

INSPECTION REPORT

PARMITER'S SCHOOL

Garston

LEA area: Hertfordshire

Unique reference number: 117576

Headteacher: Mr B T Coulshed

Reporting inspector: Mrs G Kayembe
2901

Dates of inspection: 28th – 31st January 2002

Inspection number: 191361

Short inspection carried out under Section 10 of the School Inspections Act 1996

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INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL

Type of school: Comprehensive

School category: Voluntary aided

Age range of students: 11 to 18 years

Gender of students : Mixed

School address: High Elms Lane
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Appropriate authority: The governing body

Name of chair of governors: Reverend Group Captain D S Wallace

Date of previous inspection: 27th January 1997

INFORMATION ABOUT THE INSPECTION TEAM

Team members			Subject responsibilities (sixth form)	Aspect responsibilities
2901	G Kayembe	Registered inspector		<p>What sort of school is it?</p> <p>The school's results and students' achievements</p> <p>How well are students taught?</p> <p>How well is the school led and managed?</p> <p>What should the school do to improve further?</p>
9779	S Smith	Lay inspector		<p>Students' attitudes, values and personal development</p> <p>How well does the school care for its students?</p> <p>How well does the school work in partnership with parents?</p>
19913	R Garrett	Team inspector	Theatre studies	
13619	B Meech	Team inspector	Information and communication technology	How good are the curricular and other opportunities offered to students?
8552	W Hart	Team inspector	Biology Design and technology	
13734	H Davies	Team inspector	Geography Business studies	
4351	J Strickland	Team inspector	English	
31329	K Barratt	Team inspector	History	
27247	J Pickering	Team inspector	Sociology	
10053	J Simms	Team inspector	Art and design	
23030	C Runyard	Team inspector	Physical education	
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Alexandra House
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PART A: SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL

Parmiter's School is a popular and oversubscribed comprehensive school situated just outside Watford. There are 1198 girls and boys on roll, though boys outnumber girls. The age range served by the school is 11 to 18 with 261 students in the sixth form. The school is voluntary aided and was originally set up in Bethnal Green as a charity school in the will of Thomas Parmiter. The majority of students, 85 per cent, are white. The 15 per cent from minority ethnic backgrounds are mostly Indian, and all are fluent in English. About one to two per cent of students are eligible for a free school meal, and this is very low when compared to national norms. Though students come from a wide variety of backgrounds, their overall social and economic circumstances are considerably better than those found nationally. The proportion of students with special educational needs (SEN) is well below the national average and the proportion with statements is below average.

The attainment of students on entry to the school is comfortably above average, and it is higher amongst students in Years 7 to 9 than 10 to 13. The school has the option to select about a third of its students through entry tests, and about a quarter of the intake has been admitted on the basis of performance in these tests. The school also successfully applied to become a specialist school technology college in September 2000.

HOW GOOD THE SCHOOL IS

This is a very good school and highly successful in helping its students to achieve very good results in public examinations. Very good teaching leads to very good learning. Strong leadership and management, including very astute management of finance, promote high standards and an excellent ethos which enable students to flourish. The school provides very good value for money.

What the school does well

- The school's high expectations provide the driving force for the high standards students themselves expect and hence achieve.
- High quality teaching enables students to thrive as learners.
- Sensitive leadership coupled with rigorous systems for management successfully focus on meeting the needs of students and providing staff with the necessary support and resources to perform their roles well.
- An excellent ethos which produces a strong sense of community and very effectively nurtures students' personal development. Hence they leave school as mature, articulate and well-rounded individuals.

What could be improved

- In some cases there is scope for aspects of teaching to be refined and developed further. These principally include marking of work and use of a wider range of teaching methods.
- The requirements for religious education in the sixth form are not fully met.

The areas for improvement will form the basis of the governors' action plan.

The school's strengths far outweigh any shortcomings.

HOW THE SCHOOL HAS IMPROVED SINCE ITS LAST INSPECTION

The school has made very good improvement in its results and educational provision since the last inspection in January 1997. Results of public tests and examinations have improved at a very good rate. The school has built successfully on the very good results obtained at the time of the last inspection. Results in National Curriculum tests for 14-year-olds and GCSEs have improved at a much faster rate than nationally. A-level results were in line with national results in 1997 and improved to above average in 2000. This improvement was maintained in 2001. There is considerably more good and very good teaching now than when the school was last inspected and no unsatisfactory teaching, unlike last time. The overall improvement in teaching has been very good. The school has tackled the key issues from its previous inspection with considerable success and, therefore, enhanced considerably the quality of education provided and leadership and management throughout the school. For example, provision for information and communication technology (ICT) and design and technology is now very good and there is a high degree of consistency in academic standards between different subjects. There has been some improvement in the provision for religious education in the sixth form, but this has not gone far enough. The school's capacity to secure further improvement is very good.

STANDARDS

The table shows the standards achieved by students at the end of Year 11 and sixth-form students at the end of Year 13 based on average point scores in GCSE and A-level/AS-level examinations.

Performance in:	compared with			
	all schools			similar schools
	1999	2000	2001	2001
GCSE examinations	A	A	A	A
A-levels/AS-levels	C	B	B	

Key	
very high	A*
well above average	A
above average	B
average	C
below average	D
well below average	E
very low	E*

Students perform very well in public tests and examinations and this is mirrored in the well above average standards of work seen in the school. Not only are results of tests and examinations for 14- and 16-year-olds well above national norms, but their performance is also very good in relation to their capabilities. This is reflected in the very favourable comparisons with similar schools. In 2001, mathematics results in the national tests for 14-year-olds were outstanding and in the top five per cent of schools. In mathematics and science the results for 2001 were also in the top five per cent of similar schools.

GCSE results in English, mathematics and science are consistently well above average with a high proportion of students gaining a grade A*-C. The overall proportion gaining five or more GCSEs at grades A*-C is well above average, and has consistently been so for a number of years. In 2001, 98 per cent of students gained one or more GCSEs at grades A*-G, which is average. In all subjects, results are above average, and in many, they are well above. Subjects which are particularly strong include mathematics, modern foreign languages and religious education.

Standards in the sixth form are high, and in the current Year 13, they are better than the most recent A-level results suggest. Performance in the AS-level examinations in 2001 was very

good with a high proportion of students gaining the higher grades A or B. A-level results were above average in 2000 and 2001.

Students from minority ethnic backgrounds perform as well as others in the school, and sometimes better, though in the 2001 national tests for 14-year-olds in English, they did not do quite so well. Students with special educational needs perform well and make very good progress on the whole. A very small number of students, however, sometimes do not complete their GCSEs.

Standards of work in the school in English, mathematics and science are well above average. Students are articulate and fluent writers and speakers. They read with considerable depth of understanding which improves to very good levels by the age of 16. The majority are adept with numbers, most at ease with mental arithmetic and manipulation of equations. Students' scientific knowledge and understanding are of a high order and they grasp new scientific ideas quickly. However, they do not always demonstrate as good an understanding in relation to experimental and investigative science. Use of literacy and numeracy in subjects is of a high standard, and a key feature of students' work is their capacity to apply what they have learned to new situations.

STUDENTS' ATTITUDES AND VALUES

Aspect	Comment
Attitudes to the school	Excellent. Students are highly motivated. They work hard and enjoy school.
Behaviour, in and out of classrooms	Behaviour is very good. Students treat one another with respect and are mature enough to monitor and control their own behaviour.
Personal development and relationships	Students are sensitive, polite and well-mannered youngsters. They are thoughtful and empathetic of others' views, articulating their own in very persuasive and powerful terms. Relationships are excellent.
Attendance	Well above average. Punctuality to school is very good on the whole though adversely affected some mornings by lateness of buses.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teaching of students:	Years 7 – 9	Years 10 – 11	Years 12 – 13
Quality of teaching	Very good	Very good	Very good

Inspectors make judgements about teaching in the range: excellent; very good; good; satisfactory; unsatisfactory; poor; very poor. 'Satisfactory' means that the teaching is adequate and strengths outweigh weaknesses.

The overall quality of teaching and learning is very good. Teachers' subject knowledge is exceptionally good and used well, often very well, to ask probing questions and extend students' level of knowledge and understanding. Teachers' expectations are high and students are provided with work that is suitably challenging, and so make noticeable gains in their learning. Students' literacy and numeracy skills are very good and they make good use of these in lessons. Sometimes, though, teachers miss opportunities to help develop oracy

skills further. Teachers are rigorous in their planning and structure lesson content very well so that students easily understand key learning points and acquire new knowledge and skills at a rapid rate. There is scope though to extend the range of teaching methods in some cases in order to encourage students to be more actively involved in lessons, and to provide more opportunities for students to develop their own curiosity, question their teachers and use their own initiative. Overall, students' learning needs are very successfully met by the teaching. However, marking is variable, and is, at times, cursory. Teaching in English and science is good, often very good, and in mathematics it is very good. The overall strong sense of purpose established in lessons means that students work hard, concentrate very well and know exactly what they are expected to learn.

In the best lessons, teaching is exciting and intellectually demanding for students. Teaching methods in these lessons are often imaginative and creative and actively involve students. As a result, the level of learning becomes very marked and students revel in the opportunity for discussion and debate and to work things out for themselves.

OTHER ASPECTS OF THE SCHOOL

Aspect	Comment
The quality and range of the curriculum	Very good throughout the school, though requirements for religious education are not fully met in the sixth form. Students in the sixth form are given a wide range of choices in the courses offered. The curricular provision is very carefully co-ordinated and structured to provide equality of opportunity. There is excellent provision for music through the wide range of extra-curricular activities.
Provision for students with special educational needs	Very good and as a result, the majority of students with learning needs make very good progress.
Provision for students with English as an additional language	Students with English as an additional language are fluent in English and do very well at the school. However, the school does not keep a record of the range of backgrounds of these students and if any, for example, might be at a later stage of learning English.
Provision for students' personal, including spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	The very strong sense of community contributes to the excellent ethos. Provision for spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is very good and the wide range of extra-curricular and enrichment activities provide students with excellent opportunities for personal development.
How well the school cares for its students	Very good. Child protection and health and safety procedures are very good and the overall level of pastoral care is excellent.

HOW WELL THE SCHOOL IS LED AND MANAGED

Aspect	Comment
Leadership and management by the headteacher and other key staff	Very good. The leadership provided by the headteacher sets a very clear direction for development. There is a very strong people-centred approach to leadership and management and this encourages all staff to give of their best. The senior management team is a very cohesive team and its members provide the necessary leadership and management to sustain high standards in all areas of the school's work. Middle managers are of good quality and ensure their areas are well led and managed.
How well the governors fulfil their responsibilities	Very good. Governors are very well informed about the school's strengths and areas for development. They work in a very productive and purposeful partnership with the school.
The school's evaluation of its performance	Very good. The systems for monitoring and evaluation are very thorough and data are rigorously analysed to help identify any areas for improvement.
The strategic use of resources	Excellent. The school uses its resources very efficiently and effectively. It plans ahead with great care in order to achieve the best value on behalf of the students.

PARENTS' AND CARERS' VIEWS OF THE SCHOOL

What pleases parents most	What some parents would like to see improved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That their child(ren) like school. • That their child(ren) make good progress. • The school's high expectations. • That the school is well led and managed. • Behaviour in the school is good. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homework – whilst some parents felt not enough was provided, many who expressed concern felt there was too much. • Information to parents. • Working partnership with parents.

Parents' views of the school are very positive. The inspection evidence wholeheartedly agrees with the positive comments they make. The evidence does not wholly support the concerns expressed by some. Whilst students' annual reports are not as precise and helpful as they could be, the overall quality of information for parents is very good. An appropriate amount of homework is regularly provided and it is of good, often very good, quality. The school maintains a very good working partnership with parents.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE SIXTH FORM

The sixth form has grown significantly since the last inspection in 1997 and there are now 261 students on roll. This is considerably larger than the average sixth form of 166 students. Entry to the sixth form is on the basis of GCSE successes and most students have achieved at least six GCSE passes at the higher grades A*-C before entering the sixth form. Entry requirements for individual subjects are usually a B grade at GCSE. There is, however, some flexibility at the discretion of subject heads of department. Approximately 70 per cent of Year 11 students stay on into the sixth form. The staying-on rate for the sixth form is very high and very few students fail to complete their courses. In the region of 62 per cent continued on to higher education in 2000, with a further 16 per cent taking a gap year before entering university. This pattern has been fairly consistent over recent years.

HOW GOOD THE SIXTH FORM IS

The overall effectiveness of the sixth form is very good. Excellent use is made of resources and the principles of best value are also applied in an excellent manner. Academic standards are above average and amongst the top 40 per cent of schools. Achievement of students is very good and is broadly based. Improvement over time is good. The quality of teaching and learning is very good. Leadership and management of the sixth form are very good. The sixth form meets the needs and aspirations of students very well. It is an extremely purposeful place where service, personal development and academic study are well integrated.

Strengths

- The quality of teaching is very good, resulting in very good learning and above average standards of work.
- Students are committed to their studies and to the life of the school.
- The curriculum is very good, with many varied and rich opportunities for learning beyond the classroom.
- Leadership and management of the sixth form are very good.
- Use of resources in subjects and in the sixth form in general is excellent.
- There is very good provision for students' personal development and welfare.

What could be improved?

- Opportunities for students to contribute orally, work on their own and participate actively in some subjects.
- Opportunities for students to discuss their work and other issues in non-lesson time.
- More profitable use of time in some of the morning form periods.
- Provision of religious education for all students to meet statutory requirements.

The areas for improvement will form the basis of the governors' action plan. Strengths and areas for improvement in individual subjects are identified in the sections on individual subjects in the full report.

THE QUALITY OF PROVISION IN INDIVIDUAL CURRICULUM AREAS

The table below shows overall judgements about the provision in the subjects and courses that were inspected in the sixth form. Judgements are based mainly on the quality of teaching and learning and how well students achieve. Not all subjects in the sixth form were inspected.

