

INSPECTION REPORT

FEARNHILL SCHOOL

Letchworth

LEA area: Hertfordshire

Unique reference number: 117504

Headteacher: Mrs M L Monck

Lead inspector: Dr David Lewis

Dates of inspection: 24 – 28 January 2005

Inspection number: 268805

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: Community
Age range of pupils: 11 to 18 years
Gender of pupils: Mixed
Number on roll: 1016

School address: Icknield Way West
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Appropriate authority: The governing body
Name of chair of governors: Mr Steve Jarvis

Date of previous inspection: 7 December 1998

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SCHOOL

Fearnhill School is a specialist mathematics and computing college of roughly average size, with 1016 pupils on roll. The Sixth Form is smaller than average, with 119 pupils in Years 12 and 13. The school has increased in size recently following the closure of another school in the town. Attainment on entry is close to the national average, but pupils currently in Years 10 to 13 came to the school with below average attainment. Pupils come from a wide range of social and economic backgrounds. Some of them come from an area of relatively high social deprivation. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is broadly average. The number of pupils whose first language is not English is higher than in most schools, and a total of 79 pupils are supported through a special grant. Only three, who have additional support, are at the early stages of English language acquisition. About four-fifths of the pupils are of White-British origin, and half the remainder are Indian. A few pupils are of mixed heritage, Black, or Black British-Caribbean background. There are no pupils from Traveller families, or with refugee status, but one is in public care. The proportion of pupils with special educational needs is about half the national average, as is the number with statements of special educational need. The range of special needs includes social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, specific learning difficulties (dyslexia), moderate learning difficulties, physical disability, and visual impairment. The school gained a Sportsmark award in 2003, and a Healthy Schools award in 2004. Following the closure of a neighbouring school, an additional 33 pupils entered Year 10 in 2002, and the school increased from five-form to six-form entry. The education of pupils who came to the school in Year 10 has been disrupted because of events surrounding the closure of their former school. Otherwise, few pupils join or leave the school other than at the normal times.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE INSPECTION TEAM

Members of the inspection team			Subject responsibilities
1904 3	Dr David Lewis	<i>Lead inspector</i>	
9189	Mr John Horwood	<i>Lay inspector</i>	
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1547	Mr Graeme Clarke	<i>Team inspector</i>	Special educational needs, work-related learning
2332 3	Dr Janet Harvey	<i>Team inspector</i>	Music
2971	Ms Kathy Hooper	<i>Team inspector</i>	Design and technology
1085	Mr John Laver	<i>Team inspector</i>	English, Sixth Form English
2019 2	Mr Terry McDermott	<i>Team inspector</i>	Physical education, Sixth Form physical education
2032 4	Dr Vera Morris	<i>Team inspector</i>	Geography, Sixth Form business education
1211 8	Mr Allan Paver	<i>Team inspector</i>	Humanities, history, Sixth Form history
7399	Mr Paul Roberts	<i>Team inspector</i>	Citizenship, religious education
2053 3	Mr David Rogers	<i>Team inspector</i>	Art and design, Sixth Form art and design
6432	Mr Mick Sewter	<i>Team inspector</i>	Science, Sixth Form physics
2626	Mrs Marion Thompson	<i>Team inspector</i>	Modern foreign languages, English as an additional language
2060 9	Mrs Carol Worthington	<i>Team inspector</i>	Information and communication technology, Sixth Form information and communication technology

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REPORT CONTENTS

	Page
PART A: SUMMARY OF THE REPORT	1
PART B: COMMENTARY ON THE MAIN INSPECTION FINDINGS	
STANDARDS ACHIEVED BY PUPILS	6
Standards achieved in areas of learning, subjects and courses	
Pupils' attitudes, values and other personal qualities	
QUALITY OF EDUCATION PROVIDED BY THE SCHOOL	10
Teaching and learning	
The curriculum	
Care, guidance and support	
Partnership with parents, other schools and the community	
LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT	19
OTHER SPECIFIED FEATURES	
Work-related learning	21
PART C: THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION IN SUBJECTS AND COURSES	23
SUBJECTS AND COURSES IN KEY STAGES 3 AND 4	
SUBJECTS AND COURSES IN THE SIXTH FORM	
PART D: SUMMARY OF THE MAIN INSPECTION JUDGEMENTS	46

PART A: SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

OVERALL EVALUATION

Fearnhill is an effective school that provides a good education. Standards are close to the national average, but most pupils progress more quickly than expected as they move up the school, and achievement overall is good. The leadership by the headteacher and her senior team is good, and they work effectively with staff to promote a good ethos for learning. Teaching is good overall. The quality of education in most subjects is good, but unsatisfactory in modern foreign languages. The school does not meet statutory requirements for a daily act of collective worship, or for religious education in the Sixth Form. The school and Sixth Form give satisfactory value for money.

The school's main strengths and weaknesses are:

- The school promotes very good relationships and racial harmony; pupils who have joined the school in Years 10 to 13 are very well integrated.
- The school makes very good arrangements for the care, welfare, health and safety of its pupils.
- Very good advice and guidance, including careers guidance, and excellent trusting relationships with adults in the school, give pupils the confidence they need to do as well as they can.
- The school uses rigorous tracking procedures to ensure that all pupils can achieve well, but the use of this data in planning lessons is still being developed.
- The school does not fully reflect its specialist status in promoting the use of information and communication technology (ICT) and mathematics across the curriculum.
- Governance is unsatisfactory because the school does not meet all the requirements for the curriculum, and the governing body has not been sufficiently diligent in challenging the school for information, for example in relation to financial management.

The school's improvement since the last inspection has been satisfactory. Much of the school's development has been related to managing its expansion following the closure of another school in the town, and acquiring specialist status in mathematics and computing. Monitoring of the work of departments by senior staff has improved, and governors now make regular visits to departmental meetings. There have been significant improvements in some curriculum areas, for example art and design and physical education, but provision in modern foreign languages has declined. Staffing difficulties have been a barrier to further progress in several areas. Efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning and the appointment of an additional member of the senior leadership team have had a good impact on attainment in lessons, but have not yet been reflected in improved results in national tests and examinations.

STANDARDS ACHIEVED

Performance compared with:		all schools			similar schools
		2002	2003	2004	2004
Year 11	GCSE/GNVQ examinations	C	C	C	D
Year 13	A/AS level and VCE examinations	E	C	C	

*Key: A – well above average; B – above average; C – average; D – below average; E – well below average
For Year 11, similar schools are those whose pupils attained similarly at the end of Year 9.*

Achievement is good overall. When pupils come into the school in Year 7 their attainment is close to the national average, but those who joined the school in Years 10 to 13 came with below average attainment. At the end of Year 9, pupils' attainment in national tests is close to the national average, showing satisfactory achievement. In GCSE examinations, pupils who had been at the school since Year 7 gained above average results in 2003, showing good achievement. Those who joined the school in Year 10 were very well supported. They achieved well, despite the disruption caused by a change of school, but their attainment in GCSE in 2004 was still below average. Work seen in lessons and pupils' books shows improving standards, especially in Years 10 to 13. However, work seen is average in English and ICT, and below average in modern foreign languages. Pupils with special educational needs (SEN) achieve well, and those with English as an additional language do as well as their peers. Differences between performance of boys and girls, and different ethnic groups, show no consistent pattern.

Pupils' attitudes to school are good and their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is also good. Behaviour overall is good, but misbehaviour occasionally has a detrimental effect in lessons. Attendance and punctuality are good.

QUALITY OF EDUCATION

The quality of education provided by the school is good. Teaching is good overall and this results in good learning in most lessons. Overall provision is good in most subjects, but is satisfactory in English, ICT, music and citizenship. It is unsatisfactory in modern foreign languages. Where teaching and learning are unsatisfactory, which is in just a few lessons, this is linked mainly to pupils' poor behaviour because tasks do not engage their interest, and learning deteriorates. The school's curriculum is satisfactory. Pupils are very well cared for and this contributes greatly to their sense of well-being and to the growth in their self-esteem so that good learning can take place. The high level of individual care and guidance leads to good achievement and ensures that pupils gain as much as possible from their time in school. Good links exist with partner schools.

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Leadership and management are satisfactory. The leadership of the senior staff and of subject and year co-ordinators is good because all have a clear, common vision for how the school should be developed and improved. Management is satisfactory. The integration of pupils from another school in the town has been very good, and the school has good or very good procedures in place for many aspects of its work. Although the considerable efforts of the school to raise attainment have had a good effect in lessons, they are not yet reflected in improved test and examination results. Governors clearly share a vision for the school's future with the headteacher, and support her in working towards its realisation. However, they have not been sufficiently diligent in challenging the school for information, and have failed to ensure that the curriculum fully meets statutory requirements, or that financial management is rigorously monitored. Governance is therefore unsatisfactory overall.

PARENTS' AND PUPILS' VIEWS OF THE SCHOOL

Parents are generally satisfied with the work of the school. They acknowledge that the school provides a safe and secure environment, and that their children receive very good support and guidance. For the most part they say that the school listens to and acts upon any issues they may raise. They feel that homework is not always used to the maximum benefit. Pupils feel that the school provides a good education, and they are proud to promote its interests in the community.

IMPROVEMENTS NEEDED

The most important things the school should do to improve are:

- to develop further the use of assessment data;
- to continue to work to raise attainment for all pupils, and especially those in Years 7 to 9;
- to improve provision in modern foreign languages;
- to develop further the benefits of specialist college status in all areas of the curriculum;
- to work with governors to ensure that they have the information they need to challenge the senior leadership team and to secure further improvement;
- to continue to promote links with partner institutions to ensure that Sixth Form pupils have access to a curriculum that fully meets their needs.

And, to meet statutory requirements:

- ensure that religious education in the Sixth Form meets the requirements of the locally Agreed Syllabus.
- In addition, the school should seek to provide a daily act of collective worship for all pupils.

SIXTH FORM

OVERALL EVALUATION

The school has a good Sixth Form. When students join the Sixth Form, their GCSE results are below the average of Sixth Form students elsewhere. They quickly settle into Sixth Form life and attend well and punctually; and they attain average standards in examinations in Year 13. Good teaching in a majority of lessons, which draws upon effective assessment, is coupled with very good support and guidance and leads to good learning. In turn, many students achieve well. The range of courses in the curriculum lacks the vocational alternatives often found in other schools. The Sixth Form is well led by the head of Sixth Form, headteacher and governors, who offer a clear vision for the future. However, management overall is satisfactory rather than good because financial management lacks clarity in relating costs to provision and development. Overall, the Sixth Form gives satisfactory value for money.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- The school has a very good record in ensuring that all students gain at least a pass grade in their A level examinations, but the number gaining higher grades A and B is below average.
- Teaching is good overall, but no excellent teaching was seen, and the extent of very good teaching was below average.
- Students are very satisfied with the opportunities they have to further their education. They value the school's very good arrangements for seeking and acting upon their views.
- Students benefit from the very good arrangements for giving them support and advice.
- Students offer good role models to younger pupils, and their very good behaviour and good attitudes to school ensure that the Sixth Form is well respected.

QUALITY AND STANDARDS IN SUBJECTS AND COURSES OF THE CURRICULUM

Judgements about the provision in the subjects and courses inspected in the Sixth Form are shown below. They 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	Evaluation
English, languages and communication	Good in English. Students have positive attitudes and achieve well as a result of good teaching. Work in French and Spanish, and in media studies, was in line with expectations.
Mathematics	Good. Very good teaching and good learning result in standards which have improved significantly at AS level, and are average at A level.
Science	Good in physics. Students are enthusiastic and achieve well. Support and guidance are good. Standards in chemistry and biology are typical.
Information and communication technology	Good. All students can attain a qualification for ICT skills. Very good teaching, and good support and guidance, leads to well above average results.
Humanities	Good in history. Students achieve well and attain above average results at A level. Numbers taking the subject are rising and group sizes are large.
Visual and performing arts and media	Good in art and design. Students achieve well and attain good standards as a result of good teaching and a well-managed course.
Hospitality, sports, leisure and travel	Good in physical education. Consistently good teaching ensures that well-motivated students achieve well. Standards are rising steadily.
Business	Satisfactory. Standards are average and most students achieve as well as, or better than, expected. Students are well prepared for case-study work.

The curriculum areas are broadly common across all post-16 education and training. They do not necessarily correspond with subjects and courses taught by the school. Inspectors make judgements 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'.

ADVICE, GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

Students benefit substantially from very good support and advice, including careers advice. Comprehensive arrangements prepare Year 11 pupils fairly and impartially to help them to make informed choices for the next steps in their education. After GCSE results are known, the head of Sixth Form and tutors emphasise the importance of students following an appropriate course. In turn, Sixth Form students in the school embark upon AS courses for which their GCSE performance predicts success. Teachers assess students' work continually throughout the Sixth Form, and the results are collated and analysed rigorously. Form tutors and subject teachers give effective help to students, with targets set for improvement. The personal, social and health education programme in the Sixth Form continues to prepare students well for their life after school. Students have open access to confidential counselling. Each student is personally mentored by a senior member of staff whose close knowledge of their development significantly supports his or her application to higher education or the world of work.

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT OF THE SIXTH FORM

Leadership and management are satisfactory. The headteacher and governors value the contribution which the Sixth Form makes to the school. Together with the relatively recently appointed head of Sixth Form, they have a clear vision for enhancing the part it plays in the education of Year 12 and 13 students within the consortium of providers in Letchworth. The head of Sixth Form has created an effective team of tutors who successfully contribute to students' well-being. Curriculum development is satisfactory. Although the range of GCE courses at AS and A2 level is sufficiently wide, students have limited opportunities to follow appropriate vocational courses. Numbers following vocational options are very low, which indicates that there is not sufficient attention to identifying and mounting courses that meet locally determined needs. Other aspects of management are satisfactory; for example, the running of consortium arrangements is monitored through regular meetings of senior staff involved. The amount spent on provision is approximately in balance with income to the Sixth Form. However, financial administration is not satisfactory because details of spending are vague, with no clear explanation of the allocation of funds to maintain present activities and support priorities for development.

STUDENTS' VIEWS OF THE SIXTH FORM

The great majority of students feel that they are taught well by teachers who are expert in their subjects. A significant minority in Year 13 feel their work is not assessed as helpfully as it could be. Most do agree that relationships are good, that staff treat them fairly and with respect, and that the school is well run. Surprisingly, a third of Year 12 students responding to the questionnaire felt that the range of extra-curricular activities is limited. Students' comments, made in both formal and informal discussion, confirm the positive views but do not corroborate the concerns expressed. Inspectors found assessment arrangements to be good, and that the school does offer a good variety of activities which enrich the Sixth Form curriculum.

