve well. As a result, these students have achieved well in recent years and make better progress than similar students nationally.
- The most-able students achieve in line with national averages in most subject areas and achieved slightly better than average overall in maths in 2014.
- In 2014, the relatively small number of students from minority ethnic groups, or who speak English as an additional language, achieved at rate that was not significantly different to their peers. Inspectors found that their current achievement remains similar to others in the school.
- 'Catch-up' funding to support those who joined the school having not achieved at least a level 4 in the Key Stage 2 national tests is being used effectively alongside programmes such as the 'paired reading' scheme to provide support and ensure that their progress improves quickly.
- The school does not enter students early for GCSE examinations before the end of Year 11.

The sixth form provision

is good

- Effective leadership of the sixth form delivers good provision for students. Achievement is improving strongly and, as a result of the very effective guidance and support they receive, students are increasingly securing a wide range of impressive higher education, training and employment opportunities. Student numbers are set to increase significantly in 2015 as a result of the growing and justified reputation the sixth form has within the community.
- Attainment in 2014 and in recent years has been generally close to national averages on most measures, with students attaining significantly higher than national averages in mathematics and media. Predictions for 2015 indicate that attainment will rise significantly overall and is likely to be higher than national averages. Achievement for disadvantaged students in receipt of Post 16 bursary funding is also tracked

and they are achieving in line with their peers. Similarly, predictions for students with identified special educational needs and the most able are in line with their targets.

- Strengths in achievement are reflected in the high quality of teaching observed, which was among some of the most effective seen in the school. For example, students were seen to be making outstanding progress in a mathematics lesson where the teacher's expert subject knowledge was supported by a visiting former student now studying mathematics at university.
- Students entering the sixth form without GCSE English or mathematics at grades A* to C are well provided for and generally achieve that level quickly. In 2014, just one student progressed to Year 13 without having secured a good pass in English or mathematics.
- An increasing number of students are remaining in the sixth form and completing their studies. Success and retention rates improved in 2014 and are forecast to improve further this year.
- The programmes of study are appropriate and provide students with a wide range of academic courses from which to choose, as well as some vocational qualifications.
- Sixth form students set an example to the school with their outstanding behaviour and attendance. Attendance is closely monitored and is higher than that of the rest of the school.

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	137637
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	448183

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	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1382
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	245
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mark Stocker
Headteacher	Chris Ingate
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected as an academy
Telephone number	01279 655936
Email address	cingate@birchwoodhigh.org.uk

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