Curriculum area	Overall judgement about provision, with comment.
Mathematics	Very good: very good teaching combined with students' very good levels of application result in achievement that is well above expectation in relation to prior attainment.
Physics	Good: students' attainment is above average, and is improving at both AS- and A-level because their motivation to learn is high. Teaching and learning are good and students achieve well.
Biology	Good: the teaching is very good and teachers are enthusiastic about their subject. Examination results are above average and achievement is good. However, students rely too much on their teachers.
Design and technology	Good: results were well below average in the first year of post-16 design and technology, but standards are improving rapidly. A strong team of specialist teachers together with facilities for a good range of technologies, are promoting students' progress well so that current standards are average and achievement good.
Business	Good: students make good progress in relation to prior attainment, particularly at AS-level. Results in the AVCE course in 2001 were well above the national average, but well below at A-level. As a result of well-planned lessons, students develop good, independent learning skills.
ICT	Very good: students attain well above the national average as a result of very good teaching. However, their independence in their learning needs to be extended.
Physical education	Very good: very good leadership ensures consistently high standards and achievement. Extra-curricular provision is excellent enabling students to achieve very high standards.
Theatre studies	Very good: attainment is above the national average. Teachers are very good role models for the performance skills which students so successfully acquire. Students work very well together and are mutually supportive.
Art and design	Good with many very good features: teaching and learning are good and progress in terms of added value from GCSE is high. Excellent levels of attainment are demonstrated by the ablest students. It is a well-resourced subject.
Sociology	Very good: students achieve at a level well above the national average at both AS- and A-level. They make very good progress in lessons as a result of very effective teaching, which encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning.
History	Satisfactory: good aspects in teaching and a well-planned curriculum help students to learn effectively; however, though teaching is rigorous, the narrow range of teaching methods does not provide students with enough opportunities to develop their skills of independent learning.
Curriculum	Overall judgement about provision, with comment.

area	
Geography	Very good: Students are achieving well above average standards as a result of very good, authoritative teaching combined with a keen and hard working attitude on the part of students. AS- and A-level results in 2001 were significantly above the national average.
English	Good: good teaching and positive student attitudes combine to make this subject a successful and popular A-level.

Other subjects sampled, but not inspected in depth, include:

Economics: teaching is very good and attainment is well above the national average.

Chemistry: students are making good progress.

Music: high standards of teaching and high level of student skill in composition and performance were seen. Subject makes a considerable contribution to the life of the school.

Spanish: very good coaching helps to support the development of students' debating skills in the foreign language.

OTHER ASPECTS OF THE SIXTH FORM

Aspect	Comment
How well students are guided and supported	Very well: regular and supportive feedback from subject teachers as well as the sixth-form tutorial team helps students to ascertain how well they are doing and how to raise their standards. Careers guidance and provision are very good.
Effectiveness of the leadership and management of the sixth form	Very good: leadership and management of the sixth form and of many departments ensure that students achieve very well and reach above average standards. The head of sixth form carries out his tasks skilfully to ensure a high quality experience for students.

STUDENTS' VIEWS OF THE SIXTH FORM

What students like about the sixth form	What they feel could be improved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School helps students to settle well into the sixth form. • Help is given to assist students to develop independent learning and research skills. • Work is thoroughly assessed by teachers. • Students are taught and challenged to do their best. • Teachers are always accessible to help students with their work. • Students enjoy being in the sixth form and recommend the sixth form to other students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advice about options in the sixth form. • Information on individual student' progress. • Advice on future options post sixth form. • The school does not listen and respond to students' views. • Students are not fully treated as young adults.

Inspection evidence largely endorses students' favourable replies but does not reflect the concerns expressed by some students in their responses to the student questionnaire. During the inspection, inspectors talked to a large number and a significant majority said that

advice about sixth-form courses and the quality of careers provision were very good. They also said that the school does listen and consider their views and most appreciated that not all suggestions can be implemented for a variety of good reasons. Students also considered that they are treated in a more adult manner compared to Year 11, and it was clear that they develop very good working relationships with their tutors and teachers. These views match inspectors' findings after closely examining student' concerns. Many students however, would appreciate the opportunity for group discussion on matters concerning their courses in addition to the supervised study time. This is a sensible and helpful request.

COMPARING PROVISION IN SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

Inspectors make judgements about provision in subjects and courses, and about leadership and management, in the range: excellent; very good; good; satisfactory; unsatisfactory; poor; very poor. Excellent and very good are equivalent to the judgement 'outstanding' in further education and sixth-form college reports; poor and very poor are equivalent to 'very weak'.

PART B: COMMENTARY

WHAT THE SCHOOL DOES WELL

The school's high expectations provide the driving force for the high standards students themselves expect and hence achieve.

1. The school sets very high expectations of its students and encourages them to aim high in relation to their own performance in academic studies and in relation to their personal development. There is a strong work ethic and a very well-established culture of high achievement. Students are prepared to work hard to achieve their goals but also take pleasure from their learning and the challenges they are set. As a result of these factors, the standards of work are well above average and students' achievements are very good in relation to their prior attainment.
2. In the national tests for 14-year-olds in English, mathematics and science, students' overall performance, based on average points scores, in all three subjects has been consistently well above national averages over the last five years. In 2001, the mathematics' results were very high, being amongst the top five per cent of schools. Science results have alternated between being very high and well above average over the last four years. Students achieve very well and this is reflected in very favourable comparisons with similar schools. In 2001, students' performance in mathematics and science was very high when compared with similar schools and English results were well above the average of similar schools. In all three subjects, the proportions of students reaching the expected level, Level 5, and the higher levels, Levels 6 to 8, were well above the average of schools nationally. The results of students from minority ethnic backgrounds were equally good, though some of the higher attainers did not do quite as well in comparison to their prior attainment in English as they did in mathematics and science. Boys do better here than boys nationally and the gap between girls and boys is narrower than the gap nationally in English. In science, boys are outperforming girls contrary to the national trend where boys' and girls' results are fairly similar. The very good achievement of boys at the school is largely due to the culture of high achievement and the high expectations set by the school – boys are not afraid to be clever.
3. GCSE results are equally high and the proportions of students gaining five or more GCSEs at grades A*-C have been consistently well above average for the last five years. The average points score is also well above average. Both these indicators for 2000 and 2001 have been well above the average of similar schools. The school's results for five or more GCSEs at grades A*-G and one or more A*-G have been well above average over the last few years, with one exception. In 2001, 98 per cent of students gained one or more GCSEs at grades A*-G and this was in line with the national average rather than well above. The school tends to do less well in relation to the proportions of students gaining five or more GCSEs at grades A*-G and one or more at A*-G when compared to similar schools. In 2001 particularly, the similar schools comparisons for one or more GCSEs at grades A*-G was below the average of similar schools. However, the numbers of students involved who do not attain at least one or more or five or more GCSEs at grades A*-G is very small. Nonetheless, the school is aware of the issue and has identified meeting the needs of low attainers as a focus for improvement in the school development plan.
4. Again boys do well at GCSE and the gap between boys and girls is smaller than the gap nationally. Students from minority ethnic backgrounds achieve equally well at GCSE as

their English peers. In 2001, the average points score and the percentage who gained five or more GCSEs at grades A*-C were higher for minority ethnic students than the school's results.

5. The school's value added analysis shows that students' overall achievement at GCSE is very good and that they far exceed expectations based on their performance in national tests at the age of 14 and on tests taken when they started the school at the age of 11. In all subjects, the proportion of A*-C grades was above average in 2000 and 2001, and in the majority of subjects, the results were significantly above average. In English, mathematics and science, results in 2000 and 2001 were well above average, and also well above the average of similar schools in English and science and amongst the top five per cent of schools in mathematics. Students did not perform quite as well as those in similar schools based on their results in national tests when they were 14 years old in 1999 in English and science, and value-added was as expected. Results in mathematics, modern foreign languages and religious education were very good and students far exceeded expectations.
6. The overall results at sixth-form level were above average in 2000 and 2001, indicating a distinct improvement from the previous two years. Results in a number of subjects, such as economics, sociology and physical education at A-level, and AVCE business studies were well above average in 2001. A-level geography results were very high. Achievement in these subjects was very good. In some subjects however, results were well below average, for example, in A-level business studies, design and technology and history, though students' performance was as expected given their GCSE results. Looking back over a period of years, results in subjects such as biology, music, sociology and physical education, A-levels have usually been above or well above average. Economics results have been consistently well above or very high. In most other subjects, results tend to vary from year to year, occasionally being high. In some subjects such as business studies, chemistry, French, history, government and politics and psychology, results tend to be below or well below average. Some of the variation is due to the ability of the intake, but in some cases, it is also due to expectations and provision. The school did very well in the recent AS-level examinations in 2001 with students gaining a high proportion of A and B grades. This was the case in almost all subjects, with the proportion of A and B grades being very high in art and design, design and technology, geography, history, physics and sociology. In most subjects, the pass rate was 100 per cent, which is excellent.
7. Overall, the high standards indicated by examination results are readily visible in the standards of work seen during the inspection. In English, for example, students demonstrate a high degree of competence in oracy throughout the school. Many teachers in English and other subjects provide them with good opportunities to debate and discuss issues and students are able to do these with remarkable skill and fluency. For example, students in Year 9 studying 'Twelfth Night' spoke with confidence and gave detailed and in-depth replies to questions about the characters in the play. However, at times, students are reticent, especially in the sixth form or where teachers do not build in opportunities for discussion or debate. Written work is often of a very high standard with students able to write equally well creatively or when presenting an argument. Overall, students provide a strong personal response in their writing, especially when writing about characters or events in books they have read. Comprehension skills are very well developed with students demonstrating an increasing capacity, as they move up through the school, to interpret hidden meaning in the texts they study.

8. The majority of students demonstrate very good skills with number work and become increasingly adept at mental arithmetic as they move through the school. The written work of students in Year 9 shows excellent progress in number, algebra and shape and space. There is excellent graphical work in Year 11 students' books. Challenging work on algebra and simultaneous equations has resulted in these older students developing a high level of skill in these aspects. The very high expectations of teachers and the demanding work provided to students are a strong driving force in the achievement of very high standards of work by students. For example, in a lesson with Year 8 students, the teacher set them work on vectors which was highly complex and in many respects would not have been tackled at such an early stage in their school careers. Nonetheless, they rose to the challenge and produced very good work. In science, students demonstrate strong knowledge and understanding of scientific principles and ideas. Students are able to provide detailed and useful research work on aspects of science. However, only occasionally do they provide explanations and analyses of their experimental and investigative work.
9. In other subjects, students display an equally high level of attainment and achievement. In modern foreign languages, for example, teachers expect students to speak and understand the language they are studying. Little or no English is used and students willingly accept the challenge. They demonstrate very good listening and speaking skills and by the time they are in Year 9, they respond in sentences, with the ablest developing conversation skills at a very good rate. Teachers' high expectations also mean that where they deem it necessary, they go beyond the syllabus in order to stretch the students. For example, in a top set Year 9 German lesson, the teacher selected work from a GCSE syllabus in order to make the work sufficiently demanding for these students. This task resulted in very high standards of oral work and use of difficult grammatical constructions. In geography, students are developing very good skills in enquiry as well as learning about geographical facts and concepts. Students' ICT skills are very good and they move with ease between one program and another. The majority are very skilled in using the Internet for research. In religious education, students are given quite difficult moral and spiritual questions to consider. These challenge their thinking but also make them consider the viewpoints of others. In a Year 10 lesson, for example, students were given a GCSE question to answer about belief and to put forward arguments for and against the point that 'Religious experience is a fantasy that weak people rely on'. The question made students think deeply about the nature of belief and they cogently marshalled evidence and arguments to support or counter this viewpoint.

High quality teaching enables students to thrive as learners.

10. The overall quality of teaching is very good, and about half the teaching seen was very good or better and a small proportion was excellent. None was less than satisfactory and about 89 per cent was at least good. There was little difference between the key stages, other than that there was a little more satisfactory teaching in Years 7 to 11 than in the sixth form and a little less excellent teaching. At all stages, the proportion of very good or better teaching was about 50 per cent.
11. Teaching in mathematics was very good, and in English and science it was good and often very good. The overall quality of teaching makes a major contribution to the students' learning and promotes high standards. Students make very good progress and significant gains in their learning as a result of the very good teaching with which they are provided.

12. Very good subject knowledge is effectively used to question students, probe their understanding and extend it. Teachers also make very good use of their subject knowledge to structure subject content coherently so that students engage with it effectively and readily absorb it. Thus, their own knowledge and understanding of the subjects they study are of a high order. Teachers' skills often provide very good models for students. In physical education, for example, teachers demonstrate techniques skilfully and motivate students to emulate the high standards they themselves show. Similarly, in design and technology, teachers expertly show students how to use tools and materials and hence promote their skills very effectively. Most modern foreign language lessons are conducted almost exclusively in the foreign language and teachers' own skills in speaking the language act as very good exemplars for students to follow.
13. Time is used well and in most lessons, teachers pack in a considerable amount of work and activities. Where lessons are single, for example of 35 minutes duration, the time is usually used very well and not a moment is wasted in order to optimise learning opportunities for students. For example, in a Year 11 physics single lesson, the teacher managed to cover a good deal of the topic on electromagnets through clear exposition and a question and answer session, carrying out a short demonstration to illustrate methods for increasing the strength of an electromagnet, explaining the use of an electromagnet in the operation of a bell and enabling students to make their own notes on this with illustrations.
14. Relationships between teachers and students are very good, and are used very effectively to help motivate students and also to introduce humour and a fun element into lessons. The high level of challenge and the demanding work students are given are intellectually rewarding for students who lap it up. They work with conviction and purpose in lessons showing very good levels of concentration. For example, in an excellent Year 12 English lesson on Huckleberry Finn, the teacher dealt very vigorously and successfully with key central themes. Students were encouraged to think, speculate, argue and take risks in a lesson which had pace and variety and was very well directed by the teacher. In many lessons, teachers use creative and imaginative methods such as these to make lessons more interesting and to elicit an even stronger response from their students. In these cases, students learn particularly well and enjoy the opportunities such lessons provide for being actively engaged and involved. In a Year 7 mathematics lesson on handling data, students were given the opportunity to gather their own data in groups and organise and present it in pie charts. Through gathering the data and discussions with one another, students were able to extend well their level of understanding about how to handle and manipulate the data and represent them graphically to provide useful information. In a very good Year 8 religious education lesson, students were given the task of putting forward evidence for the existence of Jesus and to work this out for themselves rather than being given the arguments. Thus, students are learning to think for themselves and to apply what they already know to new situations.
15. Resources are used well and, in the best lessons, exploited to excellent effect. In a Year 12 biology lesson for example, the teacher combined outstanding Power-point presentations on cell structure with high quality worksheets, rigorous board work and challenging questions to students to promote in-depth knowledge and understanding of how proteins build up in cells and why the body accepts some protein molecules but not others.
16. Overall, the teaching is rigorous and demanding. Teachers skilfully involve all students in lessons, using question and answer sessions in a very focused and expert way.

Lower attaining students' needs are largely very well met through the teaching they receive. Students respond very positively to the teaching they receive. They and their parents rightly acknowledge that teaching in the school is a strength.

Sensitive leadership coupled with rigorous systems for management successfully focus on meeting the needs of students and providing staff with the necessary support and resources to perform their roles well.