PART B: COMMENTARY ON THE INSPECTION FINDINGS

STANDARDS ACHIEVED BY PUPILS

Standards achieved in areas of learning, subjects and courses

Achievement overall is good; in Years 7 to 9 it is satisfactory, and in Years 10 and 11 it is good. Pupils who have SEN achieve well throughout the school. Differences between the achievement of boys and girls or different ethnic groups show no consistent pattern. Standards are average in tests and examinations.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- Standards of work seen during the inspection were above average in Years 10 and 11, but were close to the national average in Years 7 to 9.
- Results in tests and examinations do not yet fully reflect the standards seen in lessons and in the scrutiny of pupils' work.
- The number of students gaining the highest GCSE grades, A* and A, is well above average in science, in some areas of design and technology, and in humanities, but is generally below average.

Commentary

1. Pupils join the school in Year 7 with levels of attainment that are close to the national average. In 2003, their results in the tests at the end of Year 9, and in teacher assessments in foundation subjects, showed that they had made satisfactory progress. Their results were above the national average in mathematics and science, but close to the national average in English. Relatively few pupils, however, reached the highest levels, 6 and 7. National data are not yet available for 2004, but the school's results fell back a little compared to those of 2003. More detailed comparisons show that although overall standards are rising, they are still below average in comparison with those of similar schools. This is mainly because the school has relatively few pupils who reach the highest levels of attainment, but also reflects some lack of challenge for the highest attaining pupils in English. In the subjects of the curriculum, standards of work seen are above average in science, mathematics, and art and design, but are average in English and ICT, and below average in modern foreign languages. When Years 7 to 9 are taken as a whole, pupils do about as well as expected in relation to their ability, and achievement is satisfactory.

Standards in national tests at the end of Year 9 – average point scores in 2004

Standards in:	School results	National results
English	N/A (33.4)	N/A (33.4)
mathematics	N/A (36.8)	N/A (35.4)
science	N/A (35.0)	N/A (33.6)

There were 164 pupils in the year group. Figures in brackets are for the previous year.

2. Between a fifth and a quarter of the pupils in Years 10 and 11, and in the Sixth Form, joined the school in years other than Year 7, following the phased closure of another school in the town. The evidence available to the inspection team suggests that their attainment on entry was below average, partly as a result of staffing problems in the other school during the period of closure. Many pupils had low literacy and numeracy skills. The school worked hard to support them, and devised very good procedures to make sure that they were well integrated with the rest of the school community. By the end of Year 11, GCSE results in 2004 were very close to the national average. The school fell short of its performance targets by a small margin, but additional pupils joined Years 10 and 11 after the targets were set, and pupils who had been in the school since the beginning of Year 7 met the school's targets.

Standards in GCSE/GNVQ examinations at the end of Year 11 in 2004 (Unvalidated results)

	School results	National results
Percentage of pupils gaining 5 or more A*-C grades	51 (48)	52 (52)
Percentage of pupils gaining 5 or more A*-G grades	90 (94)	89 (88)
Percentage of pupils gaining 1 or more A*-G grades	97 (99)	96 (96)
Average point score per pupil (best eight subjects)	34.9 (36.1)	34.9 (34.7)

There were 179 pupils in the year group. The percentages include the equivalent GCSE grades obtained in GNVQ assessments. Figures in brackets are for the previous year.

3. These overall figures conceal some notable variations between subjects. Overall, the proportion of pupils gaining the highest GCSE grades, A* and A, was well below the number found nationally. However, it was more than twice the national figure in science (double award) and in humanities. In terms of grades A* to C, pupils gained results significantly above average in science, computer studies and humanities. On the other hand, results were well below average in modern foreign languages and below average in English.

4. In lessons throughout the school, good or very good teaching elicited high levels of concentration, leading to better than expected learning, above average standards, and good or very good achievement. This was true for pupils of all abilities, including the most able and those with SEN, illustrating well the school's commitment to high standards and the best achievement for all pupils. It shows that the school's efforts to secure improved achievement by more imaginative teaching are beginning to be effective, even where outcomes are not yet fully reflected in improved examination results.

5. Three pupils require support for English as an additional language; they are well supported and as a result they achieve as well as other pupils in the group. Pupils with a wide range of SEN achieve well in most subjects. However, although their achievement in mathematics is good, it is satisfactory in English, science and ICT.

Sixth Form

Students achieve well and attain average standards in A level examinations at the end of Year 13.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- Students are well advised in their option choices, and take GCE A level courses which are nearly always appropriate to their abilities.
- Good teaching and support helps them to achieve well, and to attain average standards from a below average baseline.
- Students' competencies to work independently, read widely, and use higher order skills in their studies are not as well developed in some subjects as in others.

Commentary

6. Following the publication of GCSE results, Sixth Form tutors counsel students wisely about the importance of following an appropriate course, particularly one for which their GCSE performance predicts success. In order to seek AS or A level qualifications, students are normally expected to have gained an average of grade C in five or more subjects. Although this threshold is met, students embark on courses with GCSE results which are below the average of Sixth Form students elsewhere.

Standards in GCE A/AS level and VCE examinations at the end of Year 13 in 2004

	School results	National results
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Percentage of entries gaining A-E grades	94.0 (95.1)	92.3 (92.3)
Percentage of entries gaining A-B grades	28.5 (35.1)	36.2 (35.6)
Average point score per pupil	244.6 (230.4)	265.2 (258.2)

There were 41 pupils in the year group. Figures in brackets are for the previous year.

7. Given their below average standards when they begin Sixth Form courses, students achieve well. The analysis of students' progress from GCSE shows that virtually all gain at least the grades expected from their GCSE grades, and that many do better than expected. In 2004, Year 13 students gained GCE A level results which were close to the national average. In most subjects, boys' results were above average and those of girls close to average. However, in history and art and design girls attained higher grades than boys. Although the school successfully helps higher-attaining students to gain the highest grades, in general the number of students gaining grades A or B is below the national average. Nevertheless, the average points score for all their subjects is average. Standards improved in 2004 from those of 2003 and 2002, reflected by a marked increase in the average points score each student attained. In 2004, standards at AS level fell markedly from 2003 for those subjects where students decided to accept the qualification at this level, but information to make national comparisons is not available. The small number of students who took vocational A levels did a little better than average at the higher grades, which was a clear improvement on the previous year.

8. Lesson observations and the scrutiny of students' current work confirm these judgements. Relatively small group sizes mean that comparisons must be treated with caution, but above average work was seen in mathematics, physics, history, and art and design. The school's culture of helping students to do as well as they can leads students to achieve well.

9. Nevertheless, there are areas for improvement. Sixth-form students need to be able to use the language of the subject accurately, to evaluate statements, to weigh evidence, and to substantiate arguments. They show these competencies in some subjects, for example in physics, where older students display maturity in the way they take notes from presentations, and in ICT, where students consolidate their knowledge through individual studies. In contrast, students in history do not read around the subject as much as they should for lessons or interest.

Pupils' attitudes, values and other personal qualities

Attendance and punctuality are good. Behaviour is generally good but the number of exclusions is still high. Exclusions are always for appropriate reasons. Pupils' attitudes to learning are good and relationships are very good. The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils is good.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- Relationships throughout the school are consistently very good.
- There is generally good behaviour in the school, though in a minority of lessons small groups of less well motivated pupils behave unsatisfactorily.
- The very good procedures to prevent any form of harassment result in a harmonious community.
- Pupils do not always join the activities available to them.

Commentary

10. Pupils are happy at the school and they feel secure. Whilst their attendance last year was below the national average there are very good procedures in place to monitor and improve it. Attendance figures for the autumn term indicate that these are proving effective and that attendance has improved. Registration is carried out efficiently, but the ten-minute registration periods are often not well structured and are not always used effectively to contribute to pupils' personal development. Systems for recording lateness and for contacting parents about absence are very good.

Attendance in the latest complete reporting year (%)

Authorised absence		Unauthorised absence	
School data	8.1	School data	0.8
National data	6.9	National data	1.1

The table gives the percentage of half days (sessions) missed through absence for the latest complete reporting year.

11. Pupils' arrival at and departure from school, as well as their movement around the school, are very orderly. Behaviour both in lessons and around the school is generally good. A few pupils, especially in Year 9, behave poorly in lessons and this can affect the learning of others. The school has a strong behaviour policy to support its approach to a safe and healthy school; this includes a policy always to exclude pupils for smoking or for having smoking materials on the school site. Expectations of attitudes and relationships are also high, and pupils are always excluded for swearing at anyone in the school. Whilst bullying does occur, the school deals very well with it and pupils feel free from harassment of any kind. The level of exclusions is high but the data is very well analysed and clearly reflects the consistent application of the school policy.

Ethnic background of pupils

Exclusions in the last school year

Categories used in the Annual School Census	No of pupils on roll	Number of fixed period exclusions	Number of permanent exclusions
White – British	819	212	3
White – any other White background	9	4	0
Mixed – White and Black Caribbean	31	9	1
Mixed – White and Black African	1	0	0
Mixed – White and Asian	10	6	0
Mixed – Any other mixed background	8	5	0
Asian or Asian British – Indian	97	2	1
Asian or Asian British – Pakistani	7	2	0
Asian or Asian British – any other background	3	0	0
Black or Black British – Caribbean	17	4	0
Black or Black British – African	4	0	0
Chinese	8	2	0
Parent/pupil preferred not to say	2	5	0

The table gives the number of exclusions, which may be different from the number of pupils excluded.

12. Promotion of good relationships is a strength of the school, and they are very good in all year groups. These positive relationships help to create a good learning environment. Pupils participate well in lessons. They are also keen to help and to take on responsibilities, for example on the school council, but there is not always a high level of involvement in extra-curricular activities. Apart from a small group who are less motivated, pupils have good attitudes to learning, to their relationships with adults, and towards each other. Around the school, pupils are polite and friendly.

13. Pupils with SEN show good attitudes to learning. They are grateful for the extra help given by teaching assistants and respond positively to it. Pupils with behavioural difficulties often respond well to the wide range of strategies employed by staff.

14. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. Pupils work well together, both in lessons and in activities such as sports and musical performances. The school is a harmonious place to work and play, where the principles of right and wrong, as well as the need for rules, are well understood and respected. Only in a very few lessons does poor behaviour prevent pupils from learning. Cultural development is good in some lessons, and pupils take part in cultural events such as musical performances. Spiritual development is satisfactory. The integrated humanities course in Years 7 to 11 includes all aspects of the agreed syllabus in religious education, and provides many opportunities for spiritual development. All pupils attend assemblies regularly, and these sometimes give good

opportunities for reflection, but opportunities for spiritual development in lessons are not always taken and tutor periods are often used solely for administrative purposes.

Sixth Form

The attitudes of Sixth Form students to their work are good, and their behaviour is very good.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- Sixth Form students are loyal to their school, and promote its interests in the community.
- Students are willing to take on responsibility, and contribute well to the running of the school.
- Students are a good role model to the rest of the school.

Commentary

15. Behaviour in the Sixth Form is very good. Monitoring of attendance in the Sixth Form is very good and confirms good attendance and punctuality. Students have good attitudes to learning and their behaviour is very good. They willingly take the good opportunities for responsibility, including positions as senior prefects, head boy and head girl, as well as leading the school council and supporting pupils in the lower year groups. Sixth Formers make an important contribution to the life of the school, and are well respected in turn.

QUALITY OF EDUCATION PROVIDED BY THE SCHOOL

The quality of education provided is good. Teaching and learning are good and the school places considerable emphasis on the importance of catering for each pupil's individual needs, based on good assessment procedures. The curriculum is satisfactory overall and is designed carefully to meet pupils' needs. The school does not meet the statutory requirement for a daily act of collective worship, or for religious education in the Sixth Form. The school's specialist college status is not yet fully reflected in teaching, or in the subjects of the curriculum.

Teaching and learning

Teaching and learning are good. They are satisfactory in Years 7 to 9 but good in the rest of the school. The school has good systems for assessing pupils and tracking their progress.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- The best teaching is characterised by a lively style, and by activities that cater for pupils' needs and support good learning.
- Despite the school's efforts to improve teaching and learning, there are still not enough excellent and very good lessons.
- Tasks that fail to capture pupils' interest, which is the case in just a few lessons, mostly in Year 9, lead to poor behaviour and prevent pupils from learning as well as they could.

- The school has developed very good systems for using data to track pupils' progress and identify areas for improvement, but day-to-day assessment is still not used for maximum effect.
- The school's commitment to inclusion is reflected in most lessons.

Commentary

16. Since the last inspection, the school has worked hard to identify ways in which it can support its pupils in working towards higher standards and improved achievement, and an additional member of staff has recently been appointed to the senior management team to lead this work. His efforts have rightly centred on the need to improve classroom practice and to make the best use of assessment data to identify how the school can best support its pupils.

17. In the best lessons, teachers capture pupils' interest at the outset by a task that reinforces their earlier learning and makes them want to learn more. Challenging questioning makes them think and maintains a scholarly atmosphere in which pupils of all abilities know that they have a contribution to make. In an excellent gymnastics lesson, for example, a group of low-attaining boys improved their body control and personal confidence through a variety of different activities in which the teacher's expectations were high. Excellent relationships led to total commitment and outstanding achievement.

18. In good lessons, a clear three-part structure supports good learning, though as the lesson progresses pupils' attention span may diminish and learning become less effective. In a Year 8 lesson, in mathematics, a real contribution was made by good support from a teaching assistant and the use of an interpreter working with a pupil with limited English language skills. Good learning was secured, so that by the end of the lesson all pupils had understood the principles of transformation.

19. A total of four lessons were unsatisfactory, three of them in Year 9, and nearly always because poor behaviour prevented the teacher from working as effectively as possible. Activities failed to engage the attention of all pupils, which made it difficult for the teacher to maintain the flow of the lesson. It is significant that only in Year 9 were fewer than half the lessons judged to be good or better, whereas in other year groups about three in every five lessons reached this standard.

20. The quality of teaching for pupils with SEN is good overall. Where provided, the use of teaching assistants is good, with teachers using their experience and skills effectively. Thorough, regular assessments are used effectively to focus support, and to help pupils derive personal targets that they then work towards attaining. Pupils with SEN are almost always taught within mainstream classes, which reflects well upon the school's policy for inclusion. Where individual education plans (IEPs) are effectively used, such as in mathematics and design and technology, the specific learning objectives are incorporated into the context of the lessons. Overall, pupils with SEN learn and achieve well.

