

# St Albans Girls' School

## Inspection report

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<b>Unique Reference Number</b>	117524
<b>Local Authority</b>	HERTFORDSHIRE LA
<b>Inspection number</b>	312642
<b>Inspection dates</b>	6–7 February 2008
<b>Reporting inspector</b>	David Knighton HMI

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

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<b>Type of school</b>	Secondary
<b>School category</b>	Community
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	11–18
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Girls
<b>Number on roll</b>	
School	1165
6th form	272
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	The governing body
<b>Chair</b>	Mrs Claire Barnard
<b>Headteacher</b>	Mrs Christine Murrell
<b>Date of previous school inspection</b>	19 January 2004
<b>School address</b>	Sandridgebury Lane St Albans Hertfordshire AL3 6DB
<b>Telephone number</b>	01727 853134
<b>Fax number</b>	01727 831157

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## Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four Additional Inspectors.

## Description of the school

St Albans Girls' School is an average sized comprehensive school, serving a prosperous area of south Hertfordshire. Its intake is comprehensive, but includes a significantly higher than average proportion of more able students. About a fifth of students are from a range of minority ethnic backgrounds. The proportion of students whose first language is not English is higher than the national average. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and disabilities, including those with a statement of special educational need, has increased over the last few years, but is still low compared with other schools. The school has been a specialist business and enterprise college since 2003. It works collaboratively with several other schools and colleges in the area to share some post-16 courses.

## Key for inspection grades

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

## Overall effectiveness of the school

### Grade: 2

St Albans Girls' is a good school with a number of outstanding features. It combines a strong academic ethos with a very inclusive approach, which meets the needs of the full range of its students well. The very large majority of students who enjoy being in the school, are highly motivated, appreciate what is provided for them, and demonstrate a clear sense of pride and achievement in what they are doing.

Almost half of parents expressed their views in the inspection questionnaire, indicating their high level of interest and involvement in the school. The large majority of these responses were entirely positive, with many expressing their appreciation for what the school provides. A number of individual concerns were raised about areas such as behaviour and communications with parents; the inspection did not find any evidence to suggest that these were widespread or significant issues.

Standards are high and the achievement of all groups of students is good. Some students are extremely successful academically. Overall progress made by students from Years 7 to 11 is good, though the school is aware that progress in Key Stage 3 has been better than that in Key Stage 4 in recent years. The possible causes for this have been analysed, and appropriate action has been taken to improve performance in Key Stage 4, by reducing the total GCSE workload for students who are felt to be under particular pressure, and by tailoring examined information and communication technology (ICT) courses more closely to the needs of different students. Teaching is mostly good, and the curriculum is being developed gradually to widen the opportunities available to students. Major staff turnover and difficulties in recruitment in key areas during the last year caused concern to the school and to parents, but they were managed as well as possible in the circumstances, and most, though not all, problems have now been resolved. A good system for setting and monitoring targets for students is in place; this is effective in identifying possible underachievement at an early stage, but is not used fully in all subjects to inform the actions needed to improve achievement.

The personal development and well-being of students are outstanding. This is a consequence of the high quality care, guidance and support provided by the school and the students' motivation and aspirations. Behaviour in lessons is very good and around the school it is consistently good. Reports of bullying have been followed up carefully and students are confident of receiving the necessary help to sort out problems. Sixth form students are particularly pro-active and effective in providing support for younger girls. There is a very strong sense of community and racial harmony within the school.

The school's specialist business and enterprise status has benefited students through a range of enterprise activities, which develop leadership and team-building skills and provide contacts with the world of work. It has strengthened wider community links, including support for parents from minority ethnic backgrounds. It has considerably expanded the ICT facilities in the school, though the use of ICT to enhance teaching and learning is underdeveloped in some areas of the school. Despite its impact on many aspects of the life of the school, the business and enterprise status is not immediately obvious around the school.

The school is well led and managed. Managers have a clear and accurate view of its strengths and of those areas needing improvement. Suitable actions have been put in place to effect improvement. Areas for improvement identified in the last inspection report have been successfully addressed. Governors provide strong and active support to the school and are

highly effective in holding it to account. Resources are deployed effectively, and the school provides good value for money.

## **Effectiveness of the sixth form**

### **Grade: 2**

The school has an effective sixth form, the success of which is a result of good teaching and very high quality care, guidance and support. Overall achievement in the sixth form is good, with most students achieving the results expected of them, and progressing successfully to higher education. The individualised help and encouragement received by all students ensures that the proportion completing their courses is very high. The school works well within the Alban consortium in order to ensure that its students are able to study their chosen subjects. The sixth form curriculum is constantly evaluated in order to ensure that it matches the needs of the ever changing student population.