17. The headteacher provides very good leadership and a clear sense of direction for the school. There is a strong sense of teamwork. Staff and governors work with energy and commitment towards commonly agreed and understood goals. Very good communication is a key to the success of the school and is predicated on the basis that all members of staff and governors are important members of the community and, therefore, need to be fully conversant with what the school is about, where it is going and how it will get there. Nor is the communication one-way, top down from senior managers to staff. There are many opportunities through the management systems for staff to communicate their views and identify their needs.
18. Senior managers see staff as a key strength of the school. There is a sensitive and caring approach for meeting the needs of staff in order to promote their work and enable them to carry out their roles well. The school is currently working towards the Investor in People award because there is a strong belief that all staff matter and should be enabled to contribute their best to the work of the school. The procedures and provision for staff development are excellent.
19. Since the previous inspection, the school has developed its management systems significantly further so that they now provide rigorous mechanisms for delegation and management of delegated duties and for monitoring and evaluating the work of the school. The line management structure works very effectively to support middle managers, particularly heads of department, in their leadership and management roles. Middle managers, such as heads of year and heads of department, feel well supported in managing their areas and also feel that they are given the support for developing them further. In one to two cases, restricted accommodation has had an adverse impact on the pace of development and innovation that heads of department would like to implement, but the school leadership, including governors, has found solutions over time to improve and extend the school's facilities in order to help move the school forward. The successful bid to become a technology college was used very effectively to improve the school's accommodation and resources, particularly ICT resources. These are having a beneficial impact on the work of staff and on students' learning.
20. Monitoring and evaluation of the work of the school are very good. Governors receive good feedback from the school's monitoring activities, including data analysis. They are, hence, very well informed about the school's strengths and possible areas for improvement. Senior managers regularly undertake observations of teaching and learning as well as other monitoring activities such as checking teachers' work planners. Students' books are also regularly monitored though there is no formally adopted system of recording key points arising out of this. Monitoring of teaching and learning is very well recorded with points for development and improvement identified and action taken to improve where necessary.
21. Governors play an active role in the life of the school and fulfil their responsibilities very well. They work hard in the interests of the school and are particularly good at getting the best out of the school's finances. In the latter, they are very ably assisted by the

school's management team and the bursar. Overall, the school is very well led and managed and the high value placed on individuals is a key feature of its success.

An excellent ethos which produces a strong sense of community and very effectively nurtures students' personal development. Hence they leave school as mature, articulate and well-rounded individuals.

22. There is a very strong sense of community in the school and many members of the school community even refer to the school as a 'family'. The strong link with past students through the Old Parmiterians' Society heightens this sense of family and community within the school. The school's history features prominently in the life of the school and adds substantially to the students' cultural development and provides good opportunities for appreciating the value of tradition and heritage. The school's aims place a strong emphasis on students' personal development as well as their academic development, and staff and governors are very clear that the school is as much about producing well-rounded young people as academically successful ones. These aims and aspirations are very effectively realised and the school successfully produces confident and self-assured youngsters who have many interests. Sixth-formers in particular come across as very mature and responsible young men and women.
23. Through its daily life and routines, students are provided with strong models of moral and social behaviour. Assemblies make a good contribution to students' personal development, though not all provide opportunities to consider spiritual matters. Hence, opportunities are sometimes missed for reflection and consideration of questions which go beyond the material world. The very good assemblies observed communicated powerful messages of a spiritual, moral, social and cultural nature. In one such assembly, for example, sharing an Indian prayer which featured in a favourite novel, was combined with an insight into making purposeful use of our lives. Respect for others, and especially respect for other cultures and faiths, is successfully promoted through the everyday life of the school, through the value placed on all individuals within the school regardless of colour or creed.
24. There are excellent opportunities through the extra-curricular activities, the house system, trips and visits, for students to develop and extend their social skills, cement relationships and develop understanding about others. The personal, social and health education programme for students in Years 7 to 11 and the liberal studies programme for students in Years 12 to 13 provide a wide variety of opportunities for development of spiritual, moral, social and cultural awareness. Sixth-form students appreciate the liberal studies provision and indicate that they are often moved by the visitors who come to share their experiences with them, such as a prisoner for example, and a Holocaust survivor. Participation in musical and sporting activities is very good and the school has bands and choirs who have performed locally and abroad. Recordings of performances in countries abroad demonstrate the very high quality of musical performance of students. Students are genuinely proud of their school.
25. There are also many opportunities for students to exercise responsibility, though there is no school council. There is a sixth-form committee through which students can express their views, though a minority did not feel this was effective. Parents agreed at the meeting with them that the school promotes positive values and attitudes well.
26. The school produces a magazine 'The Parmiterian' which contains many articles by students, including poetry, interviews, visits and trips. Students of all ages make very pertinent and well-written contributions which demonstrate mature attitudes to life. They write with sensitivity and indicate that they have a well-developed sense of morality and

spirituality, in its broadest sense, for example in the way they express feelings in poetry, and in the sense of appreciation and awe they show when writing about places they have visited or things they have done. The magazine interviews of staff by students point to very good relationships between the two. The magazine also provides good insight into the wide variety of events and activities in which students are involved such as music, sports and travel to name but a few. The articles in 'The Parmiterian' are a good testimony to the wide-ranging personal development of students. They give a view of students who are well rounded and who can express their own ideas and views and weigh up important social and moral questions. These features are reflected in the lessons where students are given the opportunities to consider moral and social issues.

WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED

In some cases, there is scope for some aspects of teaching to be refined and developed further. These principally include marking of work and use of a wider range of teaching methods.

27. Though the overall quality of teaching is very good, there are aspects where there is scope for further development. There are examples of very good and thorough marking. However, this is not consistently replicated across the whole school or even within individual departments. Variations in marking exist in terms of the regularity of marking and also in the quality of the written comments. Sometimes, there is little comment and opportunities are missed for teachers to identify for students how they might improve their work. On rare occasions, work is not marked frequently enough.
28. Though heads of subjects monitor students' work and the quality of marking, there is no system of formal recording of what this monitoring reveals. Some heads of department have started to use a checklist, but again this does not provide a mechanism for identifying issues and areas for improvement which could then be followed up in subsequent monitoring. This may be a useful area to develop alongside the improvement of the overall quality of marking.
29. Where teaching is very good and often where it is good, teachers use a wide range of methods and often involve students actively in their own learning. However, in a minority of lessons, opportunities are missed to engage students more fully and encourage them, particularly in the sixth form, to work more on their own, participate in discussion or to pose questions of their own. In a science lesson, for example, students were given information through explanation and exposition. Though there was some questioning it was not extensive and students were also provided with brief, dictated notes. In contrast, in a very good physics lesson, students were given a well-structured brief to find out information in groups about different aspects of space. The groups were formed on the basis of prior attainment and able groups were given a more challenging brief than others. The lesson gave opportunities for students to find out information for themselves and to present it to the rest of the class using ICT to develop this presentation. Often, sixth-form students in particular are so confident in their teachers' subject knowledge that they do not challenge it or probe further into the background information.

The requirements for religious education in the sixth form are not fully met.

30. The last inspection highlighted the need for the school to provide religious education to sixth-form students. The school has tried to address this issue by including religious education topics within the liberal studies programme. However, the amount of time spent on these is below the 30 hours recommended in the locally agreed syllabus for

religious education followed by the school. Hence, coverage of the syllabus is patchy. The time for religious education as part of the liberal studies programme has been put

under additional pressure due to the recent introduction of teaching of key skills through the liberal studies programme.

31. Since the last inspection, the school has markedly improved provision for religious education lower down the school in Years 10 to 11. All students in Key Stage 4 take a short GCSE course in religious education and many opt to complete the full course. It is proving to be a popular subject, not least because it is very well taught and results are outstanding, and plans are in hand to offer it as an A-level course in the near future.

WHAT SHOULD THE SCHOOL DO TO IMPROVE FURTHER?

32. In order to build on the very successful provision for education at the school, the headteacher, senior management team and governors should:

- (1) Build on the current good practice in the school to further refine and develop aspects of teaching by:

- improving the quality of marking so that all work is marked regularly and students are provided with written comments to help them identify areas for improvement;
- further developing the monitoring of marking to include recording of issues and concerns in individual teachers'/departments' marking of students' work;
- giving students greater opportunities for active involvement in their own learning and developing their capacity to work on their own;
- providing more opportunities for students, especially in the sixth form, to ask questions and become involved in discussions.

(Paragraphs 8, 20, 27-29, 46, 59, 60, 112)

- (2) Provide sufficient time for religious education in the sixth form to meet fully the requirements of the Hertfordshire Agreed Syllabus.

(Paragraphs 30-31, 51)

33. In addition to the key issues above, the school should consider the following minor weaknesses in its action plan:

- Improve the quality of written reports by providing precise and specific comments on what students know and can do, and how they could improve. (Paragraphs, see summary)
- Examine ways in which the school can meet the requirements for a daily act of collective worship. (Paragraph 23)

Sixth form

34. In order to build on the very good practice overall in the sixth form, the headteacher, senior staff and governors should:

- (1) provide opportunities for students to contribute orally, work more on their own and participate actively in lessons in some subjects; (Paragraphs 44, 48, 49, 77, 82, 86, 91, 101, 106, 117, 123, 128, 129, 146, 147)
- (2) provide opportunities for students to discuss their work and other issues in non-lesson time; (Paragraphs 42, 74)
- (3) make profitable use of time in some of the morning form periods; (Paragraph 54)
- (4) provide religious education for all students in order to meet fully the statutory requirements. (Paragraphs 30–31, 51)

PART C: SCHOOL DATA AND INDICATORS

Summary of the sources of evidence for the inspection

Number of lessons observed	Years 7-11	56
	Sixth form	55
Number of discussions with staff, governors, other adults and students		49

Summary of teaching observed during the inspection

	Excellent	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Poor	Very Poor
Years 7-11							
Number	3	25	20	8	0	0	0
Percentage	5	45	36	14	0	0	0
Sixth form							
Number	5	23	23	4	0	0	0
Percentage	9	42	42	7	0	0	0

The table gives the number and percentage of lessons observed in each of the seven categories used to make judgements about teaching. Care should be taken when interpreting the percentages as each lesson represents more than one percentage point.

Information about the school's students

Students on the school's roll	Y7 – Y11	Sixth form
Number of students on the school's roll	937	261
Number of full-time students known to be eligible for free school meals	11	0

Special educational needs	Y7 – Y11	Sixth form
Number of students with statements of special educational needs	10	0
Number of students on the school's special educational needs register	76	8

English as an additional language	No of students
Number of students with English as an additional language	41

Pupil mobility in the last school year	No of students
Students who joined the school other than at the usual time of first admission	12

Students who left the school other than at the usual time of leaving
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12

Attendance

Authorised absence

	%
School data	5.8
National comparative data	8.1

Unauthorised absence

	%
School data	0.0
National comparative data	1.1

Both tables give the percentage of half days (sessions) missed through absence for the latest complete reporting year.

Attainment at the end of Key Stage 3 (Year 9)

	Year	Boys	Girls	Total
Number of registered students in final year of Key Stage 3 for the latest reporting year	2001	93	94	187

National Curriculum Test/Task Results		English	Mathematics	Science
Numbers of students at NC level 5 and above	Boys	86	90	90
	Girls	91	91	89
	Total	177	181	179
Percentage of students at NC level 5 or above	School	95 (90)	97 (92)	96 (92)
	National	64 (63)	66 (65)	66 (59)
Percentage of students at NC level 6 or above	School	70 (59)	90 (81)	79 (71)
	National	31 (28)	43 (42)	34 (30)

Teachers' Assessments		English	Mathematics	Science
Numbers of students at NC level 5 and above	Boys	84	89	86
	Girls	90	89	92
	Total	174	178	178
Percentage of students at NC level 5 or above	School	93 (94)	95 (91)	95 (87)
	National	65 (64)	68 (66)	64 (62)
Percentage of students at NC level 6 or above	School	71 (76)	86 (76)	75 (63)
	National	31 (31)	42 (39)	33 (29)

Percentages in brackets refer to the year before the latest reporting year.

Attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 (Year 11)

Number of registered students in final year of Key Stage 4 for the latest reporting year	Year	Boys	Girls	Total
	2001	120	66	186

GCSE results		5 or more grades A* to C	5 or more grades A*-G	1 or more grades A*-G
Numbers of students achieving the standard specified	Boys	98	119	119
	Girls	55	63	63
	Total	153	182	182
Percentage of students achieving the standard specified	School	82 (82)	98 (98)	98 (99)
	National	48 (47)	91 (91)	96 (96)

Percentages in brackets refer to the year before the latest reporting year.

GCSE results		GCSE point score
Average point score per pupil	School	56.2
	National	39.0

Figures in brackets refer to the year before the latest reporting year.

Attainment at the end of the sixth form (Year 13)

Number of students aged 16, 17 and 18 on roll in January of the latest reporting year who were entered for GCE A / AS / Advanced GNVQ / VCE examinations	Year	Male	Female	Total
	2001	114	112	226

		For candidates entered for GCE A / AS / Advanced GNVQ / VCE examinations		
		Male	Female	All
School	Number of candidates	40	51	91
	Average point score per candidate	17	18.9	18
National	Average point score per candidate	16.9	18	17.5

		For candidates entered for GCE A / AS examinations			For candidates entered for Advanced GNVQ / VCE examinations		
		Male	Female	All	Male	Female	All
School	Number of candidates	38	51	89	7	4	11
	Average point score per candidate	15	18.4	16.9	15.4	7	12.4
National	Average point score per candidate	16.9	17.9	17.4	9.8	11.4	10.6

Figures in brackets refer to the year before the latest reporting year.

Ethnic background of students

	No of students
Black – Caribbean heritage	14
Black – African heritage	5
Black – other	6
Indian	72
Pakistani	11
Bangladeshi	4
Chinese	19
White	1017
Any other minority ethnic group	50

Exclusions in the last school year

	Fixed period	Permanent
Black – Caribbean heritage	0	0
Black – African heritage	0	0
Black – other	0	0
Indian	0	0
Pakistani	0	0
Bangladeshi	0	0
Chinese	0	0
White	5	0
Other minority ethnic groups	3	0

This table gives the number of exclusions, which may be different from the number of students excluded.

Teachers and classes

Qualified teachers and classes: Y7 – Y13

Total number of qualified teachers (FTE)	75.1
Number of students per qualified teacher	16.1

Education support staff: Y7 – Y13

Total number of education support staff	16
Total aggregate hours worked per week	372.25

Deployment of teachers: Y7 – Y13

Percentage of time teachers spend in contact with classes	67.6
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Average teaching group size: Y7 – Y11

Key Stage 2	
Key Stage 3	26.49
Key Stage 4	21.27

FTE means full-time equivalent.