21. The very few pupils who are still in the early stages of learning English are well supported in lessons, with an interpreter where necessary, and achieve in line with others in the group. Pupils who are gifted and talented, or who are very able, are also well supported in lessons, and they achieve well, especially in Years 10 and 11 and in the Sixth Form. However, the school recognises that still more could be done to help such pupils to achieve as well as possible.

Summary of teaching observed during the inspection in 146 lessons

Excellent	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Poor	Very Poor
3 (2.1%)	29 (19.9%)	62 (42.5%)	48 (32.9%)	4 (2.7%)	0	0

The table gives the number of lessons observed in each of the seven categories used to make judgements about lessons; figures in brackets show percentages where 30 or more lessons are seen.

22. The school has a very high level of commitment to ensuring that each pupil is able to achieve as well as possible, and has put in place very good procedures for assessing pupils and collecting data on which to base teaching. Those who have SEN, who are very able, or who are gifted and talented, are clearly identified. Assessment data is freely available to subject teachers, and pastoral staff play an important part in ensuring that all pupils know clearly how they could improve. These procedures have been implemented relatively recently, however, and the full benefits of them have still to be felt, both in the quality of teaching and in terms of improved test and examination results.

23. Within lessons, short-term assessment is sometimes used very well, but more often it is satisfactory. Good questioning is used in many lessons, and gives teachers a good understanding of how pupils are progressing. Use of self-assessment and peer-assessment is still developing, however, and could make a much bigger contribution to pupils' motivation and commitment to their studies. Parents commented on the use of homework to secure good learning. They said that whilst it is good in some areas many pupils have little homework, and the work which is set is of limited use. Inspectors found that homework is set in accordance with a fixed timetable that meets the school's stated objectives, but that the purpose of homework is sometimes not well enough defined. In at least one curriculum area, homework appears to be set erratically, making it difficult for pupils to organise their time and derive the maximum benefit from what could be a very useful resource in developing their ability to study independently.

24. The school is a specialist mathematics and computing college, but its specialist status is not yet fully reflected in its teaching. Pupils are taught to use ICT in producing coursework, in carrying out Internet research, and in standard subject applications such as CAD/CAM in design and technology and data-logging in science. Some teachers make good use of interactive whiteboards and data projectors in lessons. However, as yet there is little to emphasise a culture of using ICT in all aspects of the school's work and, especially, of using mathematics, except where this is integral to the subject.

Sixth Form

Teaching, learning and assessment are good overall.

MAIN STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

- Good teaching in nearly all subjects leads to good learning and good achievement.
- The absence of excellence in teaching and the fact that there are too few very good lessons correlate with the below average proportion of students gaining the highest A level grades.
- Assessment is used effectively to support students' learning.

Commentary

25. Sixth Form teaching is good overall. Seven out of ten lessons seen were good or better. However, the proportion of the very best lessons was below the national average reported last year: there were no excellent lessons and only two in every ten were very good. Conversely, almost three in ten lessons were satisfactory, compared to a national figure of fewer than one in ten.

26. Teachers have good subject knowledge, and invariably plan their lessons well. They explain carefully to students what they are expected to achieve. This gives a focus to the lesson and helps students to question their teachers when they do not understand. Students value their teachers' subject expertise. Students value, too, the good relationships that many teachers foster with them.

In turn, these relationships encourage positive attitudes to learning by students in many subjects. Enthusiasm was noted particularly amongst the Year 12 students in mathematics, and in physics throughout, where it leads to high quality work.

27. The best lessons are characterised by a scholarly approach in which discussion and evaluation are important elements. A good variety of activities helps to cater for the range of students' learning styles. Questioning is challenging and makes students think critically about their work, for example in physics and in English, where teachers encourage students to learn actively and independently. In history, the use of challenging open questions elicits good responses by the highest-attaining students and fosters good understanding, but many students do not take part at this level of interaction. A good range of activities helps students develop independence in their work, such as in physical education. Good use of ICT as a teaching tool, seen in mathematics, reflects the school's specialist college status, but its use is not yet as widespread as it should be.

28. Learning is less effective where expectations are not always sufficiently demanding, as in some art lessons, and in business studies, where students' analytical and evaluative skills are not extended. Overall, teaching in many satisfactory lessons lacks the scholarship and drive needed for higher grades in advanced level work.

29. Throughout the Sixth Form, assessment is very well used to monitor students' progress. In English, mathematics, and art and design, for example, teachers assess students' work very well, giving thorough oral and written feedback to improve their understanding of areas for development. In history, continuous assessment and the involvement of students in measuring their own achievement provide them with clear ideas about their academic future. Good records are kept and the school responds promptly whenever there are difficulties. The school prides itself on its policy of helping all students to reach their potential, and students themselves acknowledge that the individual support of teachers is a major strength.

The curriculum

The curriculum arrangements are satisfactory overall. Enrichment and out-of-school activities are good, and accommodation and resources support learning well.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- Preparation for later stages of education and employment is very good.
- There is a good range of additional learning opportunities.
- Accommodation and learning resources are good.
- Participation in sport is good.
- The school does not meet the statutory requirements for a daily act of collective worship.

Commentary

30. The school has developed its curriculum further since the last inspection and, overall, the curriculum provision is satisfactory. There is a satisfactory range of subjects at different levels, relating to future career pathways and matched to pupils' learning needs. Sound provision is made for pupils who would find a full range of school-based academic subjects difficult, and this includes college link courses.

31. There are curricular strengths in a number of departments. The overall provision in humanities is a substantial strength to the curriculum, because it is a compulsory element for all pupils in both key stages, and this results in outcomes which are significantly higher than the national average. It also successfully incorporates religious education, which involves pupils in the comparative study of six major world faiths. In English, the number and variety of theatre visits and contributions from visiting authors are a strength. The school's approach to the development of citizenship and the introduction of a modular mathematics course in Year 10 are good examples of curricular innovation. Although the amount of time allocated to humanities is slightly less than would normally be allocated to separate geography, history and religious studies, pupils' achievement is good, and results are generally better than in the other subjects of the curriculum. This indicates that the school's approach is successful, and that pupils learn to make good use of their general skills in humanities as a result of the integrated approach to the curriculum. The time allocation for ICT in Years 7 to 9 is also low, and this means that pupils cannot experience as wide a range of experiences as is normal at this stage.

32. Opportunities for learning outside the school day are good. There is a good range of extra-curricular activities, particularly in sport but also in music, as well as residential experiences and visits. Additional learning opportunities take place after school and the take-up of these opportunities is good.

33. A significant number of pupils enter the school with low levels of attainment in the national tests at the end of Year 6. A carefully thought out programme to help such pupils to catch up has involved withdrawal from the study of modern foreign languages for a period during Years 7 to 9. Such arrangements have met with the approval of parents. The school's planning for these pupils' future studies in modern foreign languages is still at an early stage of development, but the school is committed to ensuring that all pupils cover the National Curriculum programme of study in Years 7 to 9.

34. Despite the absence of a key member of staff, provision for the few pupils who require support for English as an additional language has been satisfactory and has enabled them to work effectively. The school makes satisfactory provision for pupils on the register of special educational needs and ensures that it meets the requirements of statements of special need. Provision for those with statements is monitored, and statements are diligently reviewed annually. Provision for pupils who are very able is still developing, and is satisfactory overall. High attaining pupils are clearly identified and their progress in all subjects is carefully monitored. Subject teachers are careful to provide them with more challenging work in lessons, and well directed questioning makes sure that their analytical and thinking skills are developed. They respond well to what the school does for them and, for the most part, achieve well. However, the school recognises that still more could be done to help them fully to reach their potential.

35. Pupils' general education is well provided for in the curriculum. The programme for personal, social and health education and citizenship (PSHCE) is well planned and fully meets statutory requirements. The course in citizenship is still developing, and now covers the requirements of the National Curriculum. The school has a clear audit of where each aspect of the programme of study is to be taught, and there is a well defined system for drawing pupils' attention to aspects of citizenship whenever they occur in the subjects of the curriculum. Pupils enjoy and value the collapsed days when citizenship is being taught, but the school recognises that further work needs to be done in order for pupils to get as much as they could from this course. Pupils are well prepared for later stages in education or employment during their PSHCE lessons. They are given good general advice within lessons and more specific one-to-one help by their form tutors. They acknowledge the value of the advice they are given, and their achievements in the Sixth Form and on entry employment show that the advice is well taken.

36. Accommodation and resources are good. Teachers are nearly all well qualified in the subjects they teach, and when it is necessary for them to teach outside their subject specialism they are well supported. In only a few areas has recruitment proved difficult, but pupils' education has occasionally been disrupted by staff illness. There is clear evidence that the education of those who came to Fearnhill in Years 10 and 11 was disrupted by staffing problems in their former school immediately before it closed. It is to the credit both of teachers and of pupils at Fearnhill that their progress in Years 10 and 11 was so good.

Sixth Form

Curriculum opportunities are satisfactory overall. Accommodation and resources are good.

MAIN STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

- The curriculum, which is based upon a good range of AS and A level courses in partnership with another school in Letchworth, has only a limited range of advanced and intermediate vocational courses.
- A well planned course provides for students' personal development and guidance.
- The school does not meet the requirements for religious education and a daily act of collective worship in the Sixth Form.

Commentary

37. A good range of subjects provides for most students who choose to remain in the Sixth Form. Provision is effectively planned in conjunction with a partner school, and developing links promise to widen the range further. Most students follow GCE courses leading to AS and A level in subjects which follow on from the courses available to them in Years 10 and 11. Good advice to students ensures that, in the main, their choices are sensible ones, and nearly all Sixth Form students are pleased with the courses they are studying.

38. An advanced vocational certificate of education (AVCE) course in business education is an option followed into Year 13. The intermediate level BTEC National course in business is planned for Year 12 in September 2005. Other intermediate level vocational courses, for example in health and social care, are available in the partner school but are not taken up by students from Fearnhill.

39. The low numbers presently following vocational courses indicate insufficient attention to identifying and mounting courses that meet locally determined needs. However, the school is developing its curriculum by planning to broaden vocational options available in Years 10 and 11 and the Sixth Form, and so provide continuity for students aged 14 to 19.

40. In addition to their main academic courses, all students follow the Microsoft Academy programme to develop their ICT skills. The personal, social, health and citizenship curriculum, which all students also follow, promotes study skills, enhances students' personal development, and gives them very good guidance on higher education and career paths. Although this makes a real contribution to students' personal development, it does not yet meet the statutory requirements for religious education in the Sixth Form.

41. Opportunities for extra-curricular activities further promote Sixth Form students' place in the community. For example, many sporting and artistic activities involve Sixth Formers in working with younger students, to the benefit of both.

42. Accommodation for the Sixth Form is good, with classes mostly taught in the same rooms as lessons in the main school. The Sixth Form common room is a social facility which students value, and it is complemented by a good, supervised, study area adjacent to the library. Resources are good, and students comment that they have ready access to computers for independent study. Teachers are well qualified, and students say that teaching is good. The school recognises that further professional development is needed if all students are to achieve well in the Sixth Form.

Care, guidance and support

The school makes very good provision for pupils' care, welfare, health and safety. The provision of support, advice and guidance to pupils is very good. The involvement of pupils through seeking, valuing and acting on their views is very good.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- The school's very good procedures for child protection and health and safety are up to date and diligently carried out.
- The school offers pupils very good access to support, advice and guidance, which fosters very good relationships.
- Pupils with particular difficulties are very effectively supported.
- Very good induction arrangements for pupils, in partnership with primary schools, are highly valued by parents.

Commentary

43. Child protection procedures are very good. The child protection officer has received up-to-date training, and comprehensive arrangements ensure relevant training for all other members of staff, including those who are newly qualified or new to the school. The school has fully amended its procedures to meet new regulations. Governors are appropriately involved, in keeping with their responsibilities. They ensure that the school liaises with the local social services department and that records are kept centrally and securely. They also ensure that information about children on the child protection register, and about those in the care of the local authority, is shared only with those staff who need to know.

44. Very good procedures ensure that pupils work in a healthy and safe environment. These include regular inspections of the buildings and grounds and detailed risk assessments of work in subject departments and for visits away from school. Regular fire alarm tests and fire drills ensure that equipment and procedures work well. Appropriate care is taken over the safe and secure storage of hazardous substances such as chemicals used in science work.

45. The school offers very good quality support, advice and guidance to its pupils. Regular meetings take place between year heads, form tutors and subject leaders to discuss pupils' progress and identify possible problems. Pupils' academic progress and personal development are closely monitored with the use of a very effective recording system that offers a potentially very useful up-to-date profile of each pupil. This reflects the school's philosophy of year heads 'knowing the child' and is an effective process to set pupils a personal learning plan with targets. Pupils and parents value the discussion they have with year heads, tutors and teachers, and the help for pupils in working towards them.

46. Of particular note is the wide range of strategies designed to support pupils with particular difficulties. Learning support mentors help those with subject-based work. Experienced personnel from the business community and Afro-Caribbean mentors help those with particularly negative attitudes towards school. Connexions advisers work mostly with Years 9 to 11 and also with some Year 8 pupils. The education welfare officer works effectively to improve attendance and punctuality. A partnership with the local authority's behaviour support service effectively helps the very few pupils whose behaviour gives serious cause for concern. Thoroughly well worked out intervention and support improves their ability to cope with rather than disrupt school life. Because of the very good arrangements made by the school to support them, pupils thrive and make good progress.

47. Pupils benefit from very good careers advice, guidance and support for when they move on into post-16 education or to the world of work. The Connexions service works effectively in school and makes a significant contribution to the teaching of careers education, which is part of the personal social, health and citizenship education programme throughout Years 7 to 11. Pupils have very good access to a careers library and work-related learning resource centre which includes booklets and other written matter as well as Internet access to useful web-sites. All pupils are very well prepared for work experience in Year 11, for example by attention to key skills of ICT and numeracy, and in developing their ability for formal interviews. The school shows a very good level of care for pupils with SEN. As with other pupils in the school, they benefit from good relationships with a wide range of external agencies, including help from the Connexions service in making choices for their future

48. Relationships between pupils and staff at the school are very good. Pupils feel that their views are taken into account through the year councils, that their opinions matter, and that they are treated with courtesy and respect by staff. The school fosters a strong sense of belonging and responsibility by involving pupils in its affairs, in mentoring younger pupils for example. Pupils feel a strong sense of trust in that they can turn to staff for guidance and help. They value, too, their opportunity for confidential support from the school's counsellor, who visits part-time each week.

