

# Verulam School

## Inspection report

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<b>Unique Reference Number</b>	117505
<b>Local Authority</b>	Hertfordshire
<b>Inspection number</b>	326630
<b>Inspection dates</b>	3–4 December 2008
<b>Reporting inspector</b>	Mark Phillips 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>	Comprehensive
<b>School category</b>	Community
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	11–18
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Boys
<b>Number on roll</b>	
School (total)	1030
Sixth form	195
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	The governing body
<b>Chair</b>	Mr Simon Gwynn
<b>Headteacher</b>	Mr David Kellaway
<b>Date of previous school inspection</b>	11 January 2006
<b>School address</b>	Brampton Road St. Albans Hertfordshire AL1 4PR
<b>Telephone number</b>	01727 766100
<b>Fax number</b>	01727 766256

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## Introduction

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

## Description of the school

Verulam is a boys' comprehensive school situated in the Clarence ward of St Albans. Students come from fifty different primary schools. It is larger than average for a secondary school, but with a sixth form that is part of a consortium with Sandringham and Beaumont, two other St Albans schools. A small proportion of girls join the school for their sixth form education. Separate inspection teams coordinated by HMI inspected all three schools and their respective sixth forms simultaneously.

The majority of students come from homes across St Albans, where there is a much higher incidence of economic advantage and adults with higher education experience than is the case nationally. Other students come from further afield. The number of students known to be eligible for free school meals is well below the national average. The number of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is slightly higher than average, but most students have English as their first language. The proportion of students with a statement of special educational need is about half the national average. The number of students judged by the school to require additional support, mostly for behavioural and emotional difficulties, has increased recently but is still below the national average.

Verulam School was re-designated as a Technology College in April 2008, with mathematics, science and technology as specialist subjects. The school was designated as a High Performing Specialist School in 2007 and was subsequently awarded a second specialism in modern foreign languages. Verulam holds the International Schools award and Sportsmark, and was re-awarded Investors in People status in 2007.

## Key for inspection grades

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

## Overall effectiveness of the school

### Grade: 3

Verulam School provides a satisfactory standard of education and care. Students achieve above average standards in their Year 9 tests and GCSE exams. However, when they arrive in Year 7 they have already attained above average results in their primary schools, so their progress is satisfactory. They make their best progress in English and in the specialist technology subjects. Standards in science are generally above average. However, progress in mathematics is just satisfactory and this is an important area for improvement.

The curriculum is satisfactory overall, enriched by a very good and much enjoyed range of extra-curricular activities. The quality of teaching and learning is also satisfactory. Teachers have good subject knowledge and plan lessons efficiently. Too often, though, lessons concentrate on teachers feeding information to their classes. As a result, not enough time is given for discussion or for students to apply and test out their learning. Whilst this helps students prepare effectively for examinations, it is less beneficial to their wider development, including the study skills needed for successful sixth form study. As a student said, 'it's much better when teachers talk with you, rather than at you'. Students make satisfactory progress in their personal development. Their attendance is above average. The majority behave appropriately, and often very well. However, students and parents told inspectors that, when they experience less effective teaching, the behaviour of a minority deteriorates. Academic guidance is satisfactory; students are set targets and their progress monitored, but students are not informed well enough about their progress and the quality of teachers' marking is inconsistent. The school has International Status, and has made good efforts to build links with local faith communities. However, these are not fully reflected in students' spiritual and cultural understanding, which is only satisfactory. This impacts on the school's contribution to community cohesion, which is also satisfactory.

Whilst the majority of parents who contacted inspectors were satisfied with most aspects of the school's provision, a small minority expressed concerns, including about leadership. Overall, leadership and management is sufficient enough to ensure that students make satisfactory progress. There are some particularly able senior and middle managers, including those leading the most successful areas of the school. However, not enough is made of their expertise to help all subjects make good or outstanding progress. The school has taken effective steps to secure improvements in some important areas since the last inspection, for example in reducing the number of exclusions, in raising attendance, and in bringing about much-needed improvements to the learning environment. There have been some staffing difficulties, often necessitating temporary appointments, which have held back other improvements in the school's performance. However, whilst self-evaluation, led by the headteacher, recognises most of the school's strengths and weaknesses it is not urgent or incisive enough to help students make any better than satisfactory progress. The recently appointed Chair of Governors, himself a parent at the school, recognises that whilst the governing body carries out its statutory requirements efficiently, it has a bigger part to play in raising the school's ambitions for its students. He is challenging the school rigorously, and he is determined that it will live up to its development plan and raise performance 'from good to excellent'. As it stands, however, the school is showing only satisfactory capacity for future improvement.

