

Barnwell School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117518
Local Authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	326635
Inspection dates	25–26 February 2009
Reporting inspector	David Jones HMI

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 (total)	1442
Sixth form	244
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Julie Ashley-Wren
Headteacher	Mr Richard Westergreen-Thorne
Date of previous school inspection	2 November 2005
School address	Barnwell Avenue Stevenage Hertfordshire SG2 9SW
Telephone number	01438 222500
Fax number	01438 222501

Age group	11–19
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four Additional Inspectors. It was planned to coincide with the inspection of Heathcote School with whom Barnwell maintains a significant 16 to 19 partnership.

Description of the school

Barnwell is significantly larger than the average comprehensive school. The pupils' social and economic backgrounds vary but are average overall. The proportion known to be eligible for free school meals is close to the national average. The number of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds is less than half the national figure and the proportion of those whose first language is not English is low. The proportion of pupils registered by the school as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities is below average, and so is the proportion of pupils with a statement of special educational needs. There are a small number of looked after children in each year group.

Barnwell School grew rapidly after the closure of a neighbouring school in 2006. The local authority is continuing the reorganization of education in Stevenage and Barnwell is scheduled to be the only secondary school serving the southern part of the town in 2012. The school operates on two sites one mile apart; Years 7 to 9 are accommodated at Barnwell West and Years 10 to 13 are taught at Barnwell East. The school is the hub of the local extended school provision and provides a full range of local services. The local authority has committed funds from the Building Schools for the Future programme to the construction of new premises for Barnwell when the neighbouring Heathcote School site becomes vacant in 2012.

The school has been granted specialist business and enterprise status and has also received the following national accreditations: Artsmark Gold, ICT Mark, the Healthy Schools Award, Investors in People and Sportsmark Gold.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

This is a satisfactory school with a many good and outstanding features. The school has made good progress since the last inspection; it has risen to the very considerable challenge of absorbing a 50% increase in the school population, following the closure of a local school. Although academic outcomes during the first two years of this process were significantly below what is expected at GCSE nationally, improvements were made. Examination outcomes already secured for 2009 in science and mathematics, two of the subjects supporting the business and enterprise specialism, are notably stronger and are already closer to the national average than those secured in previous years. The progress made by students in the rapidly growing sixth form at A level and in vocational courses where business related courses feature strongly, was well above average overall and amongst the highest in the county.

The students' personal development is good overall, although attendance is below the level of secondary schools nationally and a small number of pupils are persistent absentees. The students care, welfare and guidance are good with well-focused support for those with significant social and emotional needs. The range of information held by the inclusion team is not consistently used by subject leaders and as a result, pupils who receive support from outside agencies do not make the progress they should. Communication between the learning support teams and the main school requires greater drive and challenge.

Teaching and learning are satisfactory overall, with over half the lessons seen judged to be good or better; four out of ten lessons could have been more effective if a sharper focus had been maintained on the quality of learning. Where opportunities to enhance teaching and learning were missed insufficient attention was given to student involvement and independent learning. Sixth form teaching is overwhelmingly good. Curriculum provision is good with real strength developing in Key Stage 4 where the impact of the school's outstanding post-16 curriculum collaborations is facilitated effectively by the well-organised learning pathways in Years 10 and 11. Community cohesion is outstanding because proactive decisions have been based on the pertinent analysis of community need, set in the context of an awareness of the socio-economic dimension, faith, ethnicity and culture.

Leadership and management are good overall, the headteacher and his senior staff have built a larger than average school, based on two sites in a short period. The contribution by staff at all levels has been intrinsic to this success. The significant achievement of building a strong Key Stage 4 and post-16 provision on the Barnwell East site, of which students speak highly, is an impressive performance. Capacity to improve is good.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The sixth form has been transformed over the last three years and numbers have increased considerably. Attainment on entry has been below average; however, in 2008 outcomes at A Level and AS level were in line with the national average. Student achievement across the range of A-level courses was good with outcomes from vocationally orientated A-level courses noticeably above the national average. The average points score per student has risen steadily over the last three years and the educational value added figure achieved in 2008 was amongst the highest in the county. Attendance in Years 12 and 13 is satisfactory; the school is committed to enhancing procedures for registering students when they arrive on site.

The curriculum is outstanding: the excellent relationship with the consortium of seven local secondary schools ensures that there is an outstanding range of subjects offered locally with significant onsite provision. Three quarters of the local 16 to 19 course provision offered jointly with the neighbouring Heathcote School is delivered at Barnwell. The retention rate is good and more than half the students go on to university.