49. Most pupils settle very well into school life when they join from elsewhere. The induction arrangements for pupils beginning in Year 7 are very good. The head of Year 7 forges productive links with the principal partner primary schools, and these lead to visits to meet prospective pupils, and opportunities for these pupils to visit Fearnhill. Parents of Year 7 pupils overwhelmingly praise the arrangements for helping their children settle in, and they value the meeting held early in the

autumn term to discuss and resolve any issues. The high levels of loyalty to the school by pupils who joined in Year 10 are a good measure of the very good management of the induction process for pupils of all ages.

SIXTH FORM

The school offers a very good standard of support and advice to all its Sixth Form students. A comprehensive personal, social, health and citizenship programme prepares students well for their futures, and offers advice and counselling to all.

MAIN STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

- Very good advice on sixth-form courses, and good induction procedures, leads to high levels of success and satisfaction with what the school has to offer.
- The school has very high regard for students' views, and acts upon them.
- Very good procedures for monitoring academic progress ensure that all students are aware of their targets.
- Very effective arrangements for support keep students informed about how they can improve, and prepare them very well for when they leave the Sixth Form.

COMMENTARY

50. Year 11 students comment that they feel very well prepared for life in the Sixth Form, and that the school values and acts on their views. The comprehensive careers and support programme is fair and impartial in advising them about opportunities and courses for their post-16 education or training, which are available to them in the consortium of providers in Letchworth. As soon as GCSE results are known, the head of Sixth Form and tutors emphasise the importance of students following an appropriate course for which their GCSE performance predicts success. The quality of this advice is reflected in the results students attain at A level. In 2003 every student obtained at least a pass grade in each examination, and in 2004 only one examination entry resulted in failure. The principle for year heads to 'know every child' continues in the Sixth Form. Rigorous collation of assessed work gives form tutors and subject teachers useful information with which to set students targets for improvement, and importantly, to give them effective help.

51. Students gain considerably from the good relationships the school has with external agencies such as Connexions. The personal, social, health and citizenship education programme in the Sixth Form continues to prepare students well for their life after school. Examples of topics are personal finance and budgeting, politics, cookery, being interviewed, and application for entry to higher education. These complement work on improving study skills, and other aspects of citizenship, health and personal development. As in the main school, students have open access to confidential counselling. Students particularly value the personal mentoring by members of the school's leadership group, whose close knowledge of their development gives significant support to their applications to higher education or the world of work.

52. The school adopts the principle that students' views are of importance, and willingly responds to their needs and requests made through the Sixth Form council. Sixth Formers interviewed during the inspection confirmed that they are treated as responsible young adults by staff, senior school management and governors. Inspectors' judgements confirm students' view that they are very well prepared for life in the world of higher education and work in a multicultural society.

Partnership with parents, other schools and the community

The school has good links with parents, the community and other educational establishments.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- There are very good links with primary schools, which are of mutual benefit.
- Parents and the community are kept very well informed about the school.
- Parents receive good written information about progress but only have one short meeting with the teachers each year.
- There are very good links with the police, who support the personal development of the pupils, and with some businesses who provide mentors for some pupils.
- Through its specialist status the school provides good support to other schools, but the partnerships have yet to become sufficiently developed to provide a real benefit to the pupils at Fearnhill.

Commentary

53. Responses to the parents' questionnaires and from the parents' meeting indicate that parents are pleased with both the academic and pastoral aspects of the school. Though they identified that there is some poor behaviour and some bullying in the school, the areas in which they felt the school could improve were in the information supplied about progress, the consultation with parents, and the quality and quantity of homework. A small number of parents made individual comments about the school, approximately equal numbers of positive and negative comments, and these were considered by the inspection team and contribute to the findings of the report.

54. Parents receive a very well formatted annual report on their child. The comments from teachers are addressed to the pupil and contain helpful advice but not quantifiable targets. For parents the information is comprehensive and helpful. All parents have the opportunity to meet individual teachers for a short discussion once a year and these sessions are very well attended. The pupils' planners offer very good opportunities for communications about both progress and homework, but they are not always well used by staff or parents. Overall, parents are well informed about the progress of their children. Almost all take up opportunities to be involved in discussion about their children's progress, both during the parents' meetings and for specific annual reviews.

55. A professional school prospectus and governors' annual report, supported by high quality newsletters, provide very good information to parents about the school. The termly publication, Fearnfile, is also sent to community partners and promotes the school well. The school website, however, is not well used as a system to communicate and to promote the school. The school consults with parents well through the parent community group and through the use of questionnaires.

56. The school has very good links with primary schools. The very good arrangements for induction of pupils involve staff visiting every primary school and, through the specialist school status, three nominated primary schools benefit from the support available. There are good partnerships with other schools and educational establishments, and these ensure that pupils are well informed about the next stages of education and make timely decisions.

57. The partnership with the community is good. The curriculum is supported by a good range of visits and a number of specialist visitors to the school. In addition to the normal work experience links with industry, pupils benefit from a business mentor initiative where local business representatives give direct support to pupils. The personal development of pupils benefits from very good links with the police, who visit the school to talk informally to pupils on a weekly basis.

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Leadership and management of the school are satisfactory overall. Leadership is good, and management is satisfactory. Governance is unsatisfactory, partly because not all statutory obligations are met, but also because, despite recent improvements, governors do not provide enough challenge to the headteacher, based on first-hand knowledge.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- The headteacher has a clear vision for the role of the school in the town, and works with governors to realise it.
- Senior staff of the school have clearly defined roles, and work with a high degree of unity of purpose to secure a safe and secure environment in which each pupil can achieve his or her potential.
- Governors work hard to further the interests of the school, and they bring a wide range of expertise to their work.
- The governors have not ensured that their statutory obligations have been met, in respect of religious education in the Sixth Form or the provision of a daily act of collective worship.
- In the recent past, management of the school's finances has not been as secure as it should be.

Commentary

58. The experienced headteacher leads the school well. She has appointed a dedicated senior team who work very well together to realise her vision, and that of the governors, for a school in which all pupils can grow in confidence and self-esteem, reach their potential academically, and leave school as responsible citizens.

59. Senior staff, heads of faculty and year heads provide good leadership, and make a major contribution to strategic planning and to the smooth running of the school. They fully support the school's objectives. Clear lines of responsibility give managers the authority to take the school forward, and to contribute both to development and to management. All work together to promote the school as a safe and secure place in which pupils can reach their full potential and enter further education or the world of work as responsible, knowledgeable and confident citizens.

60. Performance management of all staff is carried out satisfactorily. Non-teaching staff have satisfactory appraisal. Improvement is brought about by identifying targets to improve standards and expertise. Governors and members of the senior management team monitor the school's performance targets, and whole-school in-service training on ICT is helping to improve teachers' expertise.

61. The school has a comprehensive policy for the induction of all new staff, which is carried out well. Newly qualified teachers have a specific programme arranged by the school's professional tutor and their own mentors. Their teaching load is lower, as is required for such teachers, and they regularly attend courses and watch colleagues teach. Other new teachers also receive a good induction and are mentored by a colleague, usually in the same department.

62. The school makes a good contribution to initial teacher training through its connections with local teacher training establishments and welcomes student teachers at all

levels, providing them with a good programme. The budget for staff development and training has, however, been cut in recent years due to lack of funding, and the high turnover of staff has made it necessary to repeat basic training, such as that for behaviour management and literacy development.

63. The school has made some progress in managing the workload of staff. It has difficulty in recruiting well-qualified staff because of high housing costs in the area. Some heads of department have a particularly heavy workload due to staff vacancies; this leaves them insufficient time for preparation and marking, and means that departmental monitoring is less good than it should be.

64. The special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO), in partnership with a deputy headteacher, provides good leadership for learning support. The committed teaching assistants, some of whom are very recently appointed, work well together as a team and are well supported by a comprehensive training programme. Rigorous assessment arrangements allow teachers to track pupils' progress carefully. However, there have been difficulties with computerised procedures to prepare individual educational plans, and these have meant that many general targets have yet to be adapted specifically for different subjects.

65. Since the last inspection the school has acquired specialist college status and has managed the integration of pupils from another school very well, including additional building work. These developments, in addition to the normal running of the school, have proved a considerable drain on resources, both in terms of finances and time. Financial management over this period has been unsatisfactory because appropriate records have not always been kept, and a considerable budget deficit has accrued without the school being aware of the implications of what was happening. The full extent of the problem was made clear to governors in the last auditor's report in June 2004. The local education authority was able to help by awarding a transitional grant, contingent on more rigorous monitoring and the appointment of an independent financial adviser. Financial monitoring is now much rigorous, and the finance committee of governors is able to monitor more closely the management of the school's finances.

Financial information for the year April 2003 to March 2004

Income and expenditure (£)	
Total income	3,854,010.00
Total expenditure	3,957,168.00
Expenditure per pupil	3,918.00

Balances (£)	
Balance from previous year	-40,035.00
Balance carried forward to the next	-143,193.00

66. Governors bring a wide range of expertise to their work, and support the school well in realising its vision. They carry out regular visits to the school when they can, and attend departmental meetings as part of a programme to gain better first-hand understanding of the work of the school. They support school functions well. Development planning is satisfactory, but planning documents do not always identify success criteria as sharply as they could, or define the details of how the school and governors will measure the success of their initiatives in terms of the principles of best value. Governors have not ensured that the school meets all its obligations for the curriculum or for a daily act of collective worship, and they were not aware of a potentially damaging financial situation until it was brought to their attention in the recent auditors' report. Governance overall is therefore unsatisfactory.

Sixth Form

Leadership and management of the Sixth Form are satisfactory overall. Leadership by the headteacher and head of Sixth Form is good. Management is satisfactory. Governance is unsatisfactory.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- The head of Sixth Form and his team of tutors rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of the Sixth Form in terms of academic success, and more widely.
- The school values the place of its Sixth Form, and works to promote continuous development and improvement.
- Inadequate financial management limits considerably the extent of evaluating the cost-effectiveness of the aspects of Sixth Form provision.

Commentary

67. The governors and headteacher value the contribution which the Sixth Form makes to the school. They have a good, clear vision for the place of the Sixth Form in the community. Together with the relatively recently appointed head of Sixth Form, they are clearly intent upon enhancing the part it plays in the education of students within the consortium of providers in Letchworth. The head of Sixth Form leads an effective team of tutors who successfully contribute to students' well-being and academic development. All are committed to a Sixth Form in which equality of opportunity and the best possible support for students are paramount.

68. The head of Sixth Form and his tutorial team continually evaluate their work, and they work with students and subject staff to identify how best they can support students during their courses and beyond. Many other aspects of management are satisfactory. The running of consortium arrangements is monitored early in the autumn term to resolve quickly any difficulties students have with course provision. Twice-termly meetings thereafter helpfully involve senior staff in checking progress and development planning.

69. Financial management and administration are not satisfactory, because they lack detailed analysis of income and spending. In turn, the school and governors do not have essential information to make judgements about the cost-effectiveness of their decisions relating to the Sixth Form. The school and governors are only at the early stages of planning the development of the curriculum to enhance opportunities for Sixth Form students by providing continuity of academic and vocational courses throughout the 14 to 19 age range. Governors have ensured that the curriculum in the Sixth Form provides for academic studies balanced with very good personal development, but they do not meet their statutory requirements for religious education. For these reasons, governance is unsatisfactory.

Work-related learning

Provision in work-related learning (WRL) is **satisfactory**.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- Good careers education helps pupils prepare effectively for appropriate courses of study in Year 10 and the Sixth Form.
- All pupils have good experience of the world of work in a programme that extends from Year 8 to Year 11.
- Pupils' development of enterprise skills, and understanding of business, is limited throughout the curriculum.
- A useful approach to involve pupils in assessing their own development is effectively used to plan activities and give support.

Commentary

70. Pupils are well prepared to learn about the world of work through a good careers education programme, a good opportunity for work experience, and the attention given to building their key skills for enterprise and employability. Pupils have some opportunities to widen their understanding of business and enterprise throughout the subjects of the curriculum, but these are relatively underdeveloped.

71. Careers education is an integral part of the school's personal, social, health and citizenship education programme. Year 9 and 10 activities focus upon developing the personal and learning skills that employers value, such as problem-solving, ICT and numeracy. Senior staff help to develop pupils' interview techniques, and these are usefully

honed in peer interviews where pupils take the part of interviewer and interviewee in role-play cameos.

72. Pupils are very well prepared for their choices of study in Year 10, and for their next steps as they consider Sixth Form courses within the consortium of providers in Letchworth, and further education, training or employment. Sixth Form pupils value the impartial and fair advice they are given which, they say, helps them to choose wisely and embark upon courses appropriate to their interests, aspirations and abilities. Pupils benefit from very good guidance and support from the Connexions service. The careers and WRL resources centre provides a very good range of materials, with access to Internet information sites. Pupils are encouraged to make good use of the Fast Tomato careers information website which is supported by Connexions and Curriculum On-line.

73. Pupils have good opportunities to experience the world of work in Years 8 to 11. The 'take your child to work' initiative has successfully introduced many Year 8 pupils to parents' workplaces. Industry days enable all Year 10 pupils to take part in workshops run by local companies during the school's activities week towards the end of the summer term. The school arranges work experience through the Hertfordshire B2E organisation, which vets and assures the suitability of placements. Pupils currently in Year 11 were helped to gain good value from a period of work experience. Changed arrangements for students in Year 10 have begun with a structured programme. This involves them in completing preparatory components of a work experience diary in advance of their placement later this year, and in afterwards evaluating lessons they have learned.

74. The curriculum in several subjects is made more relevant by linking lesson content to business and industry. Some discussion of jobs which people undertake occurs in modern languages lessons. Work-related learning is explicit in humanities lessons throughout the school, especially those related to industrial development in historical and geographical contexts. There are appropriate references to industrial practice in electronics work in design and technology; these introduce pupils throughout Years 7 to 11 to industrial practice; and visits to playgroups and local primary schools enhance work in the child development course. Opportunities elsewhere are rarely taken to make subjects more relevant in enlarging pupils' understanding of business or to develop their skills of enterprise.

75. Leadership of WRL displays a clear vision and a secure grasp of all statutory requirements. The school has a clear strategy to extend pupils' understanding in relation to learning through work and developing the skills for work, but it is less clear about how WRL can be developed throughout the curriculum. Monitoring and evaluation of WRL are thorough. Pupils diligently complete a formal self-assessment process which is incorporated in their personal development files. The co-ordinator uses the information in them to review pupils' understanding and to improve support and opportunities for further development. The day-to-day management of work-related activities is good, but lines of responsibility would benefit from clarification to help make coordination more effective as the extent of practice is broadened.