Recruitment of teachers

Number of teachers who left the school during the last two years	22
Number of teachers appointed to the school during the last two years	21
Total number of vacant teaching posts (FTE)	0
Number of vacancies filled by teachers on temporary contract of a term or more (FTE)	0

Financial information

Financial year	2000/2001
	£
Total income	3,595,292
Total expenditure	3,680,722
Expenditure per pupil	3,173
Balance brought forward from previous year	145,775
Balance carried forward to next year	60,345

Number of unfilled vacancies or vacancies filled by teachers on temporary contract of less than one term (FTE)	0
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FTE means full-time equivalent.

Results of the survey of parents and carers

Questionnaire return rate

Number of questionnaires sent out	1,198
Number of questionnaires returned	269

Percentage of responses in each category

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
My child likes school.	50	44	5	1	0
My child is making good progress in school.	61	37	1	0	1
Behaviour in the school is good.	44	51	2	0	3
My child gets the right amount of work to do at home.	33	49	12	3	3
The teaching is good.	46	49	2	0	2
I am kept well informed about how my child is getting on.	33	51	13	1	1
I would feel comfortable about approaching the school with questions or a problem.	55	37	6	1	1
The school expects my child to work hard and achieve his or her best.	71	27	1	0	0
The school works closely with parents.	36	47	11	2	4
The school is well led and managed.	57	38	3	1	2
The school is helping my child become mature and responsible.	52	41	3	0	3
The school provides an interesting range of activities outside lessons.	52	39	4	1	4

PART D: THE SIXTH FORM

RESULTS AND STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

35. The school has raised its entry requirements for sixth-form courses, though these remain flexible and it is still at the discretion of respective departments to take a student who may not fulfil the criteria but is considered to have the drive and enthusiasm to complete the course successfully. Students begin sixth-form studies, especially A-level courses, with attainment on entry which is broadly average. The most recent results, for 2001, for 18-year-olds, were above average, with performance being particularly good in A-level economics, geography, sociology and physical education, and AVCE business studies. In these subjects, the 2001 results were well above average with the exception of geography where they were very high and amongst the top five per cent of schools. The A-level computer studies results were very favourable though numbers were small and hence comparisons with national averages difficult. Business studies, design and technology and history were amongst the subjects where A-level results were well below average. Results were below average in chemistry and physics. In most other subjects, results in public examinations for 18-year-olds were above average. In English and mathematics, they were average. Overall, results in 2000 were also good being above the national average. Students' performance in 2000 and 2001 was better than expected given their respective GCSE results. There was no significant difference between the results of boys and girls. Students from minority ethnic backgrounds attained similar standards to their peers.
36. The results of AS-level examinations for 17-year-olds were very good and a high proportion of students gained grades A or B. In the vast majority of subjects, the proportion of students gaining a grade A or B was high, and above national expectations. In most subjects, the proportion of grades A or B was significantly high with the proportion of A and B grades being very high in art and design, design and technology, geography, history, physics and sociology. In most subjects, the pass rate was 100 per cent, which is excellent. In mathematics and computer studies, though the pass rate was below 100 per cent, it was still higher than the national pass rate in these subjects. In English, the overall pass rate was broadly in line with the national average, but the proportion of students gaining grades A or B was higher than for English nationally.
37. Standards of work seen in the sixth form are above average and in a number of subjects, are higher than the results of 2001. This is in part due to a more able year group in the current Year 13 than in the previous two years and in part due to improvements in the school's provision. For example, design and technology was introduced only two years ago as an A-level subject at the school, and the first group of A-level students to take the course sat the examination in 2001. Under new heads of department, the quality of teaching and learning is improving throughout the school and this is having a positive effect on the prior attainment of students choosing to study the subject. In history, where A-level results have been consistently well below average for a number of years, a change in syllabus is enabling teachers and students to perform better and current standards of work match national norms.
38. By the time students reach Year 13, their standards of work are well above average in computer studies, economics, geography, ICT and sociology. In most of the remaining subjects, (art and design, biology, AVCE business studies, design and technology, mathematics, physical education, physics and theatre studies) standards are above average. The ablest students in art and design attain excellent standards. In business studies at A-level, English and history, standards are in line with national averages.

39. Overall, students make very good progress and achieve markedly well in relation to their prior attainment. Very good achievement was noted particularly across the sixth form in AVCE business studies and ICT, and A-level courses in geography, computer studies, mathematics, sociology and theatre studies. Very good progress was also evident in Year 13 in mathematics and physical education. Year 12 students make good progress in mathematics and have made a satisfactory start in physical education. Achievement is good in the remaining subjects with the exception of history where it is satisfactory.
40. Students make good progress in developing subject knowledge, understanding and skills. In biology and physics, they do not always make as much progress in developing their own practical investigations as they do in developing their theoretical understanding and knowledge of the subject material. In business studies, standards of analysis and research work are high, but in some subjects, students do not have enough opportunities to work on their own.

STUDENTS' ATTITUDES, VALUES AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

41. Attitudes are excellent. Students are enthusiastic about their work and enjoy coming to the school. They have a desire to develop to their full potential. They are confident, articulate and are fully involved in the life of the school. Sixth-form students make a positive contribution to the life of the school and present extremely good role models to younger students. They carry out a range of duties diligently, such as day-to-day duties, accepting responsibility in the school's house system and in a range of sporting, musical and drama activities as well as acting as representatives on the sixth-form committee. They also assist form and subject staff lower down in the school as well as acting as very good ambassadors for the school in community activities.
42. Students form excellent relationships amongst themselves, with staff and other adults. Students' personal development is excellent. They develop mature, very responsible attitudes and are supportive of younger students. Most students develop very good independent learning skills in and out of lessons. In some lessons however, for example in biology, physical education, ICT and in English, there is sometimes over-reliance on the teacher. They show a very positive approach to learning and have a good attendance record. They are punctual and use their non-lesson time productively. A significant majority appreciate the opportunities available to them in the school and are proud of their school. While they appreciate the value of some aspects of the supervised private study time, they would welcome the opportunity to discuss their work and 'bounce' ideas off one another, outside the supervised sessions in the sixth-form centre. In English, the department makes two major contributions to students' personal development; an English teacher edits an excellent annual magazine and another runs a very successful debating club. However, there are very few visits, visitors or small-scale productions.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

43. The overall quality of teaching in the sixth form is very good with just over half the lessons being very good or better. Over 90 per cent of teaching seen was good or better and all was at least satisfactory. Teaching is very good in biology, geography, ICT, mathematics, sociology and theatre studies. It is good in art and design, business studies, design and technology, English, history and physics, though very good teaching was observed in these subjects also.

44. A major strength of the teaching is the very good subject knowledge teachers have and their mastery of relevant concepts and skills. This subject expertise is very effectively used to provide clear, coherent and well-argued expositions of subject content and to ask students probing questions which help to develop their thinking and deepen their subject knowledge. Students recognise this subject strength amongst their teachers and are well motivated and confident as a result. For example, in English, teachers' familiarity and ease with the texts provoke lively analysis and discussion amongst students. In biology and physical education, the very good subject knowledge is used to provide stimulating lessons which fire students' enthusiasm and engage their interest. Sometimes though, students' high level of confidence in their teachers' subject knowledge means that they do not question what they are told or they become over-reliant on teachers. These shortcomings were particularly noted in biology, design and technology, history, ICT, mathematics and physical education. In these subjects, students were sometimes reluctant to work on their own or were given insufficient opportunities to do so. Conversely, in business studies, students are adept at conducting their own research and discover new ideas for themselves.
45. Lessons are well structured with relevant and well-developed tasks and activities which help students to practise their skills and apply their knowledge effectively. In most lessons, teachers skillfully combine theoretical background knowledge with practical activities. Hence, students learn the relevance of theory to practice and see the link between the two. High expectations from teachers are the norm and a rigorous approach to teaching results in a scholarly approach to learning by the students. The latter apply themselves with vigour and energy and put in considerable intellectual and creative effort which pays dividends in terms of the substantial gains students make in their learning.
46. Relationships between teachers and students are excellent and this means that teachers and students not only work hard but also enjoy the teaching and learning. Teachers know their students well and provide informative and continuous oral feedback which helps and guides students' work and enables them to improve it. However, in some subjects, this useful oral feedback could be of even greater value if it was also provided in written form. This is the case in art and design and physical education in particular. Overall, though, teachers treat sixth-form students as individuals and provide very effective guidance and support for learning on an individual basis as well as at whole-class level.
47. Time is very well used and pace is carefully controlled to optimise students' learning. Teachers feel their way very carefully around what their students require at any one point in time and alter the speed and use of time in lessons to meet these needs. This serves to increase students' confidence in their teachers.
48. Teaching methods are very good and in the best lessons, students are provided with imaginative and creative tasks to help them learn. For example, in a physical education lesson, the students were asked to conduct an experiment on the impact of the audience's support on performance in sporting events. The results of the experiment led to lively debate and discussion as well as giving students a very good opportunity to participate actively in finding an answer to the research question rather than being told or reading about it. Very occasionally, teaching methods are limited and lack variety. This was particularly the case in history, where students receive good quality, direct teaching but have too few opportunities for active participation.
49. Key skills are well taught on the whole, though the use of ICT in lessons is not as well developed as it could be. There are some good examples of ICT use, but teachers miss opportunities to present students with computer-based models or analytical tools which

will challenge and stretch them intellectually. Students have very good command of English. They are very fluent and articulate, and in many lessons, lively debate and discussion are encouraged by teachers to promote both oral skills and deeper subject knowledge. However, sometimes, students are not given sufficient opportunities to make oral contributions to discussion or debate. Hence, they do not get to articulate their own ideas or to hear others' ideas. Teachers make high demands on students' essay writing skills and these are first rate in many cases. Use of numeracy is well developed across subjects of the curriculum, and teachers of subjects with high numeracy content, such as physics, geography and business studies, are well versed in relevant numerical applications to their subjects. They teach these effectively to their students.

50. Overall, the quality of teaching in the sixth form makes a considerable contribution to the students' progress.

CURRICULAR AND OTHER OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS

51. A wide range of courses is available to meet the needs and aspirations of potential students. In addition to the 'traditional' sixth-form courses, other subjects available include sociology, theatre studies, economics and business. The choice is wider than at the time of the last inspection. Since 1997, three AVCE courses have been introduced in business, travel and tourism and information technology. Insufficient opportunity is however provided for students to cover religious education topics in line with the statutory requirements of the Hertfordshire Agreed Syllabus. The school is therefore not meeting statutory requirements for religious education in the sixth form. Some concern was expressed by some staff and students about the lower value placed by the school on art and design and theatre studies within the curriculum. However, inspection evidence found no justification for such concerns.
52. Some staff and students expressed concern about the reduction of teaching time from eight to six periods per subject in the lower sixth. This puts additional pressure on teachers to complete their examination syllabuses and on students to learn the work. This change arose from pressure on staffing and the changes in the curriculum from 2000. Time allocations will return to eight periods per subject in the next academic year.
53. A very good programme of enrichment studies, the liberal studies programme, enhances the sixth-form curriculum. The programme is comprehensive and well organised. Eminent speakers on a wide range of issues provide students with the opportunity to listen to and discuss issues which widen their awareness and contribute very effectively towards their personal development and understanding of citizenship. Students speak highly of this provision. Topics have included the legal system, the Middle East, medical research and the sanctity of life. Speakers have included the Bishop of St Albans, a Holocaust survivor and a prison governor accompanied by a prisoner. While the provision for students' personal development is excellent overall, there are some missed opportunities in English and history.
54. Social or moral issues are also raised for consideration and discussion in the weekly tutorial period. One of the strengths of this course is that all students are required to research and deliver presentations in front of their peers. Other interesting and valuable topics covered in tutorials include planning for the future, personal finance and preparing for higher education and for interviews. The 20-minute form registration time each morning is not so well used. It tends to be a purely register marking session with the rest of the time given over to student conversation.

55. The school has developed a very good programme for the provision of key skills in communication, application of number and ICT. These subjects are taught by a team of specialist staff within a rotation with liberal studies. Lower sixth students are also entered for the key skill tests and some complete the portfolio requirements as well. The introduction of key skills has unfortunately reduced the time available for the liberal studies programme. The sixth-form tutorial team are currently evaluating provision to obtain the best balance for students.
56. A wide range of extra-curricular activities also enhances the curriculum. A large number of sixth-form students take part, often in a leading or supportive role. There are many opportunities, including community service, Young Enterprise, Duke of Edinburgh Award, Youth Speaks (the students in the Public Speaking team for Youth Speaks were UK champions in 2001), exchanges with public schools and a range of musical, sporting, dance and drama activities. These extra-curricular activities support students' development very effectively.
57. Some students were concerned about careers provision. While time provided by the local education authority careers advisor has been cut over recent years, discussions with students and the careers staff indicate that it is a very good provision.

THE SCHOOL'S CARE FOR ITS STUDENTS

Assessment

58. The school's assessment of students' academic progress is very effective and contributes to their very good achievement.
59. Judgements are based upon a large survey of students' files and on lesson observations. GCSE results and predictions based on a commercial value added scheme administered by a well-known university are constructively used to set target grades for students. Teachers have information on the ability of the groups they teach and they use it well. The levels to which students are working are reviewed termly on review days and are shared with students and reported to parents. The system is used well to set targets in subjects and by the school overall. Most teachers and tutors use this information effectively to guide students in their progress and to quickly spot students who have problems with their work. In some subjects, there is more focus on oral feedback rather than written targets. Greater attention to providing written targets that are clear and measurable could enhance the information on progress available to students, teachers and parents.
60. Marking is generally good but there are some inconsistencies in and between subject departments. Considerable classroom feedback reinforces written comments and all such comments make a positive contribution to students' ability to assess their own progress. In business studies, regular one-to-one feedbacks on tasks and assignments are provided and these have a beneficial impact on learning.

Advice, support and guidance

61. The school has very good procedures for ensuring students' safety and welfare. A clear line of management responsibility has been established and regular checks of the premises and equipment are undertaken. Visiting speakers talk to students about a range of issues including, substance abuse, HIV/Aids and sex education, so that they gain an informed perspective on the critical and sensitive issues which arise in current

society. Pastoral support is very effective and students appreciate the many points of contact with staff, pastoral and academic.