Academic guidance is good and helps students achieve well; they feel teachers are supportive, know them personally and work very hard to provide for their needs. The quality of teaching and learning is good. A striking feature of the most successful lessons is the quality of relationships. The tutor system, provision for personal, social, and health education as well as the responsibilities taken by students help to prepare them very well for higher education and the workplace. The leadership and management of the sixth form are good.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise standards of achievement by developing a strong focus on independent learning and ensuring that lesson plans are organised around what students are expected to learn.
- Improve the communication between the learning support teams and subject areas.
- Monitor the work of all departments by focusing on the quality of learning.
- Further improve the rate of attendance by careful analysis of the causes of persistent absence.

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 and achievement are satisfactory. Academic outcomes have been affected for the last two years by the merger with the former Collenswood School. During this period Barnwell school has maintained a steady improvement in the proportion of pupils, 52%, securing five A* to C grades at GCSE. In 2008, the proportion of pupils who obtained five higher grade GCSE passes that included English and Mathematics was below the national average at 34%. However, the proportion of pupils obtaining a level 2 functional English and mathematics qualification improved significantly to 45% in 2008. In the 2008 public examinations, boys performed less well than the girls and lower ability boys underperformed significantly, although the current position in Year 11 is stronger. The 2008 outcomes note that the small numbers of pupils from minority ethnic groups were significantly more successful than their White British peers. Middle and higher ability pupils did not achieve as well as predicted in some courses but students who transferred to Barnwell from the former Collenswood school did well.

Evidence available from the school's robust assessment data base and confirmed by inspectors, highlights that the progress made by the current Year 11 is noticeably more positive than was reflected in the examination outcomes secured in 2008. Nearly two thirds of the current cohort has secured a higher level science GCSE grade, modular GCSE examinations in mathematics indicate that over half the Year group have secured a higher level pass in two of their three modular tests, and the proportion of pupils securing level 2 functional English and mathematics qualifications has continued to improve.

In the 2008 examinations, the performance of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities varied and those with a statement of special educational needs did well. However, those who receive support from a range of outside agencies do not progress as well because the systems

in place to identify the students' individual learning needs are not sufficiently used by subject staff in the main school.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Students' personal development and well-being are good. They hold high moral values, as seen in their generous support through charitable fund-raising for disadvantaged groups, and in their empathy for individuals from any background whom society appears to treat unfairly. In discussion, they are quick to champion the underdog! They treat each other with consideration, and are composed and polite to visitors. The pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good.

Attendance has improved significantly as a result of the school's robust procedures. The vast majority of students enjoy school and attend regularly, although a small core of regular absentees affects the attendance figures adversely. Students behave well in lessons and around school, treat property with respect and adopt safe practices. Large numbers of students take part in a diverse range of sports activities. They are aware of the principles of healthy eating but say they regard school meals as lacking value for money and prefer sandwich lunches.

Students make highly effective contributions to the school and the local community. Many are 'buddies' for other students. Those taking junior sports leader courses become involved with sport in local primary schools. Considerable numbers of students are involved in an extensive range of voluntary activities in the town and the surrounding community. The vast majority of students have secure literacy, numeracy and computer skills and positive personal attitudes that ensure they are prepared suitably for their future economic well-being.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Teaching and learning are satisfactory and just over half the lessons seen were good or outstanding; few were found to provide inadequate learning opportunities. Most lessons take place in a calm and orderly environment, and are characterised by positive and constructive relationships between teachers and students, and between students themselves.

In the best lessons, teachers provide opportunities for students to take responsibility for their learning, to work independently and to use active and creative approaches to learning. These lessons proceed with pace, use timed activities effectively and provide the appropriate level of challenge for all abilities. Particularly effective questioning was often a key marker of best practice and often illustrated by skilful and well-judged probing of student understanding that ensured student involvement, extended their thinking, allowed the teacher to assess the progress of individuals and groups, and ensured students were aware of the progress they were making. The less successful lessons were those, which were dominated by the teacher, lacked a clear focus on what students were to learn, and provided only basic information, rather than have students solve problems or make deductions, either individually or cooperatively.

Many lessons have teaching assistants deployed to give additional support to students, and although this is effective in some instances, in a number of lessons opportunities are missed by subject staff to direct the contributions of teaching assistants.

