



Birchwood High School

Inspection Report

Unique Reference Number 117549
Local Authority HERTFORDSHIRE
Inspection number 290868
Inspection dates 14–15 December 2006
Reporting inspector Lynne Blakelock

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

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|---|--------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Type of school | Comprehensive | School address | Parsonage Lane |
| School category | Community | | Bishop's Stortford |
| Age range of pupils | 11–18 | | Hertfordshire CM23 5BD |
| Gender of pupils | Mixed | Telephone number | 01279 655936 |
| Number on roll (school) | 1065 | Fax number | 01279 757459 |
| Number on roll (6th form) | 135 | | |
| Appropriate authority | The governing body | Chair | Mr David Nicholas |
| | | Headteacher | Mr Chris Ingate |
| Date of previous school inspection | 10 December 2001 | | |

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|------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
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| 11–18 | 14–15 December 2006 | 290868 |

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by four Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Birchwood High School is an average sized school which is growing and becoming increasingly popular. The sixth form has almost doubled in size over the last four years. It has specialist school status for technology and sport. A major building programme continues to improve the facilities for learning. Students start here with standards that are in line with the national average. Most are from a White British background and speak English as their first language although there are a growing number of students joining the school from Portugal and Eastern European countries. Fewer students than average are eligible for free school meals. A lower than average number has learning difficulties and/or disabilities or a statement of special educational needs. Movement of pupils in and out of the school is above that experienced nationally. The school has been awarded Investors in People, Healthy School status and the British Council's International School award.

Key for inspection grades

| | |
|---------|--------------|
| Grade 1 | Outstanding |
| Grade 2 | Good |
| Grade 3 | Satisfactory |
| Grade 4 | Inadequate |

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

The inspection judges that this is a good school and confirms the school's own evaluation. It has a number of strengths. A parent was correct when she wrote, 'The key to success here is the excellent leadership.' The headteacher's great drive and commitment has transformed the school into one in which the expectations students have of themselves have risen dramatically and learning is valued. It is a school which students, parents and the wider community are increasingly proud of. Senior and middle managers have been empowered to develop systems and skills which have raised standards although there is some inconsistency in practice among middle managers at present which results in good, rather than outstanding, leadership and management. Because of the headteacher's pro-active approach the school has won a second specialist status in sport with bids being thoughtfully worked out to provide maximum benefit for students and the wider community. Significantly the school has taken the lead in joint initiatives with other schools so that learning experiences have been widened. The curriculum has been broadened substantially at Key Stage 4 and post 16 so that learning is increasingly relevant which explains the doubling in numbers over the last four years of students who join the sixth form. Governors are very strong partners of the school because they challenge it so well.

The progress that all students make through the school is good given their starting points. This is facilitated by assessment systems which inform teachers very well about the levels at which students are working. They are attaining above average standard at Key Stage 3. At Key Stage 4 the greatly improved monitoring of students' work is providing strong evidence of an upward trend in standards and progress from the average standards and satisfactory progress achieved in national tests in 2006. Specialist school targets were met. Teaching and learning of students is good across the school. However, there are inconsistencies in the quality of learning which explains the variations in standards from subject to subject. Students are motivated and relish activities which encourage independent learning and allow them to adapt their learning to real situations. The much improved provision for information and communications technology (ICT) is one of the strengths of the curriculum which is good. It provides well for the needs of all learners and promotes the progress of students including those at Key Stage 4 who are offered open access to vocational courses. Students know their targets although marking of their work does not always give them specific enough advice to help them to move on quickly in their learning. Attitudes to learning are good because teachers know their subjects well and sustain positive relationships with students.