PART C: THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION IN AREAS OF LEARNING, SUBJECTS AND COURSES

SUBJECTS AND COURSES IN KEY STAGES 3 AND 4

ENGLISH AND MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

English

Provision in English is **satisfactory**.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- Good leadership offers a clear vision of strengths and weaknesses and a commitment to improvement.
- The achievement of some pupils, particularly the more able, is restricted by lack of pace or challenge in some lessons.
- Learning, although satisfactory overall, is sometimes restricted by the negative attitudes or unsatisfactory behaviour of a minority of pupils.
- Assessment is very thorough and constructive.
- The curriculum is wide-ranging and incorporates a very good programme of enrichment activities.

Commentary

76. Standards in the 2003 national tests for pupils in Year 9 were in line with the national average, and in line with standards of similar schools, although results were below those in mathematics and science. The proportion of Year 11 pupils gaining A* to C grades in the 2004 GCSE examinations in Language and Literature was below average, though girls did considerably better than boys. Standards of pupils currently in Year 9 are in line with expectations in the key areas of writing and reading, and a significant number have good speaking skills. Standards in Year 11 are also in line with national expectations, with girls attaining better than boys, although the gap is not as wide as previous results suggest, partly because of increased efforts to monitor and support lower-achieving boys.

77. Achievement is satisfactory. However, some pupils, particularly amongst the more able, do not achieve sufficiently, because they are not challenged enough to do better. Girls achieve better than boys. Pupils with SEN and those from different ethnic groups achieve in line with other pupils. Year 11 pupils of all levels of ability and background achieve satisfactorily, and some gifted and talented pupils achieve very well.

78. Teaching is satisfactory. There are considerable variations in quality. In the best lessons, teachers have high expectations, maintain pupils' enthusiasm through briskly paced and varied activities, and involve pupils actively and productively. This was seen in a Year 7 lesson in which pupils worked very effectively in groups to discover the roots of language. Where teaching is less effective or unsatisfactory, the lessons are too dominated by the teacher, which results in passive learning; or else work is insufficiently matched to the needs of all pupils, restricting in particular the learning or achievement of more able pupils. Occasionally, teachers are ineffective in managing the minority of pupils who show negative attitudes towards learning.

79. An extensive programme of visits, and the provision of drama and media studies, strengthens the curriculum. In the one drama lesson observed, pupils achieved well, and drama results are impressive. Pupils also achieved well in the media studies lesson which was observed. Assessment in English is very good: it is constructive and detailed, giving pupils a clear understanding of strengths and areas for development. Pupils regularly use computers effectively to word-process their work.

80. Leadership is good. The head of faculty clearly understands the areas for development, has coped well with recent staffing difficulties, and has a prominent training role outside the faculty. Management is satisfactory: monitoring is thorough, but there are still inconsistencies in the way good practice is shared amongst teachers. Improvement since the previous inspection has been satisfactory. Standards are still average and progress still satisfactory, whilst the faculty has worked hard to overcome intervening staffing difficulties.

Language and literacy across the curriculum

81. Standards of language and literacy are average, although many pupils display above average speaking skills. A literacy co-ordinator has only recently been appointed, and there is some variation of practice within faculties and departments. Pupils are encouraged in humanities to discuss and make presentations, was seen in a Year 11 debate on nineteenth century public health. Pupils in religious studies are encouraged to debate and write in different styles. However, in modern foreign languages there is not enough encouragement of speaking, and writing is frequently inaccurate. The correction of writing is more consistent in some areas than others.

Modern foreign languages

Provision in modern foreign languages is **unsatisfactory**.

Main strengths and weakness

- Standards in Years 7 to 11 are below average and represent unsatisfactory achievement for a large minority of pupils.
- Teachers have good subject knowledge and they structure lessons well, so that pupils understand the progress they are making.
- In a large minority of lessons the pace of learning is slowed by the need to manage unsatisfactory behaviour. In a few lessons, the management of pupils is unsatisfactory.
- Some pupils are withdrawn from modern foreign languages for a period in Years 7 to 9 in order to improve their below average literacy skills.
- The department makes a good contribution to pupils' cultural development.

Commentary

81. Results in the 2003 GCSE examinations were significantly below average in German, Spanish and French. In 2004, Spanish results improved, but French results declined further following a downward trend since the last inspection, particularly in the number of higher grades A* to C awarded. Teacher assessments at the end of Year 9 in 2004 showed pupils to be reaching average standards, but these assessments are over-generous. Given that pupils' overall attainment on entry is close to the national average, achievement in Years 7 to 9 is unsatisfactory.

82. Standards in work seen are below average, and achievement is unsatisfactory for a large minority of pupils in Years 7 to 11, but higher overall in Year 10. Whilst reading and listening skills are satisfactory, pupils lack confidence and fluency in speaking the foreign language and pronunciation is often incorrect. They rarely use the foreign language spontaneously, for example to ask for a question to be repeated. Standards in writing are below average overall. Some higher-attaining pupils in Years 10 and 11 produce good descriptions of, for example, their home town, showing a good grasp of grammar. However, most writing contains basic errors, with little variety of construction.

83. The achievement of motivated, higher-attaining pupils in Years 8 and 9, and of learners in Year 10 who have chosen to study a language, is satisfactory and sometimes good, although very few pupils reach the highest levels. For middle and lower-attaining pupils, including some in Year 11, negative attitudes frequently lead to distracting behaviour and contribute to underachievement. Many pupils with low literacy skills or SEN are withdrawn from lessons for a period in Years 7 to 9 to concentrate on developing communication skills in English, but the school has clear plans to ensure that the requirements are fully met. Those who remain achieve in line with their peers.

84. Teaching and learning are satisfactory and have recently improved significantly as a result of intensive support and training. Parents are appreciative of these improvements. Major strengths include consistently good lesson planning, which helps pupils to understand what they are learning, and good subject knowledge. Opportunities to develop speaking skills are frequently missed. Occasionally, management of pupils is unsatisfactory.

85. Leadership is satisfactory and management is unsatisfactory. Improvement since the last inspection has been unsatisfactory. Standards have fallen, and the issues related to pupils' speaking skills and behaviour management have not yet been resolved. However, planning for improvement is now of good quality and, after a lengthy period of staff changes, training is now leading to improved teaching and learning. The impact of these changes has not yet been fully realised, but the department now has the capacity for further improvement. Some pupils in Years 7 to 9 are withdrawn from language lessons as part of the school's procedures to help those who have low language and literacy skills. Despite limited availability of time, the school plans to cover the full National Curriculum programme of study with these pupils. The department makes a good contribution to cultural development in lessons and through educational visits abroad.

MATHEMATICS

Provision in mathematics is **good**.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- Leadership by the head of the mathematics faculty is outstanding.
- The management of the mathematics faculty is very highly effective.
- The mathematics curriculum options in Years 10 and 11 are very good.
- Assessment procedures and their use are highly effective.
- The management of challenging behaviour in the classroom by some teachers is ineffective.

Commentary

86. On pupils' entry to the school, attainment in mathematics is close to the national average. By the end of Year 9, standards and achievement in mathematics were above average in 2003. Although the number of pupils reaching level 5 in the National Curriculum tests was above average, the number reaching level 6 or above was slightly below average. National data for 2004 was not available at the time of writing, but similar high standards were maintained in 2004. At the end of Year 11 the picture for standards and achievement is similar. GCSE results for 2004 were above the national average overall, and the percentage gaining A* to C was also above the national figure. Again the main strengths were in the grades B and C rather than in A and A*. Nevertheless, based on prior attainment, results in Years 9 and 11 are above average.

87. In Years 7, 8 and 9 the teaching is never less than satisfactory but more often good or very good. In Years 10 and 11 the quality of teaching is similar, and leads to good learning. More experienced teachers manage challenging behaviour more successfully than their less experienced colleagues. The use of laptops combined with a data projector and whiteboard is proving particularly effective.

88. The department is putting into practice the Key Stage 3 national strategy, which enhances the delivery of the National Curriculum in mathematics in Years 7 to 9. Access to the GCSE mathematics curriculum is good for all pupils, and the introduction of the modular mathematics scheme is motivating more pupils to achieve higher grades. The assessment, recording and reporting policy and its implementation are good in the faculty. Individual pupils are tracked and have targets throughout their time in the main school. The quality of their coursework is carefully monitored. Work is marked sensitively by teachers.

89. Most mathematics teaching takes place in a new building with good access to ICT resources by teachers and pupils for shared interactive and creative mathematics. However, these resources are currently underused. Library resources to stimulate interest in mathematics in the workplace are limited.

90. The leadership qualities shown by the head of faculty, particularly during the time of significant staffing changes and shortages, are exemplary. Staff look to the head of faculty for guidance and this is most willingly given. The creation of a framework to keep the faculty on track during these recent difficulties shows excellent managerial skills. The regular consultation with staff on all matters within the faculty is a strength. Staff are clear that their contribution to the development of the department and of pupils' mathematical capability is highly valued.

91. The mathematics faculty has undergone significant changes since the last inspection. Information and communication technology (ICT) resources were limited and the school had no special emphasis on mathematics and computing as it has now. The department has rightly concentrated on maintaining the quality of education for its pupils in a period of staffing difficulties, and has not, as yet, embraced fully the benefits of specialist status. Improvement since the last inspection has been satisfactory.

Mathematics across the curriculum

92. Currently, there is no school policy on numeracy across the curriculum, but opportunities are taken in science, physical education, design and technology and other areas to develop mathematical skills where appropriate. However, the school has not yet adopted a coordinated approach to using its mathematics and computing college status to the benefit of pupils in all areas of its work.

SCIENCE

Provision in science is **good**.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- Standards at the end of Years 9 and 11 are above those found nationally.
- Teaching is good overall and resources are used effectively.
- Leadership and management are good and assessment is well developed.
- Attitudes to science are good overall and science has a positive and exciting image.
- The monitoring and evaluation of teaching are not fully developed.

Commentary

93. The results of national tests at the end of Year 9 have steadily improved. The most recent national data shows that they have been consistently above the national average, and the school has exceeded its own targets for the past four years. In comparison with those of similar schools, results are also above average. Results in the GCSE double award examinations are well above the national average. Although some years have been less successful, generally these results

have also improved over the past five years. A small group of pupils take single award courses in science, and the proportion gaining passes in the range A* to G is above the national average. Based on pupils' standards on entry to the school, which are below average in science, achievement in Years 7 to 11 is good.

94. On the evidence of lessons, and scrutiny of pupils' work, standards are above average and all groups of pupils achieve well. Pupils in Year 7 quickly develop practical skills in testing soil samples for pH. Able pupils in Year 11 work very well together; they are successful and confident in plotting magnetic fields and in their understanding of the ideas behind what they are doing.

95. The quality of teaching and learning in science is good overall and sometimes very good. Teachers explain clearly what pupils are going to learn, and make good use of starter activities that remind pupils of the scientific ideas they will need to use. Thorough and detailed planning of lessons, often with effective and focused questioning, helps pupils to learn well. Pupils are well motivated and enthusiastic, and most use equipment with care and enjoyment. They work hard, both independently and in small groups, and are confident and competent learners who communicate well. With very few exceptions, behaviour is good.

96. The leadership and management of the head of faculty are good. Recently reviewed documentation is clear and helpful, and organisation is effective and supportive. The head of faculty handles people with sensitivity and the team of teachers and other colleagues are well supported. Many teachers in the department also have other senior responsibilities in the school. There is a keen sense of purpose, and knowledge and understanding of science are high. However, the monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of teaching is underdeveloped, and the sharing of good practice is not yet widespread. The team of three technicians provides very good support to practical science, although the time allocated to them is insufficient for the size of the department.

97. Since the last inspection there have been major changes in staffing, responsibilities, accommodation and resources, all of which have brought about steady improvement in the way science is organised. Courses have been reviewed, updated and resourced, and some recently improved ICT facilities are being introduced. Assessment is regular and rigorous and identifies realistic targets for pupils, although how these can be accomplished is not always known. Pupils' work is on display and, together with a range of extra-curricular activity, supports a popular and positive image of science. Improvement since the last inspection has been good.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

Provision in ICT is **satisfactory**.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- Standards in the GCSE full course examinations have been consistently above average, and improved to well above average in 2004.
- The time allocated is very low to cover the full programme of study in Years 7 to 9.
- All teachers have good expertise in the subject, but they do not consistently use assessment to plan work suitable for all abilities.
- Leadership is good.
- All pupils follow an ICT course in Years 10 and 11, but coordination of ICT in the whole curriculum is not rigorous enough to ensure that National Curriculum requirements are met in all subjects.

Commentary

98. All pupils now follow an ICT course in all years: this is an improvement since the previous inspection. Currently, GCSE courses are being phased out in Year 11 and more vocational BTEC courses are being phased in for Year 10, so that all pupils may gain a qualification. Standards in GCSE full course examinations in 2004 were well above average, but fewer than half the pupils in the year take these examinations. Results in the short course were below average, and many pupils did not take a GCSE.

99. Currently, all Year 10 pupils and those in Year 11 who have opted out of GCSE are doing BTEC courses appropriate for their age and ability. Standards are currently average in Years 10 and 11, but Year 11 GCSE pupils are on target to reach above average standards. Pupils have acquired a sound knowledge of skills, which they apply in their website design, for example.

100. In Years 7 to 9, standards are average. Pupils make satisfactory progress from their average attainment on entry to the school, although the amount of curriculum time is very low for in-depth coverage of the programme of study. Pupils show satisfactory skills in the use of presentation software, databases and spreadsheets, but few exhibit good keyboard skills.

101. Pupils' achievement is satisfactory overall in Years 7 to 9, and in Years 10 and 11. Those with SEN generally achieve satisfactorily, as do those who do not speak English at home. Although girls do slightly better than boys at GCSE, most pupils who have opted for the full course in the past year are boys. The most able and the gifted and talented pupils achieve well; pupils of average and below average ability do not do as well, however. This year the department is rightly focusing on Year 11 pupils on the C/D borderline.

102. Teaching is satisfactory overall. Teachers are enthusiastic and employ a good variety of teaching methods. They use their expertise to help pupils to learn well and to understand the place of ICT in society through the study of its use in business, entertainment and education. Assessment procedures are good but are not used well enough to ensure that all pupils achieve well in every class. Specific targets for ability groups are not a feature of many lessons, and teachers do not always draw together the learning at the end of a lesson. Indeed, pupils do not expect this in most classes, and are ready to leave the classroom when they log off the computer system. There are a few instances of problems with communication and behaviour management in the department, but these are in the minority.

103. Leadership is good. The head of department has good expertise and has succeeded in forming a cohesive team of teachers, despite staffing difficulties which have resulted in very recent appointments. She is a good role model in her own teaching but, because of her recently much increased Sixth Form work load, is no longer able to share her good practice by teaching in Years 7 to 9. She has, however, satisfactorily monitored the teaching of newly qualified teachers. Management of the subject is satisfactory.