Many teachers use marking well to provide academic guidance. However, inspectors noted that although marking was often regular, some comments were superficial, providing little informative guidance on how to improve. The school uses learning review days to keep students aware of their achievement levels and targets, and to identify potential underachievement. Where provision is most effective staff use assessment information to plan the lesson, and use references to mark schemes and exam criteria to support learning.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The range of curriculum opportunities is good. The Year 7 and 8 core curriculum courses are appropriate, encouraging the students' personal development and providing a good basis for further study. An innovative curriculum from Year 9 ensures that the curriculum is tailored well to the students' individual needs. Key Stage 4 curriculum pathways contain a wide range of academic and vocational courses that include diploma opportunities and a clear progression to post-16 provision. Students are offered an extensive number of subjects, both academic and vocational, through the extensive consortium arrangements. The provision for basic skills is good, especially for supporting mathematics and English across the curriculum. Barnwell uses its specialist status well through a range of enterprise activities. These develop leadership and team building skills and provide good contacts with the world of work, as well as strengthening wider community links and expanding the teaching and learning of information and communication technology. Enrichment activities are extensive and the take up by students is high. Students enjoy taking part in the numerous sports activities and external visits.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Provision for the care, guidance and support for pupils is good. Communication between pastoral and academic staff is also good. Parents comment particularly on the high levels of commitment by tutors and by subject teachers which ensure the well-being of their children. Students feel safe and are confident that any concerns they may have will be taken seriously. Rare cases of bullying are dealt with swiftly. Procedures for child protection and for all aspects of health and safety are meticulously observed. However, time spent in tutor groups could be better structured.

The school is quick to identify those students whose personal difficulties create barriers to progress. Intervention strategies, mentoring and support from a wide range of outside agencies are quickly put in place. Some parents commented appreciatively on the help their children had received with social skills and with attendance problems. One parent said, 'As a result ...my son has improved immensely.' Gifted, talented and more able students are well provided for in a range of extra-curricular activities, but provision within some lessons is too variable and therefore their progress slows.

Reflecting its specialist status for business and enterprise, the school provides good opportunities for work experience and enterprise activities. Together with high quality careers guidance, students are well placed to make choices at GCSE that are appropriate for their on-going education and future economic well-being.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Leadership and management are good. Senior staff and governors have done particularly well to manage the very significant growth in the school population and the transition to split-site provision required as the school expanded. Efforts to ensure that pupils who have transferred into the school are not disadvantaged by the expansion are continuing; standards of attainment for this group have risen noticeably. The headteacher and his senior staff have set a clear direction that has led to improved learning opportunities for all and the provision of high quality care. Some aspects of self-evaluation were a little more generous than the judgements given by inspectors, others were more modest. Overall, standards have been maintained in difficult circumstances; student achievement is improving significantly in the current Year 11 and in the rapidly growing sixth form.

Governance is good with a strong focus on improving provision. The school's budget has been effectively managed to facilitate the expansion of the school and resources have been used efficiently. When consideration is given to the effective manner in which the recent significant expansion of the school has been managed, the value for money secured is good.

The school provided a senior management team nominee to join the inspection team and a deputy headteacher played a full part in the inspection process. Senior and middle managers were involved in the joint observations of lessons with inspectors. A formal evaluation of this exercise by inspectors and senior staff revealed that many of the lessons could have secured a higher grading if greater emphasis had been given to the learning outcomes expected.

The management of pupil behaviour is effective and relationships are good and the school is a calm and orderly community as a result. Curriculum development has been impressive and has resulted in an outstanding range of post-16 opportunities..

Community cohesion is outstanding because the school's effective analysis of the local context has produced a significant impact on its own community. Charitable work has a global dimension and a number of curriculum areas offer a faith, social or cultural insight. Through the extended school responsibilities and specialist school status the school provides an exemplary programme of activities to meet local needs, providing opportunities which are not frequently offered by most schools.

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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?	3	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?	2	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2

Achievement and standards

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

¹Grade 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

How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2	2
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	2
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	2
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	2	2
The attendance of learners	3	3
The behaviour of learners	2	2
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1	1
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3	2

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	3	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	2

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	2
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	2	2
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	1	1
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	2	2
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2	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	

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

27 February 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Barnwell School, Stevenage, SG2 9SW

Can I begin by thanking you all for the mature and friendly way you behaved when my inspection team visited the school just after half-term. It was a pleasure to meet so many of you, to see the images of hundreds of you who had made a positive contribution to the school celebrated in the corridors and to hear about another successful Rock Challenge performance.

The inspectors found all aspects of the school's provision to be satisfactory, many areas were good and some aspects, notably the opportunities provided in the sixth form and the extended school arrangements, to be outstanding.

I have asked the headteacher and governors to concentrate on improving:

- standards of achievement by developing a strong focus on independent learning and ensuring that lesson plans are organised around what you are expected to learn
- the communication between the learning support teams and subject areas
- the work of all departments by focusing on the quality of learning.

You will gain more from school if you attend more regularly.

I look forward to hearing about your future success.

David Jones

Her Majesty's Inspector