

# Inspection of Birchwood High School

Parsonage Lane, Bishop's Stortford, Hertfordshire CM23 5BD

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Inspection dates:	21 and 22 January 2025
The quality of education	<b>Good</b>
Behaviour and attitudes	<b>Good</b>
Personal development	<b>Good</b>
Leadership and management	<b>Good</b>
Sixth-form provision	<b>Good</b>
Previous inspection grade	Good

The principal of this school is Sam Griffin. This school is the only school in a single-academy trust, Birchwood High School trust. The trust is overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by Gillian Turner.

## **What is it like to attend this school?**

Pupils at Birchwood High School know they are valued for who they are. Pupils accept that everyone is different. This diversity is celebrated in a warm, inclusive community. Pupils' talents in sports and creative arts are nurtured and provide valuable opportunities to represent the school. New interests are fostered through the range of clubs on offer. Pupils take great pride in the improvements they have achieved as part of the school's pupil leadership team.

Recent changes have resulted in a renewed ambition for what pupils can achieve. Many pupils, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), respond to this ambition by working hard. As a result, they produce high-quality work that reflects the depth of their understanding. Pupils, including those in the sixth form, achieve well in public examinations.

The majority of pupils behave well. However, recent changes to the way staff support and manage pupils' behaviour are not yet fully embedded. This makes it difficult for some pupils to understand how to meet the school's high expectations. Consequently, while most learning happens in a calm, focused environment, some pupils' learning is interrupted by the behaviour of others.

## **What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?**

The school has redesigned its curriculum to meet its high aspirations. Pupils in key stage 3 now enjoy learning the full depth and breadth of the national curriculum. The school has carefully defined the important knowledge pupils should know in each subject. This prepares pupils well for further study in key stage 4 and in the sixth form.

Subject experts have set out the important information pupils should learn logically. Pupils learn small pieces of information and learn these well. Teachers then support pupils to combine these small pieces. This helps pupils to develop a secure understanding of the topics they study. Teachers have deep subject knowledge. This helps them explain new ideas in a way that is easy for pupils to understand. Complex, often abstract ideas in sixth-form study are simplified in a way students can comprehend. Teachers use the information provided about pupils with SEND to adapt their teaching. This helps these pupils access learning. Teachers are alert to potential misconceptions in pupils' understanding. They check carefully to identify and address these swiftly alongside any gaps in knowledge.

Generally, the work set for pupils helps them secure their learning. However, sometimes learning activities focus on what pupils already know and do not help deepen pupils learning. This includes the sixth form, where, occasionally, students miss out on opportunities to develop a rich understanding of their chosen subjects. In most cases, pupils, including those with SEND, learn well. However, in some instances pupils' experiences are not always as positive. When some pupils experience periods of long-term substitute teaching, they fall behind. The school has taken action to mitigate this. However, the impact of these actions is yet to be fully realised.

The school has prioritised reading. Opportunities for pupils to access a broad range of books and stories are embedded across the curriculum. The school supports pupils who struggle with reading well. Experienced staff help pupils overcome their individual barriers to reading. Sometimes the information about these pupils' reading is not effectively shared. This hinders some pupils' progress to becoming fluent and confident readers.

The school has recently changed how it manages pupils' behaviour. While this has improved behaviour considerably, the new approach is not fully understood by a few staff. Where this happens, there are some inconsistencies in how adults implement the agreed policy. Some pupils get confused about what is acceptable, as different adults respond to the same behaviours in different ways. This means that some pupils are unable to meet the high expectations set by the school. This results in disrupted learning for some.

The personal, social and health education programme is well designed. It supports pupils to develop an age-appropriate understanding of important topics such as online safety. Pupils understand the importance of healthy bodies and relationships. They place high value on how the school helps them maintain healthy minds through support groups, clubs and counselling.

The school's careers programme is extensive. Careers opportunities are signposted in subject studies, including in the sixth form. Pupils access up-to-date and relevant information about different career routes and qualifications. As a result, pupils make well-informed, successful choices about their next steps.