Sixth form leaders and managers have a clear vision and a commitment to continual improvement. Sixth form students really value the pastoral and academic mentoring they receive, which ensures that they know their targets and know how to improve them.

Across all parts of the school students take on a very wide range of responsibilities. They operate a 'HEAR4U' programme which provides an effective listening and support service for younger students; they help with reading clubs, run charity events and contribute to the local community through the varied Year 12 enrichment programme. The majority of sixth formers mentor and help younger students, both in and out of the classroom. As well as chairing the school councils, senior students meet regularly with the headteacher and senior leadership team to help with the daily running of the school. Sixth formers are excellent ambassadors for the school and develop a great sense of pride. As a Year 13 student exclaimed: 'Our sixth form is amazing.'

## **What the school should do to improve further**

- Consistently use the outcomes from monitoring students' attainment to inform the actions needed to improve their progress.
- Develop the use of ICT in teaching and learning across the curriculum.

## **Achievement and standards**

### **Grade: 2**

#### **Grade for sixth form: 2**

Standards have been consistently high in recent years across the age range in the school. Results in Key Stage 3 tests, in GCSEs and in AS and A-level examinations have all significantly exceeded national averages.

Overall progress made by students in the main school is good. This has been evident in recent examination performance and in the work observed during the inspection. Attainment of students on entry to the school is well above average, and good progress results in even higher attainment at age 16. Progress is particularly strong in English and mathematics. However, in the last few years progress in Key Stage 3 has been markedly better than that in Key Stage 4. Recent school targets at GCSE, including those associated with specialist status, and particularly in ICT, have not all been met, but this is due, at least in part, to the very demanding level at which they have been set.

Students enter the sixth form with relatively high levels of attainment. A very high proportion complete their courses. They make good progress overall, so that most achieve the good, and often outstanding, AS and A-level results expected of them. A large majority of students progress from the sixth form to higher education.

## **Personal development and well-being**

**Grade: 1**

**Grade for sixth form: 1**

Students' personal development is outstanding. They are enthusiastic about their school and can think of very little they would change. Attendance is good, reflecting students' attitudes and the strong support of parents. Behaviour is very good in lessons and good around the school. Students have a mature and meticulous approach to learning. They are confident, courteous and friendly to others.

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is excellent. There are many opportunities for them to think about ideas, actions and their consequences, stimulated, for example, by the many visitors to assemblies. Students are tolerant and compassionate and the school raises substantial sums for charity. There is a very strong sense of community, promoted through the house system and the Eco and school councils. The house system is excellent: one student said, 'It gives us a great sense of belonging and camaraderie.' Music and art feature strongly in the life of the school and students have good opportunities to learn about other cultures.

Students gladly take responsibility and work well with others. Many students gain confidence and new skills through involvement in the outstanding extra-curricular activities. The development of healthy lifestyles is very good and the school prepares students extremely well for later life. Community links are outstanding.

## **Quality of provision**

### **Teaching and learning**

**Grade: 2**

**Grade for sixth form: 2**

Inspectors' observations confirmed the accuracy of the school's own assessment, that the overall quality of teaching and learning is good in the main school and sixth form. Teachers are well qualified and their subject knowledge is good. The management of behaviour in lessons is effective. Relationships are always good and nearly all students have a very positive attitude to their work. In most lessons, teachers' enthusiasm and challenge motivate students well. In a small number of lessons the pace of learning is too slow and too firmly controlled by the teacher; in these lessons there are insufficient opportunities for students to work independently. The use of ICT to support teaching and learning is generally underdeveloped. Students with learning difficulties and disabilities are taught well. Students' work is assessed regularly and challenging targets set. Assessments are recorded and monitored well both in subject areas and centrally; they form the basis of good reports to parents, but are not used fully in all subjects to identify actions needed to improve achievement. Homework is regularly set and marked.