104. Improvement since the previous inspection has been satisfactory. Resources and accommodation have improved as a result of specialist college status, and all pupils now follow an ICT course in all years. However, although the time allocation in Years 7 to 9 has grown, it is still inadequate, and in Years 10 and 11 there is a lack of sufficient ICT resources or access to resources in some subjects, such as music.

Information and communication technology across the curriculum

105. There is no co-ordinator for ICT in the whole curriculum and this makes it difficult for the school to be sure that all National Curriculum requirements are met in Years 10 and 11. Provision for ICT is good in English, design and technology, art, and humanities in Years 10 to 13. It is satisfactory elsewhere except in music, where it is unsatisfactory. Pupils extend their skills through word-processing and the use of graphics software. They acquire specialist skills using computer-aided design and manufacture software in design and technology, and temperature sensors in science. In mathematics and geography, there is specialist software and ICT is used satisfactorily. Resources are sufficient through access to ICT rooms and sets of laptop computers, but some departments, such as religious education and modern languages, do not have sufficient access, and specialist equipment in music is inadequate.

HUMANITIES

106. Geography, history and religious education are combined in a humanities course in Years 7 to 11. GCSE humanities is part of the compulsory core curriculum, but geography and history are offered as additional, optional GCSE subjects and were sampled. Each humanities class is taught by one teacher across the whole curriculum, and this contributes strongly to good relationships and stability. This unusual arrangement is a pillar of the school's educational philosophy and represents a substantial strength of the curriculum.

107. GCSE results in **geography** in 2004 were poor for the very few candidates. Standards seen in lessons were average, but pupils achieved well and standards are rising. In a good geography lesson in Year 10, the teacher's good subject knowledge and lesson planning stimulated pupils' interest and engaged their attention. Pupils responded very well and worked hard, which led to good achievement. The classroom presented a good learning environment, with good geographic resources, maps, atlases, and photographs.

108. GCSE results in **history** in 2003 were close to the national average overall, with above average numbers of A* and A grades. Unvalidated results in 2004 fell back slightly. Whilst there were well above average numbers of A grades, there were few A* grades because the highest attainers did not produce good enough coursework. In 2003 and in 2004, pupils did better in history than in most of their other subjects but, compared with all schools, progress was satisfactory. Numbers are low. Two lessons were sampled in Year 11. In both of them, lively teaching with very well-planned resources led to very good learning and achievement.

Humanities

Provision in humanities is **good**.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- Standards in Year 11 are well above the national average, but standards in Years 7 to 9, although average, are limited by insufficient time and by the underdevelopment of independent learning. Achievement overall is good.
- Teaching is good overall, often very good, and sometimes excellent.
- Very good leadership and management are very supportive of a young and enthusiastic teaching team.
- Pupils' curricular experiences are not enhanced by any planned visits to religious buildings or places of worship.

- There is not enough whole-class use of ICT in Years 7 to 9.

Commentary

109. On pupils' entry to the school, attainment in humanities subjects is close to the national average. Teachers' assessments carried out towards the end of Year 9 in 2004 indicate that attainment is average in geography, history and religious education. Girls do better than boys, and in history by a wider margin than is seen nationally. Relatively few pupils reach the highest levels. Standards seen in Year 9 books and lessons are average, and achievement is satisfactory overall. In religious education, standards seen in lessons were close to the national average, but there is clear evidence from scrutiny of pupils' books that standards are rising.

110. GCSE humanities results in 2003 were significantly above the national average, with many more A*, A and B grades than are seen nationally. Results declined slightly in 2004 but very high overall standards were maintained. Pupils achieved better in humanities than in most of their other subjects, boys significantly so, and all added very good value to their prior attainment. The quality of coursework is very high and contributes substantially to success, particularly for the lower

attainers. In books and in class, standards of work seen in Years 10 and 11 are high overall and show that pupils achieve very well over time. The make-up of GCSE classes is influenced by setting arrangements in other subjects. As a result, some classes have uneven blends of gender and attainment; this can prove a barrier to learning.

111. By the age of 14, pupils have gained a satisfactory knowledge and understanding of the beliefs of six major world religions and are able to make comparisons between them in respect of symbols, festivals, sacred books and their conceptions of the divine. These studies make a significant contribution to their spiritual and cultural development. Pupils of average and above average attainment write about the subject at a good standard of literacy. Progress from Year 7 to Year 11 is good overall, but is much faster after Year 9 than before it. The faculty is aware of the need to accelerate progress between Years 7 and 9.

112. Teaching is good overall. It is sometimes excellent and is very good in one lesson in five. It is good in about half of lessons and satisfactory in the rest. It is better on the GCSE course than in Years 7 to 9. There are no religious education specialists, and all staff teach outside their subject specialism for part of the week. However, the quality of the schemes of work for history, humanities and religious education is high and those for geography are being redrawn well. Lesson planning is strong and materials are well prepared, and as a result teachers are well equipped and very well supported to manage combined humanities teaching. The requirements of the Agreed Syllabus for religious education are well met in Years 7 to 11. A high level of commitment to inclusion was noted in a Year 8 lesson on the Resurrection, which involved role play, one of the principal roles being taken by an Afro-Caribbean pupil and another by a pupil with SEN.

113. Pupils' good attitudes to their work contribute well to learning, and very little poor behaviour was seen in lessons. In good lessons, learning is characteristically driven at pace from the front with a variety of tasks that allow pupils to learn at their own level and to develop new understanding. Teachers use powerful visual images which stimulate strong learning. For example, a video clip about the holocaust stunned a lively Year 9 class. Literacy is well supported and pupils are good at communicating their ideas in the classroom. The level of presentation and debate in an excellent lesson on public health in the nineteenth century was very high, and showed a good understanding of historical principles that extended far beyond the lesson being taught at the time. Information and communication technology (ICT) is well used by GCSE pupils, but there is not sufficient whole-class use lower down the school. There are not enough visits and practical work in Years 7 to 9 to help pupils to widen their experience, and to develop the practical skills they

need. For example, there are no planned programme of visits to religious buildings, or of visits to the school by representatives of different faiths.

114. An exemplary system of course and folder management includes a good assessment system. Most pupils know how well they are achieving and understand what they have to do to improve in the medium and long term.

115. Over the last two years there has been a potentially damaging high turnover of staff, but despite difficulties the school has appointed well. The new team is young, committed and enthusiastic. Although relatively inexperienced, its members are well capable of taking the faculty forward. Very good leadership and management have maintained good morale and generated a spirited team based around a workroom that makes possible continuous informal consultation and mutual support. Though resources for learning are satisfactory overall, there are not enough books in Years 7 to 9. Access to computers remains a problem and there is only one data projector in the faculty.

116. Because substantially less time is given between Years 7 and 9 to the combined subjects than is usual when the three subjects are taught separately, achievement is limited, although satisfactory overall. Unusually, religious education is afforded equal status with geography and history, so the time available to those subjects is squeezed further. Some parts of the programmes

of study of the National Curriculum for geography and history are barely covered, though others are taught in depth. Time is spent on covering the curriculum rather than on developing the extended research tasks and independent learning skills which make possible attainment at the highest levels.

117. Improvement since the last inspection has been good; line management and monitoring are in place and are both supportive and rigorous. Planning is accurate and teaching and learning are monitored sharply. The use of ICT has not yet improved enough.

TECHNOLOGY

Design and technology

Provision in design and technology is **good**.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- Good teaching leads to high standards in electronics, resistant materials and graphics; pupils' achievement is good.
- Examination results in GCSE are below average in food, but improving.
- The department is well led and managed and good provision has been maintained.
- There are limited opportunities for pupils to develop an understanding of design in Year 7 to 9.
- Some projects in food and textiles in Years 7 to 9 limit achievement for higher attaining pupils.

Commentary

118. Pupils come to the school with limited knowledge and skills but they achieve well, and by the end of Year 9 standards are comparable with those of other schools nationally. Achievement is good. For example, pupils use computer-aided design and manufacturing to make good quality clocks and weather vanes. They present their work well, showing good levels of literacy and numeracy and good attitudes to their work. However, they do not use their planning sufficiently when making products.

119. By the end of Year 11, standards are higher than average. Pupils' achievement is good. Results in GCSE are well above the national average in electronics, resistant materials and graphics. Pupils' achievement in food technology has improved. Pupils use ICT well to present their work, to carry out research and to analyse data. The work of higher-achieving pupils is thoughtful and focused. For example, when they make a prototype alarm in electronics, their specifications are linked to assembly and industrial processes and their designs show clear development. There are no significant differences in the achievement of girls and boys or ethnic minority pupils.

120. Teaching and learning are good. In very good lessons, teachers' planning is well focused. This helps pupils to be confident about what they have to do, and these lessons have a good pace. Pupils really enjoy learning new skills from professional specialists. In the best lessons, teachers' well-focused questioning extends and reinforces learning very skilfully. Where teachers encourage the use of modelling, for example, making quarter-size models in resistant materials, pupils gain a good understanding of how to make their final products. Homework makes a good contribution to pupils' learning. Literacy, numeracy

and ICT skills are reinforced well in many lessons. However, in some projects, particularly in Years 7 to 9, design is confused with drawing, pattern and style. Occasionally the beginning and ends of lessons are not used to reinforce and extend learning. Higher-attaining pupils are not always challenged by the lessons, particularly in food and textiles.

121. Assessment is good. Marking is regular and very detailed so that pupils understand how to improve their work. However, the assessment of pupils' levels of attainment in Years 7 to 9 is not always accurate. Learning objectives do not always include measurable outcomes, and pupils' self-assessments do not relate to the teachers' planning. Opportunities are missed, therefore, to modify and amend teachers' plans and provide differentiated work for pupils.

122. Whilst the curriculum is satisfactory, opportunities are missed to develop pupils' design skills, and the long-term planning for food and textiles does not encourage the highest levels of achievement. The scheme of work has not been audited to ensure that there is appropriate emphasis on developing, planning and communicating ideas. Leadership and management are both good. A complex department is efficiently organised and the good standards reported at the last inspection have been improved.

VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS

Art and design, and music, were inspected fully, but lessons were also sampled in media studies and drama within the English curriculum area.

Art and design

Provision in art and design is **good**.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- Improvement since the last report is very good.
- Standards are above expectation in all years.
- Teaching is good.
- The department is well led and managed.
- Pupils are positive and well behaved.
- There is not enough use of ICT in Years 7 to 9 as a creative medium.
- Levels of expectation and the evaluation of learning outcomes are not sufficiently demanding in some lessons.

Commentary

123. In the 2004 GCSE examinations, results were above the national average in the higher grades. There has been an upward trend in recent years, and predictions for next year indicate a further rise in standards.

124. By the end of Year 9, standards are above the national average. This is the result of the strong emphasis placed on the development of drawing and painting skills and represents good achievement. Pupils learn to use colour, inspired by the work of famous artists, and to manipulate a range of other media, including clay. Approaches to research and experimentation in sketchbooks also show good development. There are few opportunities for pupils to use ICT as a creative medium.

125. By the end of Year 11, standards are above the national average. Many pupils have learnt the importance of research, the development of ideas, and how to work effectively as individuals. Many learn to draw competently and to use colour effectively in a variety of media.

126. There is no significant difference in the achievement of girls and boys. Pupils with SEN make similar progress to other pupils. Gifted and talented pupils are identified and there is planned additional provision to challenge them.

127. Teaching is good overall in all years, and sometimes very good. Pupils respond with positive attitudes to their work, and they are well behaved. The best lessons have very good pace, learning is reinforced by regular questioning, and there are very high expectations of pupils' active involvement. There is a small amount of teaching where pace and challenge resulted in only satisfactory learning. In some lessons, outcomes are not reviewed with sufficient rigour to identify underachievement or to raise expectations. Aspects of literacy are being well developed. Opportunities for spiritual development are often missed. Homework, linked to coursework, is set regularly and marked helpfully in all years.

128. Assessment procedures are very thorough and informative. They contribute to individual target-setting as an aid to raising standards.

129. The department is well led and managed by a very experienced and enthusiastic specialist. Much of the good improvement since the last inspection has resulted from the strong team spirit and a commitment to raising standards. There is a need to focus this experience and enthusiasm more critically on the evaluation of some teaching styles and learning outcomes, linked to a more detailed analysis of the data generated, as part of the department's determination to raise standards further.

Music

Provision in music is **satisfactory**.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- Pupils have very positive attitudes to music.
- Assessment is not used sufficiently to monitor standards or identify areas for improvement.
- Music makes a very good contribution to pupils' personal development.
- Teaching is good, leading to good learning.
- Accommodation is unsatisfactory.

Commentary

130. By end of Year 9, pupils attain in line with expectations for their age. The numbers entered for GCSE in recent years have been too small to compare with national figures. In summer 2004 the pupils entered did less well in music than in other subjects. Present Year 11 pupils are attaining as expected for their age; a talented minority are reaching standards slightly above average in composing and performing.

131. Pupils' achievement throughout Years 7 to 9 is good. Their achievement in Years 10 and 11 is satisfactory. No significant differences are apparent between the attainment or achievement of boys and girls. Pupils with special needs are achieving comparably with other pupils, as are those acquiring English as a second language. However, a few of the more able pupils in Years 7 to 9 do not do quite as well as they could.

132. Teaching throughout Years 7 to 11 is good. Well-planned lessons cover all aspects of the curriculum appropriately, enabling pupils to acquire technical skills through appraising and performing in different musical styles. For example, Year 8 learn about compound time through Celtic music, and Year 9 practise improvisation through samba. Less able musicians, and pupils with SEN, receive good quality support from their teachers in class. Lessons are usually briskly paced and keep pupils working hard. However, the most able pupils are not consistently stretched during Years 7 to 9, though they are appropriately challenged throughout their GCSE courses in Years 10 and 11. Homework is not consistently set in Years 7 to 9. Pupils do not have sufficient access to computers for

composing, and therefore do not get enough practice in using them. Assessment of pupils' work in lessons is effective. Opportunities for pupils to appraise their work, and that of others, are provided sometimes but not consistently. Evaluation of pupils' work is not as fully monitored as it could be to ensure parity of standards across whole year groups.

133. Leadership is good. The recently appointed head of the department has identified clear, relevant priorities for its improvement, including attention to assessment and to the development of ICT. Management is satisfactory. The newly qualified teacher working in the department is being appropriately mentored. Departmental data is analysed but not yet used rigorously enough to identify areas for future improvement.

134. Pupils enjoy music lessons and most concentrate very well. They help each other, take turns in using resources, and work effectively in groups. Over their first three years in the school they study a very wide range of world music. Music is making a very good contribution to their personal development, particularly social development and understanding of other cultures.