Parents agree that this is a happy and welcoming school where students feel safe and protected. Students get off to a flying start because very helpful arrangements enable them to settle into Year 7 and encourage their good attendance. The good care that individual students can rely on from staff and external agencies is matched by academic care and guidance which supports all students in their learning so that more achieve challenging targets. There is a bustle about the school because students are busy, mixing well with other students and involving themselves in numerous activities which

extend their skills to help them in their future life. There is a true community characterised by respect for each other and a readiness to listen to the views of other students. Consequently their personal development is good.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form are good with significant improvement evident from the last inspection. Standards attained in 2006 were broadly average and students made satisfactory progress. The current good progress made by students in Years 12 and 13 is due to more careful tracking of their progress and a good post-16 curriculum which is part of a federation. Students' attitudes are very good and demonstrate their pride in their sixth form. Wide ranging social opportunities foster their confidence and broaden their outlook and this is complemented by appropriate academic expectations. A parent wrote in appreciation of the school's contribution to developing her son into the, 'Great young adult he now is.' Students' ICT skills and participation in sports are enhanced because of the specialist nature of the school. There is no act of collective worship in the sixth form. Leadership and management of the sixth form are good and there is good capacity for ensuring further improvement. Astute financial management is ensuring that the sixth form operates efficiently and provides good value for money.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve the consistency of learning across subjects in order to raise standards.
- Ensure that the advice given to students in their marked work and the level of challenge offered accelerate students learning.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Students, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, are making good progress through the school from their starting points. This is in large part due to far more detailed recording and use of assessment information. Key Stage 3 results are above average and improving, with more students reaching higher levels in science and especially in mathematics. All students met their targets. GCSE results in 2006 were slightly below the national average at higher levels but exceeded targets at other levels. Every student achieved at least one GCSE grade, an improvement from the preceding year. Performance in English was below the national average but the more able attained highly. The school is working successfully with feeder schools to promote standards in writing which are one level lower than in reading when students start here. During the inspection there was clear evidence of an upward trend in standards and progress at Key Stage 4 although there is some variability across subjects due to inconsistencies in the quality of learning. Specialist school targets were met. 'A' level results at the end of Year 13 were broadly average. Progress post 16 is now good in

this open access sixth form because students are on courses which meet their learning needs and career aspirations.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Personal development and well-being, including students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development are good. Students behave well and are considerate towards others. Many Year 11 students are 'buddies' to newly arrived Year 7 students. The care and attention this brings is a great start and builds their confidence considerably; this helps to explain their good attendance. The calm and supportive atmosphere of school, where risks are managed effectively reassures students and makes them feel safe. Respect between staff and students encourage good learning. Students are very aware of the importance of caring for their health and fitness. The high profile of sports has created a positive ethos for them to develop and improve their physical performance and fitness. Many attractive options of healthy foods for snacks and lunch ease students towards sensible diets. In personal, social and health education they gain insights into important life style issues. Many students make significant contributions to the school council and to the community with much fund-raising supporting many good and often local causes.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Teaching and learning are good. Students achieve well and results are improving in those faculties where teaching is consistently good. Inconsistencies in the quality of learning and in the level of challenge in some lessons means that students' progress is not always maximised. Staff create good learning environments in which students are able to develop independent learning skills. They have very positive attitudes to work, and behaviour in lessons is good. Where marking provides diagnostic comments students understand how to improve their work, but some marking lacks detail. Data is used effectively to set students' targets. They know their goals, and are encouraged to assess their own progress. Question and answer sessions are used skilfully by many teachers to extend students' knowledge and understanding. A variety of teaching strategies are employed to engage learners and good subject knowledge ensures effective delivery. Whiteboards are used well in some lessons to stimulate and reinforce learning. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are supported well and make good progress.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The curriculum is good with some outstanding and trailblazing features which are strengthening students' attitudes to learning and responding more to their changing needs. These include provision for ICT which is much improved. At Key Stage 3 students are able to follow a fast track route to sit General Certificates in Secondary Education in two subjects. Open access to an increasingly diverse range of courses at KS4 ensures that all learners can choose a pathway that enables them to make good progress and develop well. The school is part of a consortium with a local college which enables a wide variety of vocational courses to be offered to all students. A good range of trips and extra-curricular activities, well supported by the students, provides additional enrichment. An international dimension in the curriculum supports the development of global awareness. Sport and technology specialist status has extended the learning opportunities within the school and enabled strong partnerships to be forged with the community.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Parents agree that staff make the school welcoming and friendly for all students and this supports their personal and academic development well. Those new to the school are given significant help and settle well. Students benefit from the school's positive atmosphere and are being inspired by its high expectations and drive for improvement. The attention given to their welfare and safety is strong and arrangements for their protection and managing of risks are firmly in place. The able and talented and those with learning difficulties are quickly identified and receive support and encouragement as do students arriving from different countries in Europe. Information from the thorough tracking of students' progress is used effectively to set them challenging targets.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The inspection confirms the school's evaluation that leadership and management are good. Those of the headteacher are outstanding. He is totally driven in his determination to raise standards. He has transformed the culture of the school and students' and parents perceptions of it, aided by a committed and very capable senior leadership team. The headteacher monitors the school's work rigorously. Well thought out strategic planning results in all levels of leadership acquiring the skills and applying the systems that are now moving the school forward. However some inconsistency in

