

The Priory School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117499
Local Authority	HERTFORDSHIRE LA
Inspection number	312635
Inspection dates	13–14 March 2008
Reporting inspector	Robert Drew

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

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	900
6th form	115
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Charles Lacey
Headteacher	Mr Peter Loach
Date of previous school inspection	9 February 2004
School address	Bedford Road Hitchin Hertfordshire SG5 2UR
Telephone number	01462 622300
Fax number	01462 622301

Age group	11-19
Inspection dates	13–14 March 2008
Inspection number	312635

© Crown copyright 2008

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Further copies of this report are obtainable from the school. Under the Education Act 2005, the school must provide a copy of this report free of charge to certain categories of people. A charge not exceeding the full cost of reproduction may be made for any other copies supplied.

Introduction

The inspection was carried out by four Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

The school is set in north Hitchin, serving the town itself and some of the area beyond. The main school is average in size for a secondary school and has a small but expanding sixth form. Most students are White British while about 20% come from minority ethnic groups. Attainment on entry is a little below average, but rising. About 20% of students have learning difficulties. The school gained specialist status in 2005 as a Business and Enterprise College.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

This is a good school. It is improving noticeably. Some aspects are already outstanding, such as the school's curriculum and its links with the community. Both these demonstrate the impressive impact of specialist status as a Business and Enterprise School. Leadership and management are good, leading to improvements on several fronts. Attainment has risen from a low base several years ago to match national levels and continues to rise. Achievement is now good. The curriculum has been changed radically for the better. Teaching quality is good. These beneficial changes indicate that the school has a good capacity to improve.

Self-evaluation is effective. It has prompted improvement and confirmed that, in some areas, more remains to be done. Attainment has risen to match national levels through a combination of factors. For instance, some of the steep rise in GCSE results in 2007 reflected the first examination of new and highly motivating courses started two years earlier. Fresh approaches to monitoring by senior staff have helped to make judgements about teaching more reliable. Effective action has followed this analysis. Tracking students' progress has acquired much more rigour and led to earlier remedial action for underperforming individuals or groups. Pupils who find learning more difficult now make good progress. The school is aware that attainment has only recently come to match national average standards. Given the improved attitudes of students and rising quality of teaching, scope exists for exceeding national attainment levels by a clear margin. Rises have been strong in some subjects, with more modest improvements in English and mathematics.

Teaching and learning are good overall. Instances of outstanding practice exist and inadequate teaching has been eliminated. Typically, lessons are well structured, relationships are good and students keen to progress. Varied tasks allow students of differing abilities to get on well. In the very best lessons, the pace is excellent. In a few, it is only adequate. Teachers generally try to build on students' previous attainment, but in Key Stage 3 the quality of marking and use of assessment lack consistency.

The curriculum has developed to the point where it offers an excellent match to the needs of students. There are traditional academic courses, more practical or vocational courses and numerous programmes to build up key skills. Together these provide excellent routes for all student groups, meeting their needs as well as encouraging positive attitudes to school and study. In addition, extra-curricular provision is excellent and the school enriches all areas of the curriculum through its highly developed business links. The sixth form's consortium arrangements are extremely effective, offering breadth and quality through cooperation with partners in the area. The curriculum's impact on students' attainment is excellent. It has also led a great many parents towards active involvement in school life and regular use of its facilities.

Personal development is good. Students behave well, are mature and show strong respect for each other and for staff and visitors. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. Attendance has risen to satisfactory levels. Students show they have responded well to guidance on personal safety and on healthy lifestyles and they are keen to contribute to the school and wider community. They are particularly good at mentoring students in Years 7 and 8 and at raising money for charities. While basic literacy and numeracy skills offer satisfactory preparation for economic well-being, outstanding links with businesses give students an excellent awareness of the world of work. This good personal development stems from very effective care guidance and support. Good systems are used to promote well-being. All statutory safe-guarding

requirements are met and staff provide good role models. Tracking of academic progress has improved and is now good.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The sixth form is good and meets the needs of students well. Business and enterprise activities are motivating an increasing number of students to enter the sixth form and are enriching learning well. The curriculum is outstanding. Students follow one of three routes, each providing a different balance of GCE and vocational courses. Some courses are offered within a consortium of local schools. Attainment has improved since the last inspection and is now average. This indicates that progress is good because students generally enter the sixth form with lower than average attainment. The quality of teaching and learning is good and sometimes outstanding. Most lessons are challenging and give good opportunities for students to work independently. Students mature well and some undertake significant responsibilities within the school. Most enjoy their education. Whilst a few students leave after taking one-year courses, the retention rate is very good. Extra-curricular activities are outstanding and well attended. The head of the sixth form and senior staff provide good leadership and capacity to improve. The sixth form is managed well on a day-to-day basis and offers good value for money.