## Effectiveness of the sixth form

### Grade: 3

Students achieve broadly average standards in their A Level examinations. This represents satisfactory achievement because when they join the sixth form their standards are in line with those of students nationally. Some subjects such as mathematics and English literature do well, but equally there are subjects such as computing, business studies and art where progress is slower. The proportion of students completing their studies is good and students enjoy their time in the sixth form. They make good progress in their personal development, including mentoring and guiding younger students. Consortium partnerships with two other local schools provide students with access to a wide range of courses, including the International Baccalaureate, and this curriculum meets students' needs well. Plans are in place to extend provision further, including more vocational courses to help even more boys benefit from sixth form education. Regular termly reviews help students to focus on how to improve their progress. Teaching is satisfactory in the sixth form. There is good practice, but it also varies too much in quality between departments and this is a key reason for the considerable differences in achievement between subjects. As a result of limitations in their independent learning and study skills, some students found the change from GCSE to AS Level difficult last year, leading to too many fail grades in Year 12 examinations. Day-to-day management of the sixth form at Verulam is effective. However, systems for monitoring and improving sixth form performance at the school lack coherence. As in the main school, there is not a sharp enough focus on the sixth form's strengths and weaknesses. In particular, there needs to be more consideration of the inconsistencies in performance between subjects.

### What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that the headteacher and senior leadership provide more effective monitoring and direction leading to consistently good and outstanding progress in students' academic and personal development.
- Ensure that the best middle leaders are able to share their practice effectively throughout the school, leading to greater consistency across all subjects.
- Raise achievement in mathematics to match the exceptionally high standards reached in English.
- Ensure that all teaching focuses firmly on the development of students' independent learning and the quality of their active participation in lessons.

A small proportion of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

## Achievement and standards

### Grade: 3

Standards are above average. In 2008, just over two-thirds of all Year 11 students gained five good GCSEs, and some six in every ten gained five good GCSEs including English and mathematics. However, this is no more than they should have achieved. Overall, their progress was satisfactory. Work seen in lessons during the inspection supported the school's view that current students are also making satisfactory progress. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities also make satisfactory progress.

One of the best performing subject areas is English. In both English language and English literature, boys consistently make very good progress. In contrast, their performance in mathematics remains only satisfactory, partly because not enough boys gain the highest grades. Whilst good numbers of boys gain two or three passes in science subjects, the proportion achieving the highest grades should also be higher. In 2008, there was some notably good performance in French and design technology, two of the school's specialist subjects. However, there were other subjects where progress was disappointing, including computer studies, geography and history. This inconsistency in performance across the school is an important reason why overall progress is only satisfactory. It is also why, although it met its challenging targets in technology this year, the school did not meet its other targets.

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

### **Grade: 3**

After a fall in 2007, attendance has improved and is now above average. The number of persistent absentees is smaller than in similar schools. Students socialise well with each other and adults. Spiritual development is satisfactory, although opportunities are missed for students to be more reflective, both in tutor periods and through discussions in lessons. Students know how to keep themselves healthy and safe, demonstrating a particularly good attitude to healthy life styles. Many are involved in and greatly enjoy sporting activities. The school provides a good range of healthy food and most students appreciate this. The new personal learning course, food technology and physical education programmes all contribute towards their understanding of healthy lifestyles. Overall, behaviour is satisfactory. However, for some, especially younger students, the narrow corridors and playgrounds can feel intimidating at break-times and between lessons. This is a concern for a small number of parents. Students' community involvement is also satisfactory. The school has worked positively to engage with community groups, and there is a school council. However, only a small proportion of students are involved and some remain unappreciative of the rich diversity in their local and national communities. Students prepare well for their future lives through work placements and their excellent literacy skills, but their progress in numeracy and ICT skills is only satisfactory.

## **Quality of provision**

### **Teaching and learning**

#### **Grade: 3**

Teaching is satisfactory, enabling students to make the progress expected of them. The majority of lessons are characterised by good teacher subject knowledge, with clear lesson organisation and routines that are understood, accepted, and followed by students. In the best lessons, teachers' good use of assessment helps them plan tasks that are exciting and challenging, and students develop skills and knowledge at a fast rate. In these lessons, which are enjoyed most by students, they develop the independent learning skills that are so important to their future studies and working lives. However, there are too many lessons centred on teacher-presentation where students are dependent on the information fed to them by teachers, rather than them having space and time to enquire, investigate, and respond creatively. In these lessons, teachers often work much harder than students do. The whole class works at the same speed and whilst this ensures that the teacher covers a good amount, it does not ensure that every student is secure in his learning. The school's observations of teaching and learning acknowledge these inconsistencies, confirmed by visits to classrooms made jointly by inspectors and senior staff.