practice and impact exists across subjects and year groups and explains the variation in results from subject to subject. An excellent performance management system bases teachers' targets on priority areas, thus quickening the progress of the school. It is using its specialist status well to increase learning opportunities and a major building programme is improving resources in this ambitious school. Governors are a major strength because they know the school so well and challenge its work very effectively. Financial planning is secure. Improvement since the last inspection is good as is the school's capacity to improve. Value for money is good.

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Inspection judgements

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| <i>Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate</i> | School Overall | 16-19 |
|--|-----------------------|--------------|

Overall effectiveness

| | | |
|--|-----|-----|
| How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners? | 2 | 2 |
| How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being? | 2 | 2 |
| The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation | 2 | 2 |
| The capacity to make any necessary improvements | 2 | 2 |
| Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection | Yes | Yes |

Achievement and standards

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| How well do learners achieve? | 2 | 2 |
| The standards ¹ reached by learners | 3 | 3 |
| How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners | 2 | 2 |
| How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress | 2 | |

Personal development and well-being

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners? | 2 | 2 |
| The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development | 2 | |
| The behaviour of learners | 2 | |
| The attendance of learners | 2 | |
| How well learners enjoy their education | 2 | |
| The extent to which learners adopt safe practices | 2 | |
| The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles | 2 | |
| The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community | 2 | |
| How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being | 2 | |

The quality of provision

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs? | 2 | 2 |
| How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners? | 2 | 2 |
| How well are learners cared for, guided and supported? | 2 | 2 |

¹ Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average to below average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Leadership and management

| | | |
|--|-----|-----|
| How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners? | 2 | 2 |
| How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education | 2 | |
| How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets | 2 | |
| How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can | 2 | |
| How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money | 2 | |
| The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities | 1 | |
| Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements? | Yes | Yes |
| Does this school require special measures? | No | |
| Does this school require a notice to improve? | No | |

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

16 December 2006

Dear Students

Birchwood High School, Parsonage Lane, Bishop's Stortford, Hertfordshire CM23 5BD

Thank you for all the help you gave us when we inspected your school recently. We enjoyed our visit very much. We were pleased to be able to talk to you and hear from you about the many things that make you proud of your school. You know that your parents are increasingly pleased with the improvements that the school is making.

Birchwood High is a good school. You have an outstanding headteacher and a strong senior leadership team. You are making good progress in your learning because of the improvements they are making. You show positive attitudes to learning as shown by your good attendance and this helps your teachers who are trying hard to ensure you get the best results that you can. You behave well and your relationships with each other and with your teachers are good. Older students are delighted with the much wider range of courses available at Key Stage 4 and post 16. We saw great work in the hairdressing salon! The school's Sport and Technology College status is improving the school for you and providing you with a wide range of activities that many of you take up in and out of school time. We know that you enjoy visits because they are over-subscribed.

To make your school even better, we have asked Mr Ingate and the teachers to make sure that your learning in all subjects is always equally good. This will mean that the standards that you attain will rise further. It is also important that the tasks you are given are at the right level so that you can learn as fast as you can, and that all marking of your work always tells you very clearly how you can make more progress.

On behalf of the inspection team, I wish you all the best for the future.

Lynne Blakelock

Lead Inspector