What the school should do to improve further

- Strengthen the momentum of rising standards, focussing especially on English and mathematics, so that overall attainment clearly exceeds national averages.
- Ensure marking and assessment in Key Stage 3 give a consistently accurate picture to students of current standards and how to improve

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Achievement is good at each key stage. For some years students have made good progress in Key Stage 3 and this now continues into Years 10 and 11. While broadly average, attainment amongst current Year 9 and 11 students is considerably higher than at this stage last year. This rising trend in attainment reflects the impact of several well-grounded improvements. The school has radically improved the curriculum, giving better access to courses students enjoy and in which they perform well. Their motivation, attendance and will to succeed have all risen as a result. Teaching is more effective and tracking of progress more frequent. A growing number of support programmes are now in place to counteract early on any signs of underperformance. Other factors have helped behaviour improve to the point where it is now good, so that students come to lessons attentive and positive. Key Stage 4 standards are rising particularly well in several subjects. In English and mathematics there are signs of improvement in both key stages, though these have yet to translate fully into test and examination results. Students with learning difficulties make good progress.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Students' personal development and well-being are good. Students' enjoyment of school is reflected in their gradually improving attendance, which is now satisfactory. Students appreciate the way their teachers care for them and give freely of their time to help them. They show respect and consideration for others. These attitudes are strengthened by the outstanding curriculum and extra activities and the considerable improvements that have been made to the facilities and resources. Behaviour in lessons and around school is good overall, though a few lessons are disturbed by petty disruption. The number of students excluded has fallen, partly because vulnerable students feel well served by the curriculum and the learning support they receive. If bullying occurs, students know to whom they can turn for help. Students enjoy the school's healthy, appetising food. They contribute well to the school, whether through the many responsibilities open to them, their extensive charity work, or the numerous activities that relate to specialist status. Such involvement and, above all, their sociable and considerate attitudes, help to create the school's good community spirit and ethos. Because of the school's emphasis on enterprise and teamwork, the students develop strong workplace skills, though their literacy and numeracy skills are not as well developed. Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The quality of teaching and learning is good. Teachers are well qualified and have good relationships with students. Most teachers are enthusiastic, motivate students well and use a good range of teaching methods. An emphasis on literacy and numeracy and the use of the national guidance in the core subjects and information and communication technology (ICT) have improved learning. In the great majority of lessons, behaviour is very good and students arrive keen to learn and contribute constructively. Occasionally the pace and involvement are exceptional, leading to outstanding teaching and learning. Most lessons are planned well, but in a small number the range of work provided is insufficient to challenge students of different abilities equally. In such cases, the pace can be slow and in a minority of lessons students become inattentive. Students with learning difficulties are taught well and teaching assistants are effective in lessons. Assessment in Years 7 to 9 does help students progress, but it is variable in quality and accuracy. Marking is also less consistent than it should be in showing students how to improve.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The curriculum serves the needs of all the students to an outstanding degree. Four learning routes at Key Stage 4 and three at sixth form level offer them a wide choice and clear progression, with an imaginative variety of courses both academic and vocational. The school

provides well for students who are gifted and talented or who need extra learning support. As leader of the North Hitchin Extended Schools' Consortium, the school serves the wider local community in a variety of very productive ways, such as with parenting and literacy classes for adults. So too the school's specialist status for business and enterprise creates, by the numerous links with businesses, a host of opportunities for its students to develop the necessary skills for economic well-being. Specialist status has greatly increased the provision of ICT resources, which benefit students' learning and attitudes. Extra-curricular opportunities abound and foster students' personal development and their relationships with teachers. Citizenship and a well-planned programme of assemblies contribute well to the students' moral and all-round education.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The quality of care provided for the main school and the sixth form is good. All requirements for child protection and safe-guarding are in place and suitable risk assessments are undertaken. Students are well known, monitored and supported in pastoral and academic matters. Students feel safe and have good relationships with the staff. Although some students would welcome a greater say in school affairs their views are listened to and they can quote examples of where their suggestions to the 'student voice' have been acted upon, such as the renovation of the toilets and the provision of healthy food in the cafe.

The combination of pastoral care and academic intervention gives focused support to assist students in raising their levels of achievement. Vulnerable students and those with learning difficulties are well supported and monitored so that they achieve as well as the other students. Good guidance is given on option choices with an outstanding curriculum to meet the needs of individual students.

The parents are overwhelmingly positive about the school and feel that their children are very well cared for.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Leadership and management in the main school and in the sixth form are good. The headteacher is leading the school well. He has built up a high quality senior team. With them, he is equipping the staff to fulfil a clear vision of how to move the school forward and raise standards; and he is not afraid to make any necessary difficult decisions. Governance is good. Governors are supportive, have a clear understanding of the strengths of the school and are increasingly prepared to challenge. Performance is monitored and evaluated well by managers at all levels to set suitable targets for improvement. Equality of opportunity for all pupils is actively and successfully promoted, so that all pupils are respected and given opportunities to achieve well. Finances are well managed and resources are used efficiently and effectively to secure good value for money. The school's self-evaluation is good. It has already shown its effectiveness in raising standards and has accurately identified areas for development.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaints about school inspection', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Annex A

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	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
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	1	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2

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 extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
How well learners enjoy their education	2	
The attendance of learners	3	
The behaviour of learners	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?	1	1
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.

Annex A

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 leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	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	2	
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

17 March 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of The Priory School, Hitchin, Hertfordshire, SG5 2UR

Thank you for the mature and pleasant welcome you gave us during last weeks' inspection. We are especially grateful to those who gave up part of their lunch-time to talk with us.

Like you and your parents, we believe you are in a good school. There are many strengths.

- You make good progress.
- Levels of attainment are rising.
- Teaching is good.
- The school is well led and managed.
- Your behaviour is good and your attitudes are very positive.
- Links between the school and local businesses are excellent.
- The school provides an excellent range of courses and after-school activities.

If the school is to continue to improve, it needs to:

- raise standards further, especially in English and mathematics
- make sure that marking and assessment in Years 7 and 8 consistently show you how you are doing and how to improve.

Best wishes for the rest of your time at the The Priory School.

Yours sincerely

Robert Drew

Lead inspector