## **Curriculum and other activities**

### **Grade: 3**

In Key Stage 3, there have been revisions to the curriculum appropriate to the latest national curriculum requirements. In Key Stage 4 there are four pathways that offer routes and qualifications to meet the needs of most students. There is a good range of GCSE courses and the school has advanced plans to increase its range of vocational courses with the new diplomas in September 2009. The newly introduced BTech Sport is proving particularly popular. However, there are weaknesses in citizenship education in Years 10 and 11, which does not meet the requirements for assessment and reporting. Provision for literacy education is good. However, it is only satisfactory for numeracy, as it is for information and communication technology (ICT). Upgrades and improvements to the ICT systems have been made since the last inspection, but there are still problems that have disrupted the completion of some coursework.

A good range of clubs, societies and sports opportunities beyond the normal school day includes the Swing Band, a highly successful Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme, and many trips and visits both at home and abroad. These are well supported and highly valued by students, who are appreciative of the generous time and effort that teachers give to these activities.

## **Care, guidance and support**

### **Grade: 3**

Arrangements for safeguarding students are firmly in place. The school has introduced new systems for rewarding and encouraging students. Along with the good work of the year managers, these make a significant contribution towards improved attendance. Whilst the number of exclusions reduced last year, it is still above the national average. However, students are rarely excluded more than once, which shows that exclusion is used effectively. Support for different groups of learners, such as those who find learning harder than most, results in their satisfactory progress. The school is developing links with external agencies to better support in the needs of students whose first language is not English, who also make satisfactory progress.

Academic guidance is satisfactory. Sound careers guidance and advice for higher education pathways are in place. However, the extent to which learners are informed about their progress in school is not effective enough. There are examples of good practice in marking and assessment but there is a lack of consistency across the whole school and, in too many cases, work is not marked frequently enough or in sufficient detail.

## **Leadership and management**

### **Grade: 3**

The quality of leadership and management is sufficient to enable students' satisfactory progress in their academic work and personal development. The whole-school self-evaluation, undertaken by the headteacher in consultation with his senior team, is just satisfactory. Whilst it recognises most of the school's main strengths and weaknesses, it is not sharp enough to improve the school from its current state. Key to future improvement is ensuring that the school's senior leadership provides clearer vision and ambition to move the school beyond satisfactory performance. There is some good leadership amongst middle managers. and, in some departments, very good results have been achieved because of subject leaders' determination

to improve students' standards and achievement. Some of these have been given wider responsibilities to share their experience and good practice and bring greater consistency to middle leadership. Reorganisation has enabled the creation of 'Teamwork Tuesdays', when teachers meet to focus on school improvement and a new staff leadership and learning centre is promoting professional development. However, the full impact of this work has yet to be seen on improved standards.

Governance is satisfactory. Appropriate policies are in place to promote equal access and opportunities for all groups of students, and these policies are monitored regularly. Value for money is satisfactory.



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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	<b>School Overall</b>	<b>16-19</b>
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**Overall effectiveness**

<b>How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?</b>	3	3
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?	3	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	3	3

**Achievement and standards**

<b>How well do learners achieve?</b>	3	3
The standards <sup>1</sup> reached by learners	2	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3	3
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	3	

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<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.

### Personal development and well-being

<b>How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?</b>	3	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	3	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	3	
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	3	
The attendance of learners	2	
The behaviour of learners	3	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	3	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3	

### The quality of provision

<b>How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?</b>	3	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	3	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	3	2

### Leadership and management

<b>How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?</b>	3	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	3	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	3	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	3	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	3	
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	

**Annex B****Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

5 December 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Verulam School, St Albans, AL1 4PR

When I spoke to your representatives from the School Council during our recent inspection, they asked me what we thought of your school. I would encourage you to read my report in full, but here is a precis of our inspection findings.

Verulam provides you with a satisfactory standard of education and care. Your test and exam results are above average, which represents satisfactory progress because most of you are already of above-average ability when you join the school. Teaching is satisfactory, because it enables you to make satisfactory progress. You told us that you particularly appreciate the activities that your teachers provide outside of school hours, such as the sports teams, Swing Band, and Duke of Edinburgh scheme, and we agree that these are great opportunities for you. We were pleased to note that your attendance has improved and is now above average. We also noted that the majority of you behave well, although it is disappointing to hear from you and your parents that, on occasions, the behaviour of some students can disrupt your learning.

We think that, at present, Verulam has a satisfactory capacity for future improvement. I have recommended that the following steps be taken.

- Mr Kellaway and his team should make a more accurate evaluation of the school's performance to give everyone a better understanding of what needs to be done to make Verulam a good or outstanding school.
- More should be made of the best middle managers, so that they can share their expertise throughout the school.
- Results in mathematics should be improved to be as good as they are in English.
- Teachers should give you more opportunities to participate actively in lessons, giving you more responsibility for learning independently and better preparing you for your sixth form studies or your working lives.

Thank you for your help with our inspection, and best wishes for your future studies and career plans.

Yours sincerely

Mark Phillips

Her Majesty's Inspector