135. Accommodation is unsatisfactory. Pupils lose lesson time because they have to move tables to use instruments; the rooms are over-resonant and sound travels between them, affecting work which involves listening.

136. Since the last inspection, progress has been satisfactory. The department has been affected by staffing difficulties. Despite these, pupils' enthusiasm for music has largely been sustained in Years 7 to 9, though GCSE numbers are modest. During the last sixth months 'under new management', there has been good improvement in several areas, including the provision of a wider range of extra-curricular activities. Recent changes have not yet had time to raise the standards or achievement of pupils but their impact so far has been positive.

Physical education

Provision in physical education is **good**.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- Consistently good teaching leads directly to good learning.
- Very good leadership ensures that all pupils have many chances to succeed.
- Pupils have good attitudes to learning and they achieve well.

Commentary

137. Results in GCSE examinations in 2004 were at the national average for the subject. This was an accurate reflection of these pupils' prior attainment. Overall, achievement for these pupils was satisfactory. Compelling evidence suggests that standards will rise above the national average in coming years.

138. Reliable teacher assessments at the end of Year 9 show that attainment is broadly average. Given the below average attainment of these pupils on entry to the school in Year 7, this represents good achievement. Pupils are able to perform with consistency in a range of games and athletic activities. All groups of pupils make similar good progress. They know how and why to warm up before exercise. In an excellent Year 8 gymnastics lesson, a group of lower-attaining pupils were able to build their self-esteem and

confidence. This was because the teacher relentlessly challenged them to perform vaulting exercises of rapidly increasing difficulty with gymnastic starts and finishes.

139. Lesson observations and scrutiny of data on pupils' performance indicate that by the end of Year 11 standards in core physical education lessons are above average, as pupils build on the strong foundations of earlier years. Pupils achieve well in lessons. In GCSE classes, they are well motivated and work hard to refine and develop their knowledge, skills and understanding.

140. The curriculum is good in Years 7 to 9, and is satisfactory and improving in Years 10 and 11. The time allocation for pupils not studying GCSE in Years 10 and 11 is lower than is normal. The good range of extra-curricular activities offers many opportunities for pupils to refine and develop their sporting performances, some up to national level.

141. Pupils are positive about the subject. They pay close attention to teachers' guidance, and work co-operatively with energy and enthusiasm. They are trustworthy and can work effectively when not under immediate supervision. Relationships and behaviour are very good, and this contributes strongly to pupils' good progress.

142. The quality of teaching and learning are good overall. One excellent lesson was seen. All teachers are enthusiastic specialists. Class management is consistently very good, giving all pupils the opportunity to engage successfully in learning. Teachers challenge pupils to work hard and produce high quality outcomes. Teaching methods are varied, and good demonstrations and clear exposition are used to meet the individual needs of all pupils. Effective use is made of homework to extend classroom learning.

143. Leadership and management are very good. This is why the department is improving. There is a clear vision of the standards the department wishes to achieve. New schemes of work are complete for Years 7 to 9, and they build up pupils' knowledge and skills in a systematic manner. Work is underway to complete schemes for Years 10 and 11, using the same high quality format. Very good assessment arrangements provide accurate information on pupils' performance. Pupils know how well they are progressing, and teachers are provided with objective data on which to base curriculum developments and the planning of teaching. Relationships within the energetic staff team are excellent, and teachers form a well-balanced all-specialist group. They support each other well, and give of their time freely and generously. Accommodation and resources to support learning are very good.

144. The department has improved very well since the last inspection. Strong aspects have been maintained, and areas noted for improvement have been addressed. The quality of teaching has improved and new developments are underpinned by strong quality assurance arrangements. There is clear capacity to secure still further improvement.

PERSONAL, SOCIAL AND HEALTH EDUCATION AND CITIZENSHIP

The PSHCE programme is well planned. It is delivered in three ways: *via* tutor group lessons for pupils in Years 7, 10 and 11; on days when the timetable is 'collapsed' for particular year groups; and in lessons in different subjects across the curriculum. It is wide ranging and meets the requirements of the National Curriculum fully, including sex and health education, self-awareness, relationships, study skills, drugs education and careers. In the three lessons seen during the inspection, which were all with Year 10 groups, the quality of teaching and learning was good.

Citizenship

Provision in citizenship is **satisfactory**.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- Planning for the subject meets National Curriculum requirements.

- Pupils have enjoyed and benefited from the ‘collapsed days’ that form a part of the delivery of the subject.
- The scheme to assess the standards that pupils have reached at the end of Year 9 is still developing.
- Pupils do not fully understand where citizenship is different from the remainder of the PSHE programme.

Commentary

145. It is not possible to make judgements on standards or on the quality of teaching, since no citizenship lessons were seen during the inspection and pupils’ work in the subject was not available for scrutiny.

146. Planning of the subject adequately covers the three elements and the study units of the National Curriculum. Senior staff, heads of year and the careers co-ordinator have assumed responsibility for organisation of the course, and for the training and preparation of group tutors. Meetings are held and discussions take place before each study unit is taught. Links with colleagues from other schools in the area bring an added dimension to the course planning. An audit has been taken of the contributions that courses in subjects across the curriculum make to citizenship, and the school uses the term *A Citizenship Experience (ACE)* to identify these aspects to pupils. The success of this way of organising the course is variable. Many pupils are quite clear about the contribution of individual subjects to their learning in citizenship, but others are not, often because the learning objectives for these lessons do not specify that the subject is being taught.

147. A scheme to assess the progress that 14-year-old pupils have made in citizenship has been devised and will be used at the end of the current year. This involves good use of self-assessment, but it will need further development to ensure that the standards reached by pupils in each of the three elements can be accurately measured.

148. In the discussions that the inspection team had with pupil representatives from different year groups, it was clear that the ‘collapsed days’ on which aspects of citizenship such as ‘Voting and Elections’ and ‘You and the Law’ have been considered were much enjoyed. Pupils had made good progress in their learning and understanding of these topics. However, discussions also disclosed that not all pupils are sure about what citizenship is or of its place in the curriculum. Many are unclear as to how the subject is distinct from the remainder of the PSHE programme. Efforts to improve this situation are included in the new developments for the subject.

149. The school has considered carefully how the requirements for the course can be fully met, and has designed a scheme which has the potential to do so. The mechanics of the delivery are still developing, however, and there are uncertainties in pupils’ minds about the nature and value of the course. Although pupils understand well how ‘collapsed days’ contribute to the learning in citizenship, they are unclear about the contribution of lessons within mainstream subjects of the curriculum. This is an area for development if the course is to be as effective as it should be. Leadership and management of the course overall are therefore satisfactory.

SUBJECTS AND COURSES IN THE SIXTH FORM

In the inspection, eight 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 2004.

Level 3 GCE AS level courses

Subject	Number entered	% gaining grades A-E		% gaining grades A-B		Average point score	
		School	England	School	England	School	England
English Literature	3	100	86.2	0	17.4	20	28.2
Mathematics	6	50	59.9	0	14.1	11.7	20.5
Physics	4	75	66.4	25	14.8	22.5	22.4
History	5	100	82.2	0	20.8	30	29.2
ICT	3	100	66.6	33.3	8.8	36.7	20.6
Art and design	No candidates in 2004						
Physical education	1	100	72.2	0	11.8	40	22.8
Business studies	No candidates in 2004						

Level 3 GCE A level and VCE courses

Subject	Number entered	% gaining grades A-E		% gaining grades A-B		Average point score	
		School	England	School	England	School	England
English language	1	100	99.2	0	36.4	80.0	81.1
English Literature	12	100	99.4	33.3	44.9	76.7	85.5
Mathematics	8	100	96.8	37.5	56.6	87.5	89.5
Physics	6	100	96.7	0	45.3	63.3	82.6
History	8	100	99.0	50	45.6	90.0	85.1
ICT	15	100	96.3	33.3	25.7	84.0	71.1
Art and design	6	100	98.3	50	50.2	86.7	87.1
Physical education	1	100	97.8	100	30.9	81.3	82.5
Business studies GCE	1	100	98.9	0	39.4	80.0	81.8
Business studies VCE	Data not available						

ENGLISH, LANGUAGES AND COMMUNICATION

English was the focus of the inspection, but lessons in media studies, French and Spanish were sampled. Standards in both languages were in line with attainment predicted from GCSE, and students achieved well, working hard to maintain high standards. Teaching was well planned, incorporating a good level of challenge, and students responded well and enjoyed their work. Private study was used well to extend and develop work in lessons. In a lesson in media studies, students in Years 12 and 13 showed average levels of knowledge and understanding and made satisfactory progress.

English

Provision in English is **good**.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- Students learn and achieve well, in response to good teaching.
- Students have positive attitudes towards the subject.

- The provision is well led and managed.
- Very good assessment contributes well to students' understanding.

Commentary

150. Year 13 students in the 2004 A level examination maintained the very good pass rate of previous years, although the proportion attaining the higher A and B grades was below the national average for this age group. Standards in the current Year 13 are in line with national expectations in knowledge and understanding and in the ability to analyse critically a range of texts. Students, both boys and girls, achieve well, particularly as they develop confidence in making a sustained personal response to authors' works. They make good progress in developing the ability to compare texts, particularly when working independently on coursework, although several students lack the confidence to join in sustained debate in lessons.

151. Teaching and learning are good, and help to produce the positive attitudes which students have towards the subject. Teachers have very good subject knowledge, which they convey well through explanation and questioning. Most significantly, teachers encourage students to learn actively and independently. They use a range of strategies, for example in a Year 13 lesson in which photographs were used effectively as a way of investigating Keats' use of language in his poetry. Active learning was also a feature of a Year 12 lesson in which students did individual research and made presentations on the context of Tennessee Williams' play *The Glass Menagerie*. Teachers assess students' work very well, giving thorough oral and written feedback to improve their understanding of areas for development.

152. Leadership and management are good. The head of faculty leads a committed and cooperative team, which has developed new units of work. Students benefit from a good programme of enrichment activities and a good range of resources.

153. Progress has been satisfactory since the previous inspection. Standards are no longer above average, because more students with lower GCSE attainments take the subject. Strengths in teaching and students' attitudes have been maintained.

Language and literacy across the curriculum

154. Standards of language and literacy are average. There are inconsistencies between subject areas in the extent of support they give. In some subjects, such as physics, there are well-developed levels of discussion and good use of specialist language by students. There is a good standard of written work in physical education. In art and design, although there are good opportunities for speaking, writing and annotation, marking is not sufficiently frequent to support well the development of written work. Some students in English lack confidence in debate.

MATHEMATICS

Provision in mathematics is **good**.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- Students' attitudes to learning are good.
- The quality of teaching is very good.

- The use of ICT to support teaching and learning is very good.
- The leadership and management of mathematics are very good.
- The AS level results in 2004 were much lower than expected.

Commentary

155. The AS level results in 2004 were lower than average, mainly because of difficulties in recruiting suitably experienced staff last year and having a relaxed standard of entry for the course. Scrutiny of students' work and class observations suggest that the action taken to resolve the problems is leading to improvements in teaching, learning and achievement. Last year's A level results from a small cohort were in line with national results, and in several cases the students obtained higher grades than expected. Detailed comparisons of attainment on entry with advanced level grades indicate that achievement is good overall.

156. Teaching is very effective and good use is made of ICT to illustrate key points, for example in a Year 12 class on applying transformations to trigonometric graphs. Expectations were high, but some students were unable to keep up as explanations were too fast. Achievement was satisfactory. Conversely, in a further mathematics group studying probability, the teacher's encouragement of active participation led most students to complete a starter problem very quickly, and then to show a ready grasp of concepts and understanding as the lesson progressed. Achievement in this lesson was very good. The general attitude of students to learning mathematics is good. Attendance is generally very good and high levels of enthusiasm for the subject were noted, particularly amongst the Year 12 students.

157. The range of options at AS and A2 levels is appropriate for the general abilities of students. The assessment policy focuses on the needs of individual students, and teachers make good use of regular marking and diagnostic comments in workbooks. Students comment favourably on the support they get from teachers for their independent learning.

158. The leadership and management of Sixth Form mathematics are very good, and currently performed by the head of faculty. Recruitment of suitably qualified staff to take on roles of responsibility in the mathematics faculty is proving difficult. The use of part-time staff does not detract from the quality of provision. The use of electronic mail for students to maintain contact with their teacher is good practice.

159. Sixth Form mathematics has undergone a number of changes since the last inspection. The availability of ICT resources for teachers was extremely limited, and the new college status has given new impetus to the subject. An action plan to improve the results is now in place and this has included the rearrangement of staffing and stricter entry requirements. Improvements are already noted in lessons, and the department has the capacity to improve further.

Mathematics across the curriculum

160. There is currently no policy for the provision of mathematics across the Sixth Form curriculum, and the work of other departments is not coordinated. Mathematical skills are developed well where they are needed in other curriculum areas, but they do not reflect the school's mathematics and computing college status.

SCIENCE

Physics was the focus of the inspection, but lessons in biology and chemistry were also sampled. In a satisfactory Year 13 chemistry lesson, students were well supported in understanding how to use the concept of equilibria to relate the properties of acids to their structures. In a well-structured Year 13 biology lesson, students made satisfactory progress; however, some struggled to build on earlier learning about teeth and dentition, and showed limited skills of analysis and deduction.

Physics

Provision in physics is **good**.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- Teaching is good overall, and resources are used effectively.
- Teachers have excellent subject knowledge and plan their lessons very well.
- The assessment of students' work is well done and is used effectively to support learning.
- Students are positive about the courses and they work hard, but few have gained higher grades in the last few years.
- Few students choose to study the subject in the Sixth Form.

Commentary

161. Students entering the A level course generally do so with good qualifications from GCSE and AS level examinations. Recently, the number of students choosing to study at A level has been small, typically between two and six students. Once settled on the course, most students complete it. Although variable, the pass rate is good, and all students gain grades in the range A to E. There has been a decline in the number of students gaining the higher grades at the end of Year 13, and there have been none in the past few years. However, both the students who plan to complete the course in 2005 are predicted to achieve higher grades.

162. The standard of work seen is slightly better than the national average and, based on prior attainment, achievement is good. Year 12 students have a sound appreciation of atomic structure and bonding and an increasing understanding of the relationships between conductivity and temperature. Others rehearse their knowledge and understanding of the history of telegraphy. In their work on electromagnetic induction, Year 13 students show developing understanding of the laws relating to induced electromagnetic force. Older students display maturity in the way they take notes from presentations.