62. The advice and support provided for students are very good. Year 11 students and their parents are able to attend an annual evening meeting and a sixth-form conference to find out about the opportunities available post-16. They are able to talk to teachers about courses and their suitability for individual subjects. Sample lessons are provided in subjects. Full and useful documentation is provided about courses.
63. Up-to-date careers information is available in both the careers office and in the sixth-form library. The school intentionally guides students to make informed choices and encourages them to carry out research into higher education opportunities and careers. It is not a 'you should do this' approach. Options from which potential sixth-form students choose subjects for study in the sixth form are drawn up on the basis of student choice. A considerable number of students spoken to by inspectors were appreciative of the quality of information and guidance provided. This is a very good provision, although some of the students who completed the questionnaire felt that more should be done for them.
64. There is an effective programme of induction into the sixth form. A programme of tasks set by subject departments over the summer holidays provides information about standards and expectations of sixth-form students. Some concerns were expressed by some students studying mathematics and physics saying that they were not well advised by subject teachers about the rigours of these subjects post-16. In other subjects, it was felt that good guidance was provided. Students consider that they are given a great deal of help settling into the sixth form and are appreciative of the way in which tutors and subject teachers are always accessible to assist them.

HOW WELL DOES THE SCHOOL WORK IN PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS AND STUDENTS?

65. Parents' views of the school are very positive. Parents agree that the school sets high standards, has high expectations and helps their children to become mature and sensible adults by the end of the sixth form. Some parents were concerned about the lack of communication between the school and home. Inspection evidence does not support this view as very good communications are in place and information on courses, progress and attainment is provided on a regular basis.
66. Students in interviews with inspectors expressed their satisfaction with the school and the support and range of opportunities it provides. In discussion, students said they were treated in a different way in the sixth form and the school did listen to their views. They appreciated that it was not always possible for the school to respond as they would desire, but felt they were listened to and that the points they made were considered. This viewpoint is contrary to that of a small minority of answers to the questionnaires. Inspection evidence supports the students interviewed. Students are particularly positive about the way their work is assessed, the degree to which they are encouraged to develop independent learning skills, in most subjects, as well as the accessibility of teachers to help them with their work and the problems which arise from time-to-time.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT IN THE SIXTH FORM

Leadership and management

67. Leadership and management of the sixth form are very good. The school is very clear about the purpose the sixth form serves within the context of the whole school and the local community, and the contribution it makes to the ethos of the school. A comprehensive set of values underpins the work of the sixth form. The expectations of the students are high, and challenging targets are set for achievement, progression and retention. These are clearly understood by all and subscribed to by staff, students and parents. Staff establish positive and supportive relationships with students and these encourage and inspire a responsible and enthusiastic attitude to sixth-form study and school life. All students have equal access to the wide range of opportunities provided.
68. There is very effective monitoring of students' progress through regular assessments and reviews. Teaching and learning are very well monitored in subjects, and by the head of the sixth form and sixth-form tutors. For the most part, the arrangements work extremely well: teaching and learning are very good and students achieve very well. There is scope, however, in some subjects, to build upon and share the very good practice which exists in many subjects, for example providing greater opportunities for students to participate actively in lessons and learn independently thus reducing the, at times, over-reliance on the expert subject knowledge of their teachers.
69. Staff with delegated responsibility, for example the head of the sixth form, sixth-form tutors and subject heads, fulfil their roles very well. They make a huge contribution to the effectiveness of the school and to the standards students obtain. Strategic planning for the development of post-16 education is detailed and thorough so that appropriate priorities and targets are identified and the necessary action taken to ensure that these are met.
70. The governing body is very supportive of the school and has very good awareness of the strengths and areas for improvement in the sixth form. They have a strong role in helping to shape the direction of development of the sixth form. Governors largely fulfil their statutory duties well in relation to the sixth form. However, they have failed to provide religious education for all students and this is a statutory breach of regulations.
71. Performance management arrangements are excellent and they form an integral part of the headteacher's quality assurance strategy. Professional development opportunities are well planned across departments.

Resources

72. There is a very good match between teachers and the needs of the sixth-form curriculum. Governors, the headteacher and staff have an excellent sense of best value and direct finances astutely towards educational goals and priorities and where they will most benefit students' learning. Financial resources are used very well to the benefit of students' education, and the cost-effectiveness of the sixth form is very good. Overall, the sixth form provides very good value for money.
73. Learning resources are very good although the school does require students to purchase textbooks in many subjects. There is an opportunity for students to sell books to the school at the end of courses. Classrooms and the sixth-form learning resource centre are well equipped. Access to computers in the sixth-form centre and in the school in general is very good.

74. There is good library, computer, study and common room provision in the sixth-form centre. There is, however, a need at times for common room facilities to be used as teaching areas. Students do not benefit from enough opportunities and space to discuss subjects and other general issues outside the silent supervised study areas when they have no timetabled lessons.

PART E: THE STANDARDS AND QUALITY OF TEACHING IN AREAS OF THE CURRICULUM, SUBJECTS AND COURSES IN THE SIXTH FORM

In the inspection, 13 subjects and courses were inspected and are reported on in detail. Work in other subjects and courses was sampled and contributed to the overall picture of teaching and learning in the school.

The table below shows entry and performance information for courses completed in 2001.

GCE AS-level courses

Subject	Number entered	% gaining grades A-E		% gaining grades A-B		Average point score	
		School	England	School	England	School	England
Chemistry	2	-	43	-	5	-	0.77
Computer studies	1	-	74	-	13	-	1.75
Mathematics	1	-	62	-	15	-	1.51

GCE A level and AVCE courses

Subject	Number entered	% gaining grades A-E		% gaining grades A-B		Average point score	
		School	England	School	England	School	England
Art and design	10	100	96	50	46	7.00	6.57
Biology	15	80	88	47	34	5.60	5.25
Business studies	9	78	92	11	32	3.56	5.50
Chemistry	13	31	43	77	90	4.92	5.90
Communication studies	10	100	93	30	31	6.40	5.53
Computer studies	14	100	86	21	23	5.43	4.62
Economics	11	100	89	64	36	8.00	5.52
English literature	42	98	95	36	37	5.80	5.91
French	3	100	89	33	38	6.00	5.59
Design and technology	6	67	91	-	30	3.00	5.38
Geography	12	100	92	75	38	8.00	5.74
German	8	100	91	50	40	7.00	5.81
History	17	71	88	12	35	3.41	5.45
Mathematics	42	88	87	45	43	5.81	5.80
Music	2	100	93	50	35	8.00	5.74
Other languages	1	100	93	100	56	10.00	6.84
Physics	18	89	88	28	40	4.67	5.67
Sociology	19	100	86	68	35	8.21	5.32
Sports/PE studies	9	100	92	33	25	6.22	5.09

Intermediate vocational qualifications

Qualification	No in final year	% gaining qualification		% gaining merit		Average point distinction	
		School	England	School	England	School	England
Business	9	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	14.67	10.45

SUBJECTS AND COURSES GROUPED IN CURRICULUM AREAS

MATHEMATICS AND SCIENCES

The focus was on mathematics, biology and physics, but chemistry was sampled. In chemistry, examination results were below average in 2001 and students' performance was satisfactory given their GCSE results. The Year 12 lesson observed was good.

Mathematics

The quality of provision in mathematics is **very good**.

Strengths

- Students' attainment exceeds the standards expected based on their GCSE grades.
- Teaching is very good.
- Students' attitudes to learning are excellent.
- The department reflects the ethos of the school, is well managed and the teachers work as an effective team.

Areas for improvement

- Insufficient use of key skills in ICT.
- Over-dependence by students upon teachers' expertise in some lessons.

75. A-level results in 2001 were in line with the national average. They were similar to those in each year since the previous inspection, except in 2000 when they were well above national standards. In 2001, about one in ten students taking the A-level examination were unsuccessful in obtaining a pass grade (A-E). However, nearly one in two students obtained the highest grades (A-B). Overall, girls and boys have performed similarly since the last inspection. Students' performance in mathematics, based on their prior attainment, in the past two years has been significantly better than the overall performance in all other subjects offered by the school at A-level.
76. Students taking AS-level examinations in 2001 performed well. About nine out of ten students were successful in obtaining a pass grade (A-E) and of these, nearly one in two students obtained the higher grades (A-B). The students who did not obtain a pass grade found the course content too demanding despite having gained high grades at GCSE. The school is aware of this discrepancy and is raising the standard of entry on to the AS-level course. Overall, there was no difference in the performance of boys and girls. A high proportion of students obtaining pass grades continued with A-level studies in Year 13.
77. Students' attainment as observed in lessons and in their written work is higher than recent A-level results indicate and is above average. Teachers expect high standards of work and students are very well motivated to learn effectively. The progress students make in developing their knowledge, understanding and mathematical skills is good overall, and very good in Year 13. As reported at the last inspection, the quality of students' written and graphical work is high. Oral work is good when teachers challenge Year 12 students but generally, students choose not to ask questions or give answers unless taxed because most have full confidence in the teachers' knowledge and expertise and accept the subject content, mostly without question. Students in Year 13 are more forthcoming. In an excellent further mathematics lesson to derive the equation of a plane, the teacher skilfully involved the students in all stages of the development, using searching questions and checking individual progress through the answers given.

The students' response on a number of occasions was spontaneous and their questions showed a thorough understanding of a difficult concept. Students' retention of topics previously studied is very good and they easily transfer previous knowledge into new situations to develop and widen their understanding. In a revision lesson on the binomial theorem in Year 13, students ably expanded the general form mentally and then successfully extended the idea to complex examples. Students transpose, substitute and manipulate numbers and ideas easily. However, in Year 12, progress is slower for a few students who are less skilled in the understanding, manipulation and use of algebraic relationships. Students' skills in the use of ICT are not fully exploited to extend further their knowledge and understanding of mathematics.

78. Teaching is consistently very good. This is an improvement since the last inspection. The overriding strength is the confidence that teachers display in their mastery of the subject. This is skilfully used in many ways to ensure that learning is effective and enjoyable. Teachers regulate the pace of a lesson to meet the students' learning needs. When necessary, the pace and rigour are increased, on other occasions, the pace is carefully controlled to ensure that the content is fully understood before moving on. Questions asked are probing and well distributed amongst girls and boys. Questioning keeps students on their toes and they respond by applying themselves with concentration and interest for sustained periods of time. There is a good balance between class teaching, class discussion and students working at set exercises. Planning has improved since the last inspection. Lesson time is used fully. The very few students who arrive late to a lesson are appropriately challenged. Relationships between the teachers and students are very good. Teachers' expertise, students' positive attitudes to learning and their firm grounding in previous work are potent contributions to the high levels of achievement.
79. The department benefits from good leadership. The teachers are enthusiastic and committed to raising standards further, a possibility which is recognised in the department's useful development plan. The teachers are well qualified and their subject expertise is suitably matched to the courses they teach. There is a strong emphasis on teamwork, and tasks, such as development of schemes of work to meet changing examination requirements, are suitably delegated. Teaching is monitored effectively and monitoring information used to extend and enhance teachers' skills. Target setting has been introduced since the last inspection. Marking and feedback to students, as reported at the last inspection, remain positive features. Overall, there has been good improvement since the previous inspection.

Biology

The provision for post-16 biology is **good**.

Strengths

- Students achieve well and this is in part due to the good knowledge and experience teachers have in relation to the requirements for A-level examinations.
- The quality of teaching is very good and teachers have an obvious enthusiasm for their subject.

Areas for improvement

- Students are too often over-reliant upon their teachers.

80. Attainment in the A-level examinations in 2001 was above average. In the AS-level examinations, one in five students gained A or B grades. The students work hard to meet the high expectations of the teachers. All students have good access to the high

quality presentations and sheets produced by teachers to support their individual examination revision. Equipment is of good quality and some laboratories have been refurbished. Within this conducive atmosphere, all students in Years 12 and 13, irrespective of their social or cultural origins, achieve well.

81. Current attainment in the work seen during the inspection is clearly above average and achievement is good. Students have very good understanding of concepts, especially when these are related in lessons to real-life issues such as conservation, factors affecting the spread of disease and the transmission of characteristics from one generation to the next. They are confident with aspects of biology that require statistical methods and when given the opportunity, they enjoy thinking aloud and exchanging ideas. Any questions from students are very well answered and explained by teachers. However, students are not as confident when asked by their teachers to apply what they have already learned to new contexts or ideas. They find it difficult to make educated guesses, based on what they already know, when questioned about topics that are new to them. In addition, whilst students plan investigations and collect data for analysis, their attainment in these more practical aspect of biology does not match the depth of their theoretical knowledge.
82. The teaching is very good. It has some excellent features, for example the use of a variety of excellent computerised presentation techniques combined with enthusiastic and rigorous discussion. The use of high quality worksheets and presentations by teachers leads to equally high quality student notebooks. Immediate feedback enables students to assess their own achievement successfully. In all lessons, the enthusiasm of the teachers, manifested in their ability to use stories and analogies, creates interest, amusement and active involvement. These factors make a very positive contribution to students' achievements. Students in a practical lesson made good progress through discussions with one another and the teacher as they collected data about pulse rates and variations in blood pressure. Their development of investigative skills has been hampered to some degree by a lack of opportunity for their own investigative work due to the refurbishment of the laboratories. Also, opportunities for planned debate are too few. Students have good communication skills but do not get sufficient opportunities to apply them. Additionally, teachers' marking, though accurate, detailed and supportive, is biased more towards filling the gaps in the students' knowledge than it is towards the development of the students' own capacity to act independently, for example in identifying how they can plan their own research work. Teachers do flag up the targets very clearly in lessons to match the examination boards requirements but the sequence of activities from lesson to lesson does not sufficiently allow all students to use and to apply more independently, previously taught skills and ideas. Hence, there is a tendency to become over-reliant on the teacher.
83. Improvement since the last inspection has been good. The biology team has a good blend of experience and recent knowledge of biology and teaching and learning which bring about good examination success. Trends in examination results are positive. Recruitment and retention of students are good. The balance of boys and girls attracted to the subject is improving. Students do well compared with other subjects. They often expressed a clear inclination to continue studying the subject in the future in order to follow a future career in the field of biology. However, within the planned sequence of activities, the balance between what the teachers do and what the students do is not yet producing a sufficient number of students who are both knowledgeable and confident at the highest level.

Physics

The quality of provision in physics is **good**.

Strengths

- Students' attainment at the end of Year 12 exceeds national expectations by a wide margin.
- Teachers' knowledge and understanding are very good.
- Students' attitudes to learning and practical skills are very good.
- Students use high achievement in mathematics to make good progress in learning the subject.

Areas for improvement

- Results at A-level show that lower attaining students and most female students are not reaching the expected levels.
- The number of girls following post-16 physics courses is low.
- Students' learning time is not always effectively used when doing practical work.