Governors have a secure understanding of the school. They hold leaders to account while supporting them to improve the school. Sometimes, the school's strategic oversight is not as refined as it could be. Occasionally, information is held in isolation or not evaluated effectively. This means that some strategies take too long or lack enough precision to have an impact. The majority of staff are proud to work at the school. They recognise that the school does its best to manage their workload.

## **Safeguarding**

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

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

### **(Information for the school and appropriate authority)**

- Important information about those pupils who struggle with reading is not always effectively shared. This means that at times the programmes implemented to support pupils to become confident and fluent readers are not as effective as they could be. The school should ensure that all those responsible for supporting reading coordinate their approaches to best meet individual pupil needs.
- Some staff do not fully understand the expectations the school has for them when

implementing the behaviour systems. This means that some adults do not implement the behaviour policy as the school expects. As a result, pupils occasionally do not know how to meet the school's high expectations, and some learning is disrupted. The school should ensure that all staff have the knowledge and skills to implement the agreed procedures and do so consistently at all times.

- Sometimes the school lacks a strategic oversight of elements of its provision. This means the actions the school takes can be too slow, lack focus or be difficult to monitor. The school and governors should ensure that leaders have the expertise to bring together information from across the school to create clear oversight that informs and measures improvement strategies.

## How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

## Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, 'disadvantaged pupils' is used to mean pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND); pupils who meet the [definition of children in need of help and protection](#); pupils receiving statutory local authority support from a social worker; and pupils who otherwise meet the criteria used for deciding the school's [pupil premium funding](#) (this includes pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years, looked after children (children in local authority care) and/or children who left care through adoption or another formal route).

## School details

<b>Unique reference number</b>	137637
<b>Local authority</b>	Hertfordshire
<b>Inspection number</b>	10345324
<b>Type of school</b>	Secondary comprehensive
<b>School category</b>	Academy converter
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	11 to 18
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision</b>	Mixed
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	1,425
<b>Of which, number on roll in the sixth form</b>	230
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	Board of trustees
<b>Chair of trust</b>	Gillian Turner
<b>Principal</b>	Sam Griffin
<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.birchwoodonline.co.uk">www.birchwoodonline.co.uk</a>
<b>Dates of previous inspection</b>	27 and 28 June 2019, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

## Information about this school

- The school is the only school in the Birchwood High School trust.
- The principal and the chair of the trust board took up their roles in September 2023.
- The school uses eight unregistered alternative provisions.
- The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 8 to 13 with information and engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.

## Information about this inspection

The inspectors carried out this graded inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. During a graded inspection, we grade the school for each of our key judgements (quality of education; behaviour and attitudes; personal development; and leadership and

management) and for any relevant provision judgement (early years and/or sixth form provision). Schools receiving a graded inspection from September 2024 will not be given an overall effectiveness grade.

- Inspections are a point-in-time evaluation about the quality of a school’s education provision.
- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors held meetings with leaders, including the principal, deputy principals, head of sixth form and special educational needs coordinator. The lead inspector met with representatives of the trust board, including the chair and the school’s improvement adviser.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: English, mathematics, art and design, history, business studies and physical education. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with leaders, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to staff, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils’ work.
- Inspectors also discussed the curriculum in some other subjects and reviewed the documentation setting out support for pupils with SEND.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, inspectors reviewed the single central record; took account of the views of leaders, staff and pupils; and considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils’ interests first.
- Inspectors considered the 265 responses to the online survey, Ofsted Parent View, and the 204 free-text comments submitted. They considered the responses to Ofsted’s surveys for staff and pupils. Inspectors spoke to groups of pupils about their experiences of school life and their learning in lessons to understand what it is like to be a pupil in their school.

## Inspection team

Dave Gibson, lead inspector	His Majesty’s Inspector
Aimee Bray	Ofsted Inspector
Cathy Barr	Ofsted Inspector
Jennifer Brassington	Ofsted Inspector
Dan Leonard	Ofsted Inspector

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