## **Curriculum and other activities**

**Grade: 2**

**Grade for sixth form: 2**

The curriculum is good and meets the needs and interests of students. In Years 7 to 9, the curriculum provides a good basis for future study, and all students follow a business element in their ICT programme. Teaching students in sets in Years 8 and 9 helps them to progress at an appropriate rate. In Year 10, an innovative curriculum has been introduced to enable students to follow more personal learning programmes at different levels. A small number of students, including some with learning difficulties and disabilities, follow a purposeful work-related programme containing an appropriate range of academic and vocational courses. The self-confidence of all students is enhanced by work experience and activities involving team building, enterprise and the development of financial skills. A wide and flexible range of academic courses is offered in the sixth form, some of them provided through the local post-16 consortium. The school is working with other local providers to extend the range of vocational subjects offered. An outstanding range of extra-curricular activities is provided. Students particularly enjoy taking part in numerous drama and musical productions, field trips and visits to the theatre and art galleries.

## **Care, guidance and support**

**Grade: 1**

**Grade for sixth form: 1**

Students are cared for very well. Parents and students are confident that they are safe. The school fulfils all requirements for health and safety and has very good provision for students with specific medical or personal needs. Risk assessments and health and safety procedures are effective and consistently applied. Child protection procedures are clear and widely understood.

The excellent pastoral system gives outstanding support to students. Its many strands, especially the exemplary careers service, the tutorial and house systems and the personal, social, health and careers education course, are all carefully organised and monitored.

Students with learning difficulties and disabilities are very well supported, as are those with English as a second language and gifted and talented students. Attendance is rigorously monitored.

Academic guidance in the sixth form is excellent. In the main school, there are effective systems in place for tracking the progress of students. Students know how well they are performing and what they should do to improve.

## **Leadership and management**

**Grade: 2**

**Grade for sixth form: 2**

The headteacher and senior leadership team have established a clear sense of purpose and direction, which is understood and shared by staff and governors.

Performance is monitored carefully and effectively by senior and middle managers. Heads of faculties and departments are clear about their prime responsibility for raising standards in their areas of responsibility. The quality of departmental review and evaluation is good. The school's self-evaluation form is well balanced and appropriately self-critical; the inspection confirms its accuracy. All staff contribute through department and faculty self-assessment reports. Managers at all levels have a good awareness of strengths and areas for improvement in their areas of responsibility. Priorities for improvement are identified and suitable actions put in place to address them. For recent measures, such as reducing the total GCSE burden for some students, and implementing a mentoring system for students at danger of underachieving, there is some early evidence of positive impact. Recent appropriate changes to the senior management structure have been instituted to support identified improvement priorities.

Resources are deployed efficiently and used effectively. Well focused staff development initiatives have been used to support improvements in teaching and learning. The effectiveness of spending is carefully monitored, and information regularly reported to governors. The school provides good value for money. The school has outstanding links with external agencies, with local employers and other schools.

The governing body is highly effective in holding the school to account, in monitoring its progress and in acting as a critical friend. The school benefits from its considerable expertise in management, finance and legal matters. Governors are very aware of issues in the school, both from comprehensive reports received from the headteacher and from their own regular visits. They are actively involved in promoting improvement.



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## 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
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### 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 <sup>1</sup> reached by learners	1	1
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	2

### Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1	
How well learners enjoy their education	1	
The attendance of learners	2	
The behaviour of learners	2	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1	

### 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?	1	1

<sup>1</sup> 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**

<b>How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?</b>	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	1	
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

27 February 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of St Albans Girls' School, St Albans AL3 6DB

As you know, my colleagues and I recently inspected your school, and this letter is to tell you about the results of the inspection. But first, I would like to thank you all for your cooperation. We appreciated talking to you, and hearing your views about your work and about all the activities in which you are involved.

St Albans Girls' is a good school, and most of you are rightly proud of it. It helps you to develop well academically and socially. Examination results are very good, and you make good progress. This is because of the good teaching and the outstanding support that you receive. You enjoy your lessons and you are usually challenged to learn as much as possible; in a few lessons we think that you could be encouraged to think more for yourselves.

We were impressed by your enthusiasm, your confidence and your courtesy. You benefit from the many activities outside lessons in which you are involved, the responsibilities you are given, and the opportunities that you have to contribute to the school and to the wider community through, for example the house system and the school councils. Some concerns were raised about occasional bullying, but you told us that you can always find someone to help if this happens.

We identified two ways in which the school could improve even more. The school has a good system for setting you targets, and for checking whether these are achieved. We feel that more use could be made of this information to help you make even faster progress. Also, we feel that more use could be made of ICT in lessons across the curriculum.

The staff and governors have worked hard to make St Albans Girls' a successful school, and we are confident that it will improve even further. We wish you well for the future.

Yours sincerely

David Knighton

Her Majesty's Inspector