84. Standards in GCE A-level physics in 2001 were below the national average. Whilst the number of students obtaining the full range of grades (A-E) was in line with the national average, there were fewer higher grades (A-B) than the national picture. Unlike the previous two years, the few girls taking the examination performed badly. Standards have fallen since the last inspection when they were well above average. Over the last four years, standards have hovered close to the national averages. Students' performance in 2001 in physics was well below the performance in other subjects taken at A-level in the school. Nearly all students entered higher education upon leaving the school.
85. Students taking AS-levels in 2001 performed exceptionally well with all students obtaining a grade within the full range of grades (A-E). Nearly seven students in ten obtained a higher grade (A-B). These results were much better than those obtained by similar students in AS-level examinations in biology and chemistry and were amongst the best of all other subjects taken at AS-level in the school. This high standard was confirmed by evidence obtained from observing students in the laboratory, talking to them and analysing their work. The evidence suggests that standards of current Year 13 students are broadly average and higher than the results of the 2001 examinations. Overall, boys performed much better than girls in both the A-level and AS-level examination but statistical comparison is not valid because of the low number of girls taking the subject in the sixth form. Of the 22 students taking the AS-level examination, 19 are continuing the subject to A-level, two left school and one discontinued the subject. All three students had obtained lower grades (C-E). Three students with grade A passes at GCSE-level in physics have joined the AS-level group in Year 12 from other schools.
86. Students in both year groups are achieving better than expected in relation to their GCSE grades and predictions. All are making at least good progress, including those students with English as a second language and the very small number with special educational needs. The most able students make very good progress because their problem-solving, deductive and logical reasoning skills are strong. Students have improved their achievement and progress from that reported at the last inspection. Students' knowledge of theoretical ideas is good and they use it effectively and readily to develop a greater understanding of more complicated theories and applications. A particular strength is the students' capabilities in experimental and investigative work.

They understand the scientific process and predict variables before applying appropriate control on those selected for investigation. Skills in handling equipment and materials are well developed and they are used with confidence. They take measurements of mass, time, temperature, length and volume accurately. They read instruments correctly, paying attention to errors which may result from the effects of parallax, and they are aware of the limitations in the design of individual pieces of equipment. However, a few Year 13 students were unsure of how to calculate the cumulative effects of margins of error when taking measurements with different pieces of equipment in an experiment. The good progress being made is in no small measure due to the students' knowledge, understanding and skills in mathematics. This is shown in their recorded work. Results are neatly shown, graphs are correctly drawn and interpreted and there is a high level of presentation in written reports. Students work with speed and accuracy and sometimes this has consequences for teachers' planning. For example, in a Year 13 lesson in which students were carrying out practical investigations using previously set A-level papers, the students quickly completed the exercises satisfactorily. The teacher did not adjust the lesson plan to use the unanticipated available time for discussion of the tasks and presentation of the students' findings and conclusions. Opportunities to use and develop key skills in communication were missed.

87. The quality of teaching is good overall. It is never less than satisfactory and is usually good. Teaching and learning are assisted by the students' positive attitudes towards learning which, together with the teaching, have improved since the last inspection. The key strengths in teaching are the teachers' very good knowledge and understanding of the subject content and their well-developed skills in supporting practical work. Homework, teaching methods and assessment are all used effectively to help students make good strides in their learning. In a very good lesson on electrical conductivity with a Year 12 group, the teacher used probing questions to find the level of previous knowledge and understanding. Retention from GCSE work was good. Using further taxing questions, he quickly reached a ceiling of understanding. Having assessed that the students had weaknesses in understanding the effects of variability and that progress was being impeded, he addressed the issue successfully before moving on to more advanced work.
88. The subject benefits from sound leadership. There is a commitment to improving standards and this is reflected in the management of the subject. Assessment of students' progress and achievement is regular and thorough, although the monitoring of teaching is less well developed. A well-conceived scheme of work incorporating recent national developments in the subject has recently been written for Year 12 and there are plans to extend this to Year 13 this academic year. Target setting at both subject and student level is becoming better established as a means to drive up standards further. Resources for learning are good; the use of ICT to help in students' investigations and independent learning is better now and there is more access to computers than there was at the time of the last inspection. Overall, there has been satisfactory improvement since the last inspection.

ENGINEERING, DESIGN AND MANUFACTURING

The school offers design and technology courses in product design and systems and control at AS- and A-level. The focus was on both these courses.

Design and technology

Overall the quality of provision in design and technology is **good**.

Strengths

- Staff specialist knowledge is very good and the range of activities within and beyond lesson time is wide.
- Resources, technical support and opportunities for discussion are positive features of the provision.
- Common systems to improve achievement are well established.

Areas for improvement

- Students' initial research is too often not focused well enough on the themes central to their chosen project.
- Guidance for students to improve their work is not always rigorous enough.

89. Attainment in the A-level examination in 2001 was well below average. However, in the AS-level examination, a high proportion of students attained the highest grades, A and B. The subject is gaining in popularity. This is because the school has, in the past academic year, significantly improved staffing, resources and accommodation. The teaching team has an obvious enthusiasm for the subject and provides good support for the students who, therefore, achieve well. Students frequently work voluntarily and effectively outside lesson time. In lessons, their response to the teachers is also good.
90. Currently, attainment is above average in both Year 12 and Year 13. At the beginning of the course, Year 12 students are able to enhance their design work successfully using either computers or traditional methods such as free-hand sketching. They are creative yet precise and effectively link their work to current trends in commerce. For example, designs for perfume bottle holders are well presented in pencil and watercolour. Computers are effectively used to reduce the size of parts, such as circuit boards, so as to reduce waste and improve appearance. However, students sometimes spend too much time on the easier tasks. Year 13 students are more confident than those in Year 12 and work more independently because the well-planned sequence of tasks encourages the progressive development of both skills and knowledge, whilst openness, good relationships and the sharing of ideas foster creativity. There is a tendency for students to move too slowly in the early stages of a project, for example the research, though thorough, is not well focused on the areas most pertinent to their projects and takes too long. Nevertheless, achievement is good because the teachers and technician work well as a team and all students receive consistently good advice, mostly at the right time. Students from minority ethnic backgrounds demonstrate equal enthusiasm for their work and achieve as well as their white counterparts.
91. Teaching and learning are good overall. They have some very good features. For example, the students tackled problems in sequence safely and with determination because the teacher at the beginning of the lesson had reviewed the students' existing understanding, made clear what was expected and had also given guidance orally and in the form of handouts. Additionally, the written guidance attached to students' work samples was also of very good quality because the next step was clearly described. The comments made are not always specifically enough related to the examination board criteria to encourage a higher degree of student independence, for example in assessing aspects of their own work. Nevertheless, the students set about their electronic projects in a thoughtful and purposeful way and they were able, with confidence, to justify the action they were taking. In all lessons, the teachers made good links with earlier learning and as a result, the students had the confidence in their own

ability to succeed. All students benefit from good engagement in discussions with all staff because they are obliged to think things through. Tutorials are well planned. However, from time-to-time, some individuals were seen to be over-dependent on immediate contact and support from the teacher, and in its absence, then chose to do the easier task rather than the one recommended earlier. Students' progress was reviewed at the end of the lessons but sometimes did not sufficiently involve contributions from all students about their progress towards the targets agreed at the beginning of the lesson.

92. The department is emerging from a period of change involving a significant change in the teaching staff. Improvement since the last inspection has been good. The good vision of the team leader is shared by the rest of the department. Encouraging signs of continuing improvement are the good retention and recruitment rates. Students are cheerful and busy in a department where all work effectively together and celebrate success.

BUSINESS

The department offers courses at both AS- and A-level and AVCE. In total, 67 students are engaged on business education courses. The department is developing greater flexibility with regard to its guidance for students on entry to the and AVCE courses, based upon predictions and individual student needs.

Business education

The focus was on AS-level, A-level and AVCE business studies courses, but economics at A-level was also sampled. In economics, the teaching was very good and attainment in past examinations over many years and in the current group is well above the national average.

Overall the quality of provision in business education is **good**.

Strengths

- Standards attained in 2001 on the AVCE course.
- Well-planned assignments on the AVCE courses.
- Relationships between teachers and students and the guidance provided on an individual basis.
- Overall, good quality of teaching.
- The development of independent learning skills.

Areas for improvement

- Standards achieved on the A-level course have been well below the national average for the last four years.
- Provision of a model business environment in the department.
- Opportunities to participate in business conference activities, to widen students' awareness of the real business world and to enable them to relate theory to practice.

93. Standards attained on the AVCE course in 2001 were well above the national average. This was the first group to undertake this particular course. From a small group of nine students, over 50 per cent attained distinctions and the average points score was well above the national average. Students achieved at a higher level in business than in their other subjects. In the A-level course in 2001, all of the nine students achieved a grade,

but only one student gained a higher A or B grade. These standards represent very good progress in relation to students' prior attainment and to the school predictions.

94. Standards in the A-level course in 2001 were well below the national average. Out of a cohort of nine, though only one student attained at the higher A and B grade level, all but one gained a pass grade. There has been a similar pattern over the last four years. Students have achieved at a much lower level in this course than in their other subjects. Standards attained were generally below those predicted. At AS-level, results were better, from a larger group of 23 students. All students gained a grade in the range A to E and four achieved A or B grades. The same team of staff teaches AVCE and A-level courses. Student retention rates on both courses are high.
95. Observations in lessons and an analysis of students' work indicate that standards achieved by current students on AVCE courses, in both Years 12 and 13, are above the national average. In the case of AS- and A-level courses, standards are currently in line with the national average. Students are, overall, achieving well in relation to predictions based on average GCSE scores. In the AVCE business studies course, achievement is very good.
96. In the AS-level, A-level and AVCE groups, students display good research and independent learning skills. The strength of the students' work lies in their steady accumulation of knowledge, which overall is well organised in files, in the assignments tackled and in their basic understanding of business concepts. They are able to relate theory well to the real business world. In Year 13 AVCE, good links have been made with local businesses and students display good understanding of the human resource function in companies, particularly recruitment and the financial aspects involved in preparing a business plan. A-level students make good notes to assist their learning and understand the case study materials used to relate business theory to the real world of business. Good progress in understanding was seen in a lesson examining the changes from the traditional structure to a more 'people focused' approach to human resource management in many modern companies.
97. Overall, teaching in both courses is good with some very good practices. Learning matches this pattern. Teachers have good knowledge of the subject and the world of business and lessons and assignments are well planned. Students are supported effectively on a one-to-one basis, particularly in regard to AS/A-level coursework and AVCE assignments. Good use is made of case studies to allow students to apply and extend their learning. Most students work well, know what they are meant to do and learn effectively. Students are challenged to think and opportunities are provided for them to develop independent learning skills. A good example was seen in an AVCE lesson exploring the marketing function using textbooks and the Internet. There is good input into personal development. Students examine ethical and environmental issues and responsibilities in business. Files of AVCE students display a good understanding of business structures and management styles in a real business context. Students are well motivated and this, combined with good teaching, results in good learning taking place in both AS/A-level and AVCE courses. Students appreciate the guidance they are given.
98. The subject is very well organised and led. Effective attention has been given to improving standards at A-level and current student performance has improved. Assignments and schemes of work are well written. Assessment is very good and, when combined with the quality of guidance, has a favourable impact on students' learning. Currently, the department does not provide a model of the business work place. The addition of opportunities for students to participate in business conference

activities would be beneficial to learning and contribute to students' confidence and understanding of the major functions of a business. Careful mentoring of students' progress and consideration of the most appropriate route, AVCE or the AS/A-level, for students is already under way. This is currently having a beneficial effect on learning.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

The school offers computer studies at A-level and an AVCE in ICT. Both these courses were the focus of this inspection.

Overall, the quality of provision in ICT is **very good**.

Strengths

- Achievement is very good and standards have improved over the past three years from average to well above average in 2000 and 2001.
- Very good teaching from teachers who have very good, up-to-date knowledge and skills.
- The high expectations of teachers which encourage students to aim high and produce very good project work.

Areas for improvement

- Develop strategies to promote greater independence in student learning and to improve students' skills in planning and documenting their learning.

99. In the GCE A-level examinations, results in terms of A/B grades were in line with the national average in 1999 but have been well above average for the past two years. In the same period, all students have achieved A-E grades. In the AS-level examinations in 2001, all students achieved A-E grades and 44 per cent achieved A/B grades. The first results from the AVCE in ICT will be in the summer of 2002.

100. Overall, standards of work are well above average and the achievement of students is very good given their prior attainment. The evidence from work seen in lessons and from students' files in Year 12 is consistent with a broad range of ability on entry to the sixth form. Current work shows sustained good progress with much of the work of a high standard. All students are confident and competent users of the school's computer network and routinely use a wide range of applications' software as appropriate. Project work is well developed with students acquiring a good understanding of design and analysis in developing a computer application. By Year 13, students' work is produced to very good professional standards and they are able to justify their choice of software in terms of the needs of the application and of the user. They are well motivated by practical applications of computers, and project work is now very well developed. It is well managed and students work to good standards for both design and implementation. They are made well aware of the assessment criteria for their project work and most provide good documentation to support their design and the development of their work. They display very good knowledge of the school's computing systems and good diagnostic skills in dealing with error messages and unexpected outcomes from their programs. In both years, however, students' files, in most cases, are not sufficiently well organised for supporting future work or for aiding revision. Overall, however, the work seen in classes and in student files is in line with the well above average performance in recent examinations.

101. Teaching is very good. It was never less than good and most was excellent in the classes seen. The teachers' up-to-date subject knowledge ensures confident teaching at a good pace in theory lessons with explanations that are well linked to practical work. Lessons are well planned with clear objectives, and good handouts for students support

practical work. In a Year 12 lesson on the design and analysis components of students' coursework projects, a clear handout identified the various deadlines and provided a checklist of design and analysis requirements. The high quality of the individual support from the teacher was the key element in relating these to each individual piece of work and resulted in good, sustained progress throughout the lesson for all students. Relationships between students and teachers are very good in both theory and practical classes and, combined with the high expectations that teachers have of their students, they result in an effective combination of support and challenge in lessons. In a Year 13 class, students were looking at user-support issues and had a computer file of typical error messages that could be produced by the computer system. The teacher got each student to role-play the manning of a user-support telephone help line and challenged them to explain in simple language what the user should do. This resulted in some excellent discussions by the whole class on the issues of supporting users remotely as opposed to individually in the workplace. Teachers have excellent knowledge of the computer applications available to students on the school network and provide very good support for practical work. In some cases, this support is almost too good, and students can rely too much on the teacher.

102. Leadership and management of the subject area are very good. Courses are well planned and effectively managed. There are detailed schemes of work with clear objectives and assessment requirements that are shared with students. Students' progress is regularly assessed and monitored against expectations and agreed deadlines. In discussions with students, it is clear that they are well aware of how well they are doing in the various parts of their course. Resources for ICT are very good. There is a need to develop strategies to improve the quality of students' files and the methods of providing printed notes to increase students' confidence and independence in their learning.