163. The quality of teaching is good overall. Lesson planning and laboratory organisation are well done. Teachers use a small range of strategies, but they use them well and they have high levels of expectation. Resources are used effectively, and the frequent use of focused questions helps students to learn well. Teachers are good role models and their enthusiasm is reflected in the positive attitudes and high quality of work of students in both year groups. They encourage high standards of commitment and, in response, students' engagement and productivity are also high. Most students produce well-organised notebooks under the guidance of their teachers.

164. The quality of joint leadership and management is satisfactory. Three teachers presently share the responsibility for physics in the Sixth Form, and work very closely together. They have a sense of common purpose and an excellent knowledge and understanding of physics. Changes in staffing structure and the student population have significantly altered the nature of Sixth Form physics. Improvements include aspects of the way in which the subject is perceived and taught, a recent major increase in confidence in the use of ICT by teachers, and additional textbooks. Monitoring and assessment of students' work are frequent and the outcomes support learning well. Students are generally pleased with the course. Overall, the subject has responded satisfactorily to changing circumstances since the last inspection.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

A level computing was the focus for the inspection, but all students do a course in ICT in the Sixth Form. Courses in 'Microsoft Academy' and GNVQ were sampled, and students were seen to be well motivated to gain an ICT qualification.

Computing

Provision in computing is **good**.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- A level standards were well above average in 2004 and 2003.
- Students generally achieve well to exceed their predicted grade.
- The very large AS group in Year 12 makes an excessive demand on the leadership and management of the department.

Commentary

165. Computing is a popular course at AS and A level. Students generally achieve well at A level, attaining standards in line with or above their predicted grades. In both 2003 and 2004, these were well above the national average. Results at AS level were not as good, though most students attained their target grades.

166. Current standards in Year 13 are average. Although students do not have entry grades as high as their predecessors, all are working on target and show good basic skills in their retail outlet projects. In Year 12, standards in AS computing vary widely. An unexpected staffing difficulty in the Sixth Form consortium brought an influx of students into Year 12, which has increased the size of the class substantially. Not only was the attainment of the additional students lower than that of the rest, but an excessively large class size of 26 with one teacher has adversely affected achievement. It is clear that many more students need help in their pre-project exercise than could be supported by the teacher, and there are not enough computers for all to be working at once.

167. Teaching is very good at A level because of a combination of very good expertise and knowledge of examination requirements. There are high expectations that all students will succeed, and individual support and guidance help them to do so. Consequently, A level students make very good gains in skills and knowledge, which they consolidate well through individual studies. In the large AS group, however, it is difficult for students to get as much individual help as they need from only one teacher, but students help each other by working collaboratively on projects.

168. Courses are well led and satisfactorily managed so that all students not doing the GCE computing course gain a worthwhile vocational qualification, which they all value.

Information and communication technology across the curriculum

169. All Sixth Form students follow a skills-based course – Microsoft Academy – which allows them to achieve a worthwhile qualification. They use the school's good resources, complemented by bringing in their own laptop computers, particularly for computing. Furthermore, they frequently use them in individual study, at home and in school, in most subjects. Information and communication technology (ICT) is used particularly well in English, history, science, and business studies.

HUMANITIES

History

Provision in history is **good**.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- Standards at A level are rising and students achieve well.
- Students with high prior attainment are challenged effectively and attain well.
- The teaching team has been recently strengthened; teaching is good.
- Many students lack study skills.

Commentary

170. Attainment on entry to the Sixth Form course is average. The subject is popular; numbers have risen steadily and group sizes are large. Standards seen in Year 12 at AS level are above average and students achieve well. A high proportion of students continued to take history in Year 13 in 2004. Results at A level in 2004 were well below average, but students with high prior attainment did well. Although coursework marks were very good in 2004, performance on the British History paper was poor and this pulled down the overall grades. Standards at A level have risen steadily from 2002 to 2004. Results in 2003 were below the national average but those for 2004 were above average. Students achieved well in relation to their prior attainment. An above average proportion gained the highest grades, and all passed. Very good marks in coursework ensured success. Girls did better than boys. Half the students who took A level history in 2004 entered university to read for history degrees.

171. Standards seen in students' work and in class are average overall. Students are making good progress to improve on their well-below average performance of the previous year. Detailed analysis indicates that half are expected to exceed their predicted grades, and most of the rest are matching them. Achievement is therefore satisfactory.

172. Teaching is good overall and is very good in one lesson in three. Teachers are good subject specialists. They know and support their students well, and good relationships strengthen learning. Learning is strongly directed, with a good pace, and the highest-attaining students are encouraged to think critically about their work by challenging, open questions. Students at AS level respond very well to this approach. They retain knowledge and understanding well from previous lessons. Though the highest-attaining students at A level also respond well, most students are less responsive. They work hard at note-making but are too dependent on the teacher, and their questions are factually based rather analytical or evaluative. They do not always do the required reading for lessons or read around the subject for interest. A very good continuous assessment system of accumulated modules involves students well in measuring their own achievement. Students know their target grades and have clear ideas about their academic future. Resources for learning are satisfactory, though students must share some textbooks.

173. Leadership and management of the subject are very good, and the school gives very good support to a good new teacher in charge of the subject. The faculty makes a substantial contribution to the Sixth Form curriculum, offering geography, sociology and psychology as well as history for examination.

VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS AND MEDIA

Art and design

Provision in art and design is **good**.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- Standards were well above average at the higher grades in 2003, but close to the average in 2004.
- There is good teaching, although levels of planning and expectation are sometimes insufficiently demanding.
- Independent learning skills are well developed.
- Relationships are very good and attitudes are positive and enthusiastic.

Commentary

174. Although the number of candidates has been low, numbers taking the course have risen significantly this year. Large variations in attainment are to be expected for small numbers, but the average over the last three years has been above average. Students explore and select a range of visual information in relation to their own ideas. They manipulate a wide variety of fine art materials and techniques successfully to communicate their own ideas. Research and experimentation are strong features, and the influence of both traditional and contemporary artists is evident through the development of work. Literacy skills are well developed as a result of an increasing amount of written work required, and through the presentations which individual students make to the group, based on famous artists. Drawing skills are underdeveloped. However, a strong emphasis on improving them and the additional life drawing classes provided are helping to raise standards.

175. Teaching is good and generally makes high demands of students, but levels of planning and expectation are not always sufficiently demanding. The two specialist teachers are very enthusiastic and have very good subject knowledge. Students have learned to work very effectively as individuals as a result of the way teachers work together and their high levels of expectation. Very thorough assessment procedures, individual tutorials and regular target-setting mean that students are well informed of their progress and how they can improve their work. Students' knowledge and levels of appreciation are extended by visits to galleries. Relationships and attitudes are very good and contribute further to productivity and progress. Teachers use the limited accommodation imaginatively to provide a stimulating and well-resourced environment, linked to challenging and interesting learning opportunities, to maintain good standards. A new advanced supplementary graphics course has been successfully introduced this year. This has extended the range of learning opportunities now available within art and design.

176. The course is well led and managed. Good organisation, combined with thorough planning and good record-keeping, contributes to the success of the department.

HOSPITALITY, SPORTS, LEISURE AND TRAVEL

Physical education

Provision in physical education is **good**.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- Consistently good teaching ensures good learning.
- The students are well motivated and achieve consistently well.
- Very good leadership and management ensure that the demands of the curriculum are well met.

Commentary

177. Physical education has been a stable option at A level since 2003. In 2004, standards at A level were broadly average. The department has a flexible entry policy based on both academic and personal criteria, and attainment on entry is below average. The number of students embarking on the course each year is rising; most of them complete the course

successfully. Standards of work seen in the inspection are broadly average. Achievement is demonstrably good.

178. Although students have good attitudes to learning overall, they are sometimes a little tardy in becoming involved. They pay close attention to guidance from their teachers, and work steadily to research, challenge and develop their own ideas. They are able to offer cogent responses to searching questions, are tolerant of different views, and are prepared to modify their opinions in the light of argument and experience. Relationships are very good, and this contributes strongly to good overall progress in lessons.

179. The quality of teaching and learning is consistently good. Teachers have secure professional knowledge, and are enthusiastic in their teaching. They are consistent in their challenge and support. Two very good lessons were seen. In Year 13, students were led into making strong intellectual efforts to incorporate the full range of their understanding of skills and anatomy to carry out a practical analysis of the work of a soccer player. Year 12 students took good advantage of the range of teaching styles offered by their skilful teacher to gain a good understanding of the influence of the modern media on sport. Detailed lesson plans support schemes of work which are well laid out and comprehensive. Classes are always very well managed, and this gives all students many opportunities to develop their skills as independent learners. The detailed marking of work, and assessment and reporting arrangements, provide accurate information on students' performance. Students know how well they are progressing. Careful deployment of staff ensures even coverage across all areas of the curriculum. Resources to support learning are good. Accommodation is good. There are very extensive outdoor areas of all types. Indoor facilities are generous and well cared for.

180. Leadership and management are very good. The department knows how to reach the high standards to which it aspires. Staff communicate clearly and adapt work in progress very well. They have total commitment both to students and to the subject. There is a clear imperative to improve on previous best. There is no reliable way to measure improvement since the last inspection, but this is a clearly improving department, with the capacity to improve further.

BUSINESS

Business studies

Provision in business studies is **satisfactory**.

Main strengths and weaknesses

- Teachers are experienced and have good subject knowledge; they encourage very good teacher-student relationships.
- Lesson planning, content and objectives lack precision, and this can result in a slow pace of learning and poor use of time.
- Strategic planning for the development of business studies lacks a clear focus and direction.

Commentary

181. The school offers a choice of Advanced Vocational (VCE) and A level GCE in business studies. Historically the A level course has proved a popular choice, attracting significant numbers. However, in 2004 just one student took the examination, gaining a

pass grade. The school has begun to turn the situation around and, at AS level in 2004, 13 students entered the examination; over 15 percent gained grades A or B. Results in the Advanced Vocational examinations for 2004 reflect steady improvement over the last three years, although they remain slightly below the national average both at A and B and at A to E grades. Nonetheless, these results reflect a significant improvement on previous years.

182. Overall, standards of work are as expected. Achievement is good and most students reach or exceed their predicted grades. After a slow start in Year 12, A level students develop motivation, maturity and confidence. They also develop well in their subject knowledge, understanding, analytical skills, written presentation, and application of business concepts to decision-making. By Year 13, they show a sound grasp of business theory and practice. Some students achieve well, because those who enter with lower GCSE grades attain better than predicted. By contrast, more able students tend to perform at the predicted range rather than beyond. Students following the Advanced Vocational course do well, and develop especially good research skills that are enhanced by the learning opportunities the school provides to study abroad.

183. Teaching that is always at least satisfactory supports students' learning and achievement well. Teachers' good subject knowledge and experience prepare students especially well in examination techniques for their case-study work on the A level course. Good relationships between students and teachers encourage motivation, and help students to gain confidence. Less strong features of teaching include planning which lacks sufficient precision; the pace is too slow, and opportunities for the development and application of students' analytical skills are lost. As a result, students' potential for learning is not always realised. Nonetheless, students always receive careful support in their coursework through individual feedback. Marking of coursework is accurate, but day-to-day marking of assignments is sometimes a little over-generous. The curriculum is well matched to present students' needs, offering a choice of vocational and academic courses. The school has good links with local business and runs innovative field study courses. Resources are adequate, although there is little visual evidence of business studies displayed in classrooms.

184. Overall, leadership and management are satisfactory. The department is managed efficiently. Strategic development and direction for the subject lack sufficient leadership and sense of purpose. For example, schemes of work tend to reproduce examination board documentation too closely. As a result, they do not show clearly enough how the course is adapted to the school's particular circumstances and provide the best support for students' learning.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND GENERAL PROGRAMMES

No subject in this curriculum area was the focus of the inspection, but personal development activities were sampled.

185. Relatively few students take a course leading to an AS qualification in general studies, and in 2004 results were well below average, with no-one gaining an A or B grade. As part of the school's specialist mathematics and computing college status, all students now follow the Microsoft Academy course designed to improve and accredit their skills in ICT.

186. Students benefit from a very good programme and opportunities for guidance and personal development. An early emphasis on improving students' study skills supports them in making the change from GCSE work to higher levels of independent study.

Citizenship lessons enhance their knowledge of government and administration. For example, in an excellent simulation of *Question Time* designed to improve political awareness, Year 12 students showed good, and sometimes very good, understanding. They had gained this through effective research, and presented their findings very competently. Active and lively debate ensued which involved the year group.

187. There is comprehensive support for students in their application to university, or in preparing to enter employment, and this includes advice from the Connexions service and personal support from form tutors. Representatives from the local business community and universities help prepare students for interviews. Of particular note is the very high regard students have for the direct mentoring support they get from the headteacher and leadership group. Students feel this helps their mentor to get to know them really well and stands them in good stead when they seek references in support of their applications.

188. In addition to these well-structured courses, students take part in activities of benefit to the school or the wider community. The involvement of sixth-form students with those from the rest of the school presents excellent opportunities for their own personal development, and promotes Sixth Form students as excellent role models to pupils. Students also benefit considerably from acting as mentors to younger pupils. As a result of this excellent provision, sixth-form students have a presence around the school which encourages respect and represents a major strength of the school as a whole.

PART D: SUMMARY OF THE MAIN INSPECTION JUDGEMENTS

<i>Inspection judgement</i>	<i>Sixth Form grade</i>	<i>School grade</i>
The overall effectiveness of the Sixth Form and the school	3	3
How inclusive the school is		4
How the school's effectiveness has changed since its last inspection	4	4
Cost effectiveness of the Sixth Form / value for money provided by the school	4	4
Overall standards achieved		3
Pupils' achievement	3	3
Pupils' attitudes, values and other personal qualities		3
Attendance	3	3
Attitudes	3	3
Behaviour, including the extent of exclusions	2	3
Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development		3
The quality of education provided by the school		3
The quality of teaching	3	3
How well pupils learn	3	3
The quality of assessment	3	3
How well the curriculum meets pupils' needs	4	4
Enrichment of the curriculum, including out-of-school activities		3
Accommodation and resources	3	3
Pupils' care, welfare, health and safety		2
Support, advice and guidance for pupils	2	2
How well the school seeks and acts on pupils' views	2	2
The effectiveness of the school's links with parents		3
The quality of the school's links with the community	3	3
The school's links with other schools and colleges	3	3
The leadership and management of the school		4
The governance of the school	5	5
The leadership of the headteacher		3
The leadership of other key staff	3	3
The effectiveness of management	4	4

Inspectors make judgements on a scale: excellent (grade 1); very good (2); good (3); satisfactory (4); unsatisfactory (5); poor (6); very poor (7).