HOSPITALITY, SPORTS, LEISURE AND TRAVEL

The focus of the inspection was physical education AS-level, A-level and the programme of activities for students in Year 12. The school has begun to offer an AVCE course in travel and tourism. However, the first group of students is not due to qualify until June 2002. There was no opportunity to sample lessons in this subject.

Physical education

The overall quality of provision in physical education is **very good**.

Strengths

- Very good leadership ensures consistently high standards and levels of achievement.
- The quality and range of extra-curricular provision. Many students represent the county and country in a range of sports.
- The students' positive attitudes and involvement in sport throughout the school.

Areas for improvement

- Develop a sharper focus on systematic target setting and report writing to help to inform teachers, students and parents of progress.
- Develop a greater range of teaching styles to promote students' confidence when speaking in the current Year 12.

103. In 2001, results were well above average. Students often achieve higher grades relative to their other subjects. Students in Year 12 have made a satisfactory start to the AS-level course and are achieving satisfactorily. Their writing shows a good understanding of the work covered so far and they use technical vocabulary with accuracy in their notes and in particular their project work. Students appreciate how various fitness tests and training programmes can be related to improving their own personal performance. Whilst written work is good, they are generally not confident about entering into discussion or debating theories. Most rely too heavily on the teacher to give them information rather than questioning or developing their own independent research.
104. Students currently in Year 13 produce work that is above average and achieve very well relative to their attainment on joining the course. Notes and homework show accurate use of technical vocabulary and an excellent grasp of principles, intelligently interpreted in relation to their chosen activities. They research work from a variety of sources such as the Internet, library and CD-ROMs. A particular strength amongst the higher attaining students is their ability to draw on knowledge from other modules in the course to make an informed answer. Students are confident in oral presentations. They argue and discuss points intelligently and have a good depth of knowledge of current sporting affairs both in events and politics. Students make effective use of ICT equipment such as video to record their performance and assist in skill analysis. They are above average in their practical activities. In badminton, many have a good range of shots. They can outwit an opponent with change of pace and their mobility around the court is good. The students of differing ethnic background are equally talented and make rapid progress in all aspects.
105. The programme of activities for Year 12 students is varied and mostly recreational. Students take responsibility for organising and officiating some of the activities with supervision from the teachers. High standards are reached in dance. The students choreograph their own work and are influenced by different cultures and eras. They perform technically demanding dances in the annual school production that are exciting to watch.
106. Overall, the teaching and its impact on the students' learning is very good. The most effective teaching involves very high expectations and a good range of tasks that stimulate a variety of responses from the students. A good example of these was seen in a Year 13 sports psychology lesson. A number of students took part in an experiment to show how an audience could affect performance. The students' endurance noticeably increased with an audience present. A lively debate followed. Factors such as intrinsic and extrinsic rewards and gender issues were discussed in relation to performance. Students used prior knowledge effectively and gained a greater understanding of the topic. All of the teachers have very good subject knowledge resulting in stimulating lessons that motivate the students, firing their interest. Question and answer sessions are mostly used effectively to provoke thought and for teachers to assess the students' knowledge. Occasionally, only the most vocal of students are heard and some are allowed to be too passive. The teachers are developing a different style of teaching to meet the differing needs of the students currently in Year 12 who are not so confident in their oral responses. This is beginning to have a beneficial impact but requires a consistent approach by all teachers, which is currently not the case. Teachers always recap on former learning and objectives are clearly mapped out resulting in positive learning by the students.
107. Previous results, such as GCSE and AS-level results, are accurately used to predict the students' grades. The teachers' ongoing assessment in lessons is very good. Verbal targets are set that inform the students as to what they need to do to improve.

Assessment procedures are not sufficiently refined as these targets and homework assessment are not systematically recorded and used to track progress accurately enough.

108. The students respond well to the sixth-form programmes. They are responsible young adults who reach high standards in their chosen activities. A considerable number of students represent the county and country in activities such as basketball, hockey, judo, netball and tennis. The teachers encourage them to join other clubs in the community as well as taking part in the excellent range of activities on offer at the school. They readily assist in younger students' lessons and clubs giving support to those who are less confident, or valuable coaching to the more talented. The students show impressive commitment in the practice of their skills. They work well in groups and teams and show exceptional sporting attitudes to each other and those in authority. They are appreciative of the teachers' efforts to improve their work and enjoy the level of independence that is trusted in them. Very good leadership creates a very effective learning environment where a mutual respect exists between teachers and students.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

This does not apply to this school.

VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS AND MEDIA

The focus was on art and design and theatre studies. Music was sampled. Too few students took A-level music in 2001 to make valid comparisons of results with national averages. However, students did well in comparison to their GCSE grades. The Year 12 lesson observed was very good.

Art and design

Provision for art and design in the sixth form is **good** with many **very good features** such as the very good progress made by high attainers. The ablest students attain excellent standards.

Strengths

- Very high levels of creativity and attainment in some A-level Year 13 students' work.
- Very good use of galleries and visits to promote students' research and practical work.
- A high level of commitment on many students' part to their art work both inside and outside the school.
- Good teaching and learning which result in good achievement for almost all students.

Areas for improvement

- The attendance and lack of commitment to work of a small minority of students whose standards reduce overall attainment and achievement across the year.
- More formal, written assessment of students' progress giving them measurable targets.

109. Recent A-level grades in art and design have been average or better when compared against national statistics. In 2001, these results were above the national averages for both boys and girls. No direct teaching of art and design in the sixth form was possible on the days of inspection, but all students' current available work was scrutinised and discussions were held with most Year 13, and a sample of Year 12, students. As at the time of the last report, group sizes are relatively small. Attainment and achievement are dependent on individuals and statistical comparisons are not really valid for these numbers.

110. By Year 13, based on the work of current students, attainment varies widely but is above average overall. Where attendance is poor, as seen in the work of a lower attaining student, and commitment to the course is weak, grade predictions based on current evidence are well below average and skills are not developing and refining as they need to. Some others in Year 13 have excellent work, well above average in all its aspects. These students have already achieved very well in their AS-level examinations gaining A grades. Their work demonstrates a very high level of commitment, research, understanding and technical skill, and they are continuing to develop at a very good rate, in very different and individualistic ways, as is expected at this level. Other examples of very good work are to be found in students' application into work of the art and design from their own ethnic culture, again giving all presentation and practical work an individual flair and flavour. Research and experimentation are often excellent amongst these higher attaining students who also speak very articulately about the development of their work. Their research covers studies of a commendably wide range of, often, less well known artists' work, which they utilise highly effectively in their own experiments and practice. Higher attaining students explore a rich range of media and materials highly creatively, mostly in two dimensions. Other students in the small group have average standards for A-level. Here, mark-making shows a lower degree of sensitivity, particularly when using simple, dry media such as pencil crayon. Students are on target to attain the full range of grades, but a greater proportion are at the higher attaining end than at the lower. Year 12 students' work similarly demonstrates a very wide range of attainment, in line with standards expected nationally. Some of these students, too, have weak mark-making skills which diminish the quality of their work. Students' achievements in art and design are good overall, and at times very good. Recent A-level results have shown good added value against students' predictions based on GCSE achievement. The same is true for the current students. Apart from non-attendees, most students are on target to achieve beyond their predictions. AS-level students are recently starting to make good progress given their start points.
111. Most students' personal development through art is very good, especially those higher attaining students who spend a great deal of their own time visiting galleries, studying artists' work and on practical activity beyond the usual scope of the course. Students speak very highly of the way the department has stimulated their interest in a variety of art movements and styles and encouraged them towards in-depth studies and development. Several combine their art studies with other art-based courses, for example graphic design, within the school and some at courses at other institutions. Life drawing classes, for example, are unfortunately not available in the school, so those who wish to benefit from this valuable experience have to use other local facilities. This degree of commitment to art-based work has also benefited the standards shown in students' portfolios, some of which gain them ready access to higher education courses of very high quality. Although students speak highly of support from the department, there is a perception amongst them that art and design receives less support at school level than it deserves. They feel that the subject is undervalued, for example in their guidance towards options and careers, and that such attitudes have adverse spin-offs on to other more 'academic' students' attitudes towards art students. The inspection evidence did not support this view. Though there are issues of accommodation, these have affected many departments and the school leadership, including governors, is systematically improving the whole school accommodation. Art and design is given appropriate status on the school's curriculum in Years 7 to 11, and indeed is allocated more time than most schools in Years 7 to 9.
112. Although no direct teaching was seen, students speak very highly of the teaching they receive in the department. All evidence in students' work shows a very good balance of

teachers' direct teaching of skills where these are required, challenge for abler students to think creatively and encouragement to develop individualistic work. Research is well established, indicating that teaching towards this has previously been good. Extra-curricular visits, for example to galleries and other stimulating sources, both at home and abroad, are used very well in sixth-formers' development. Students also speak appreciatively of the oral feedback they receive from teachers in and beyond lessons. Most would welcome more formalised, written monitoring of their progress, giving them clear and realistic targets based on the assessment objectives. They feel that this would enable them to match their work better to what is needed to achieve higher grades. Although teaching is similar for Year 12 and Year 13, it has taken Year 12 a long time to settle to learning well. Teachers and students agree about this and both feel they are only just starting to make the progress that they should be making. Several say that they did not fully understand the rigours which the AS-level course is demanding of them.

113. The management of art and design in the sixth form is good. Students' own strong views, about which both years agree, indicate that some individuals at school level project views which make students feel, in their words, 'inferior' to those studying other subjects. This is of concern, as these perceptions affect both staff and students' morale and hence, need to be countered. The department is much as described in the short comments about the sixth form in the last report, but standards, then described as good, are now well above average in several of the current Year 13 students' work. The sixth-form studio for Year 13 is very useful. Plans to install such facilities for all sixth-formers are in train and, when implemented, have the potential to help settle Year 12 more quickly into their AS-level work.

Theatre Studies

Overall, the quality of provision in theatre studies is **very good**.

Strengths

- Teaching is very good overall. Teachers are very good models for the performance skills that the students so successfully acquire.
- Students achieve very well and a high proportion continues the subject to A-level.
- Students work together very well. They are strongly supportive of each other and their teachers.

Areas for improvement

- Occasionally, students do not have enough opportunities for discussion before or during practical activities to help them understand the text or idea.

114. Theatre studies is an attractive and popular choice for students in the sixth form. There are 16 students in Year 12. Although national figures are not available for comparison, judging by the average points score, current Year 13 students' attainment was above average in the 2001 AS-level examinations. A high proportion (13) have stayed on to complete the A-level course. Of the ten students who were examined at A-level in 2001, three obtained grades in the A-B range and all gained grades in the A-E range. The average points score of these students also indicates above average performance.

115. Standards of attainment are above average at the end of Year 13, reflecting performance in AS-level examinations in 2001 and students' very good achievement. Performance skills are a particularly strong feature of students' attainment. In a lesson on how to present characters from Sheridan's 'The Rivals' on stage, students understood and used facial expression, mimicry and stylised movement very well to

create a comic effect and portray a character's comic weaknesses to an audience. In another lesson using an extract from Shaw's 'St Joan', they showed a strong sense of how their performance would affect an audience, particularly through effective use of body language, voice control and eye contact. Students work equally well with one partner as with a group or with the whole class. This sense of collaboration or teamwork contributes significantly both to the achievement of students (including those who join the course without prior experience of drama or from other schools) and to the above average standards of attainment.

116. Current Year 12 students are making good progress. They are gaining confidence in their ability to tackle the greater challenge and complexity posed by their course at this level. They used the 'tools of drama' imaginatively in working on ideas suggested by study of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', showing ability to work collaboratively and awareness of how lighting, movement and dramatic tension affected an audience's response. In another lesson on the ideas of the 'DV8 Physical Theatre Company' they showed increasing physical confidence in using movement and 'mirroring' as expressive techniques. Though some students in this year group are unsurprisingly more tentative than others, overall attainment is above average and achievement is good.
117. Teaching and learning are very good overall. Teachers' own knowledge and understanding of performance skills enhance students' learning. These were particularly evident in a Year 12 lesson where students learned much about the significance of movement and acquired trust and confidence in each other from their teacher's extensive exploration of movement in partnership and her very good modelling of fluent movement. In a Year 13 lesson, the same teacher provided a very good model of the style of an 18th century comedy of manners and illustrated very well the dance steps of the time. As a result, students were able to imitate successfully and also develop the opportunities for comedy provided by the text. Teachers work hard to promote learning by inventive ways of stimulating drama and drawing attention to key concepts. In a particularly effective Year 12 lesson, the head of department used a 'Job Centre' style of notice board to display quotations from 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'. The ensuing discussion enabled students to reinforce their knowledge of the play and make an informed 'job choice' about which key concept or issue they would dramatise. Similarly, with her Year 13 class, she consolidated students' learning about the language of drama by drawing out terms like 'hyperbole' and Stanislavski's 'emotional meaning' from discussions about relationships in Shaw's 'St Joan'. Occasionally, not enough time is spent on discussion of a text or idea before or while undertaking the practical activity that is designed to 'realise' it so that students' understanding is assured. Nevertheless, at all times, students respond with hard work, concentration and imagination to their lessons. Teachers' lively humour and commitment are combined with knowledge and skill to weld together an originally disparate and sometimes vulnerable group and to establish the very good relationships that exist between them.
118. Students have very positive views about the course and the quality of teaching they receive: 'Teachers teach it really well'. Nevertheless, there is a strong perception among students that the school has undervalued drama in the past. There is no evidence to support this perception. For example, there is good curricular provision for drama in the main school. Though accommodation for drama and theatre studies is not as good as it should be, the school is aware of this and has identified enhanced provision for drama in its development plan.
119. Leadership and management of the subject are effective in maintaining standards of attainment and achievement, quality of teaching and strongly supportive relationships,

and the current team is well placed to continue to provide their students with a very good learning experience.

HUMANITIES

The focus was on geography, history and sociology. The school also offers courses up to A-level in economics and this was sampled. The economics results at A-level are very good, and were well above average in 2001. The Year 13 economics lesson observed was very good.

Geography

Overall the quality of provision in geography is **very good**.

Strengths

- Standards on both the AS- and A-level courses are well above average.
- Students achieve very well; their coursework and field study work is of a high standard.
- Teaching and learning are very good; teachers have very high expectations and knowledge of the subject.
- Students are highly motivated and show considerable interest in the subject.
- The subject is very well led and there is regular monitoring and assessment of students' work.

Areas for improvement

- There is some lack of participation in discussion in some lessons.

Scope of provision

The provision in geography caters for some 46 students following AS- and A-level courses.

Standards of achievement

120. Standards overall are well above average. The most recent GCE A-level results in 2001 were significantly above the national average. All students gained a pass grade and three-quarters of a class of 12 gained the highest grades A and B. Girls achieved at a much higher level than boys. This pattern has been common in recent years. Students overall attained at a much higher level in geography than in their other subjects. There has been a marked upward trend in results over the last four years. The AS-level examination results were also very good. In a group of 17 students, all gained a pass grade and over three-quarters gained the higher A and B grades. Retention rates are high and 15 students continued onto A-level.
121. Observations in lessons and analysis of students' files indicate current attainment to be well above the national average. Standards are higher than at the time of the last inspection. Since students started on the courses, standards achieved represent very good achievement in relation to attainment at GCSE. Very good understanding of the factors, both human and physical, influencing climatic change was observed in a Year 13 lesson. They also fully understand arguments associated with international aid and sustainable aspects of aid to less economically developed countries.
122. In Year 12, students show clear understanding of settlement patterns and use the rank size rule confidently. They are very interested in the subject and work with confidence

on their own, making very good quality notes, collecting data from a variety of sources and are able to form sound judgements from their research. Good examples were observed in Year 12 files on flooding on the Mississippi/Missouri in 1993 and similar work on the River Ouse. Students use their skills very well to undertake case studies and to support field study work. They are able to effectively plan, investigate, describe and analyse physical data. A very good example was the work carried out on the Loughton Brook in Epping Forest.

123. Teaching and learning are very good. Lessons are carefully planned and structured. There is very effective interaction between students and teachers in most lessons. In some lessons however, particularly in Year 13, some students are reluctant to raise questions or join in discussion. Teachers are extremely knowledgeable and have high expectations of students. Students are expected to think and are given frequent opportunities to develop their independent learning skills. In a lesson on coastal geomorphology, students were challenged to use prior knowledge when analysing aerial photographs to reach conclusions on the causes of cliff formation and the development of wave cut platforms. Work is marked regularly and helpful guidance is given to enable students to improve the standard of their work. Very good use is made of past examination papers to test students' understanding. Students' learning is advanced at each point in lessons by the completion of well-written notes and of tasks.
124. Students are attentive and keen to learn and show great interest in the subject. They respond positively to the very good teaching they receive. They talk positively about the challenging work set and the opportunities for interaction in lessons, which they find stimulating. Most can talk confidently on the work on which they are engaged. They understand and use geographical language very confidently. Students' files are well organised and diagrammatic and graphical work is accurately produced. In tasks, they relate the text effectively to conceptual models and to the annotated diagrams they have used.
125. Leadership and management of the subject are very good. Work is well sequenced across the two years and this contributes effectively to teaching and learning. Regular monitoring and target setting is undertaken efficiently. There is a good team spirit within the subject and regular discussions enable teachers to examine the effectiveness of teaching and learning and also share best practice.

History

Overall provision in history is **satisfactory**.

Strengths

- Good subject knowledge of teachers.
- Well-planned curriculum.

Areas for improvement

- Increase opportunities for independent learning by students.
- Plan more opportunities for students' personal development.

126. A-level results have been below and well below the national average in the last four years. They were well below average in 2001. However, work seen during the inspection was of average standard and the AS-level results in 2001 show a marked improvement. All 33 students passed within A-E grades, 58 per cent passed at A-B level and 29 students have moved on to A-level. The rise in standards is primarily due to the new AS- and A-level syllabuses introduced recently. These match the needs of the students

more effectively. The modular nature of the each course enables students to focus on specific areas of knowledge and the coursework component sets clear deadlines.

127. Achievement by students is satisfactory in relation to attainment on entry to the course. They are able to select notes from text and maintain full and well-organised files with some cross-referencing of materials, for example on the causes of World War One in Year 12 and the Vietnam War in Year 13. They plan and structure essays from early in Year 12 and make satisfactory progress in the development of their discursive and analytical skills over the two-year course. Students in Year 13 are able to use their knowledge of America's military experience in Vietnam to offer reasoned conclusions as to its willingness to continue the war. They show good understanding of the ideology and strategies of the North Vietnamese and they can apply their learning to a discussion of the nature of defeat in war. Students in Year 13 are able to select key points from primary historical evidence, for example in an analysis of British political parties from 1900 to 1914, and use their learning to begin to develop ideas about a broader historical issue of the period. In all three lessons seen, students persevered well and, together with written work seen, show a clear commitment to their studies.
128. Teaching is good overall. This is mainly due to the good subject knowledge of teachers as seen, for example in the British politics' module where the teacher's knowledge of the rise of the Labour Party and the challenge faced by the Liberal Party enabled students to learn about the broader social and economic context as well as the detail of events in the period. There was also good examination preparation in this lesson as requirements were clearly explained and students used similar sources to practise their historical skills. Planning of individual lessons is satisfactory overall but there is insufficient opportunity built in for regular student involvement beyond short, individual answers to teachers' questions, for example by structured group work or plenary sessions which could build upon some of the short paired work seen in two of the lessons. The methodology of the subject is promoted satisfactorily, especially in the British paper on an historical issue which requires analysis of a range of types of evidence, including the judgements of contemporary historians. Teachers regularly feedback to students as to their progress, orally, through marking of essays and in monitoring the planning of coursework.
129. Leadership and management are satisfactory. There has been a good choice of several modules, such as the Italian Unification and the war in Vietnam. Students expressed enjoyment of both of these and of the teachers' contribution to the students' learning about nationalism in Europe and in the Far East. There is sound monitoring and analysis of individual students' examination results in relation to their prior achievement at GCSE and targets generated from school data. The scheme of work is beginning to address the need to develop independent learning skills, particularly through research into 19th century workhouses and use of ICT is encouraged here. A lesson on the suffragettes had a structured debate which promoted personal development and engagement with the subject well. Opportunities to develop the literacy and numeracy skills of students are taken satisfactorily although not clearly planned overall. The subject makes a good contribution to the students' moral and cultural development. The department relies heavily on photocopied resources which have the advantage of allowing students to highlight particular points in the text. This can help learning and revision but does limit students' wider reading. The department makes available individual texts to the sixth-form library to address this problem and there is some independent use of the Internet by students. Students note that they feel appropriately challenged in the successive moves from GCSE to AS-level and then to A-level.

130. Progress since the last inspection has been satisfactory. The examination courses provide a more appropriate curriculum to match the needs of students and individual modules have been chosen well. The department has begun to address the need to plan for more opportunities for independent learning. To improve further there should be more opportunities for students to engage with the subject and to develop their personal and social skills.

Sociology

The sociology department provides a very good quality education for its students.

Overall the provision in sociology is **very good**.

Strengths

- The quality of teaching is very good and effective strategies are used to inspire trust and confidence in the students enabling them to perform to high standards.
- In both Years 12 and 13, students are well above average with coursework; a particular strength.
- The subject leader provides strong and charismatic leadership and makes very good use of a wide range of resources which motivate students to learn effectively.

Areas for improvement

- There is scope for planning to be improved. Although adequate, it does not give enough detailed guidance on matching work to individual needs or in specifying student activities. The scheme of work should be revised to support lesson planning.
- Some boys have difficulty in organising their work effectively.

131. Attainment is well above average in both Years 12 and 13 at AS- and A-level. In 2001, all students gained pass grades at both AS- and A-levels with 68 per cent of A-level students gaining grades A-B and 56 per cent of AS-level students gaining grades A-B. These figures were improvements on the results for 2000 and compare very favourably with national figures and with other subjects in the school. Good progress has been noted with results improving year on year since 1998. Very good progress was seen in lessons with equally good levels of achievement. Girls are performing at a higher level than boys overall. Some excellent coursework has been produced. Students can handle data effectively and have developed suitable research and study skills which enable them to reach high standards. One student explored the 'Beauty Myth' and included research using appropriate methods into whether women felt pressurised by society to be beautiful.

132. Year 13 students have a firm grasp of sociology perspectives and concepts and are increasingly able to apply theoretical concepts to new areas of study supported and encouraged by their teacher. They have developed effective research skills – collecting and analysing data, drawing conclusions and evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of their research. Several students were able to demonstrate why their research had failed to reach a conclusion.

133. Year 12 students are currently preparing for their AS-level paper and are developing sound study and research skills. They show a good level of knowledge and understanding of the main sociological themes and demonstrate a good grasp of different perspectives. Students take a critical approach to their areas of study and are prepared to question common sense assumptions about, for example, gender stereotyping and media representations of gender roles. Overall, progress is very good.
134. Sociology teaching at the school is very good. The teacher is able to explain concepts, theories and principles clearly and uses appropriate examples from modern society. Lessons are conducted at a good pace making use of a range of resources and involving students in a variety of activities which lead to good quality learning. Students are encouraged and supported to develop as independent learners and this is particularly seen in their course work. The atmosphere in the classroom is diffused with good humour and respect on the part of both teacher and students. In a Year 13 lesson, students gave individual presentations to the class on, for example the distribution of wealth and life choices, which demonstrated high levels of knowledge and understanding and good key skills. Debate is encouraged by well thought-out questioning which accelerates student learning. Overall, the standard of teaching and the use of good teaching strategies encourage students' motivation and enable them to succeed.
135. The subject leader provides very good leadership and manages the subject very effectively. Finances are used well to provide a wide range of resources and the teacher has successfully built up the stock of resources over a period of time, drawing on audio, visual and textual materials. The accommodation for sociology is satisfactory and the display of students' work is good. Overall, a welcoming and stimulating environment is provided.
136. Since the last inspection there have been many improvements with sociology now ranking as a leading subject in terms of achievement.
137. In summary, the strengths of sociology lie in high quality of teaching, the very good standards of attainment and strong leadership and management. The areas for improvement include refining planning, revising the schemes of work and assisting some boys in developing effective organisational skills.

ENGLISH, LANGUAGES AND COMMUNICATION

The focus was on English literature. The school offers French, German and Spanish courses in the sixth form. The 2001 A-level results in German were above average. Too few students took French or Spanish in 2001 for meaningful comparisons to be made with national results. However, they all gained at least pass grades and did as well as expected given their GCSE grades.

English literature

Overall, the quality of provision in English is **good**.

Strengths

- Popularity of the subject and the standards achieved.
- Teachers' good subject knowledge and enthusiasm.
- Students' positive attitudes to their work.
- Good subject management.

Areas for improvement

- More active involvement of students in some lessons.
- Greater variety of teaching strategies.
- Wider extra-curricular opportunities.

138. AS- and A-level courses are offered in English literature. Over the past four years, the department has catered for up to 60 students taking the final examination.
139. English Literature is one of the two most popular sixth-form subjects. Over the last four years, numbers taking the A-level examination have ranged from 41 to 60. Results have been close to the national average and in 1998 and 2000, they were above it. In 2001, standards were broadly average. These results were lower because there was a slight drop in entry and attainment and the percentage of students attaining grade A or B was 36 per cent in comparison with the national figure of 37 per cent, though the A-E figure was slightly above the national figure.
140. There have been significant differences between boys and girls in terms of entry rate and attainment in A-level English. In 2001, only 12 of the 42 students taking the examination were boys, and their results were poor in comparison with those of the girls.
141. The new AS-level has been very successfully introduced and retention rates are good. Fifty-seven students took the AS-level examination in 2001, with pleasing results. The number of students gaining A-B was above the national average and of those gaining A-C, well above. More boys took the examination and their attainment was much better than in the previous year.
142. Work observed during the inspection shows that standards overall are being maintained. Teachers have high expectations of students and they respond well. They embark on the course with a good background from their GCSE literature course. AS-level students are developing a good understanding of the requirements of the course and ways in which texts can be explored, analysed and seen in context. In Year 13, course work and other essays show that most students are acquiring appropriate skills in critical analysis and essay structure.
143. Most students talk well in pairs and groups and often respond eagerly to good opportunities for whole-class discussion. Interesting and sharply perceptive contributions were heard in several lessons. Their reading aloud is unsatisfactory, especially of poetry and Shakespeare. There is clearly a need for more attention to be given to this in earlier years, Years 7 to 11, so that all those embarking on A-level English can tackle a Shakespeare scene with pleasure and confidence.
144. A-level English is taught well and the large majority of the lessons observed were good or very good. Teachers have a sound knowledge of the books and authors they are teaching and they prepare lessons carefully, with close attention to examination requirements. In the best lessons, which predominate, this examination focus is enlivened by evident enjoyment of the work itself, and a sense of discovery shared by teacher and class. This enjoyment was well illustrated in an excellent Year 12 lesson on Huckleberry Finn. Key themes and issues such as racism were sensitively explored in an animated exchange of ideas, and students were encouraged to venture their opinions and carefully evaluate those of others. Ethnic minority students made significant contributions to the discussion. Useful analogies and references extended students' understanding and stimulated interest and curiosity.

145. In other good lessons, teachers' subject expertise was skilfully used to engage and involve students. There were imaginative approaches to poetry following the teacher's reading aloud of a poem by Blake. In a lesson introducing an unfamiliar poem, a teacher, very much at ease with the material and the class, elicited lively analysis and discussion.
146. The arrangement of the rooms contributed to the quality of the interchange in these sixth-form lessons. Teachers who rearranged desks to form a circle or horseshoe were usually rewarded with better levels of student participation. Where lessons lacked this level of participation by students, it was sometimes due to overlong, albeit well-informed, teacher presentation followed by closed questioning which did not encourage enough independent thought.
147. Students interviewed about their work in English appreciate their teachers' knowledge and enthusiasm, their constructive analytical marking and their accessibility and willingness to help them outside lessons. They also like the opportunities to form and express their own judgements. Most students are eager to do this but do not have sufficient opportunities to take a lead in lessons, for example by sharing prepared material in longer and sustained presentations. A greater variety of teaching strategies or lesson structures needs to be developed.
148. English teachers work in a set of dedicated rooms, which are close to the sixth-form centre and library, but shared with other English classes in the school. The separate sixth-form library and the main school library provide valuable support for English and there is good liaison with the school librarian. Resources for the subject are adequate but not generous and students buy their own texts for GCSE and A-level work, a system which has many advantages. There is also good access to and use of ICT.
149. The leadership and management of the subject are good. English is taught by a team of specialist teachers who work closely together under the direction of an able head of department. There is close and careful analysis of examination results and trends, and staff collaborate in preparing for new requirements and initiatives. A departmental handbook provides useful information for all staff, particularly newcomers, and is a good record of achievements and intentions.
150. The department makes two major, and very effective, extra-curricular contributions: an English teacher edits an excellent annual magazine and another runs a very successful debating club. However, there are very few visits or visitors, talks by writers, trips to theatres or small-scale departmental productions. Although individual initiatives are welcomed, there is a warning in the handbook that extra-curricular activities are an 'extra'. This is too limited a view of enrichment in sixth-form English. The department has not yet identified needs and possibilities nor made a coherent plan to ensure that those studying English are given every opportunity to extend their range and experience of literature and drama.