

St Birinus School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	123259
Local Authority	Oxfordshire
Inspection number	327879
Inspection dates	24–25 March 2009
Reporting inspector	Janet Mercer 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	Boys
Number on roll	
School (total)	1259
Sixth form	182
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr C B Turton
Headteacher	Mr C D Bryan
Date of previous school inspection	24 May 2006
School address	Mereland Road Didcot OX11 8AZ
Telephone number	01235 814444
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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.

Description of the school

St Birinus School is a larger than average boys' school, serving Didcot and the surrounding rural area. The proportion of boys from minority ethnic heritages is lower than average, as is the proportion eligible for free school meals. The proportion of students whose first language is not English is small. The proportion of boys who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities is average. The largest groups are those who have moderate learning needs, behavioural or emotional needs or specific learning difficulties, such as dyslexia. The school has had specialist technology status since 1997 and language status since 2006. Sixth form provision is offered in partnership with Didcot Girls' School.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

St Birinus is a good and improving school, with a good sixth form. The headteacher has developed a clear vision for the school towards raising standards further. Staff throughout the school are committed to ensuring the highest quality of personal development and care for students and the school has a deservedly good reputation for its work in this area.

The school provides outstanding pastoral care, which is particularly effective in supporting the most vulnerable students. School staff work very closely with parents and external agencies to provide individualised support for these boys and their families. This makes a significant contribution to their achievement and personal development. Teachers and tutors monitor academic progress closely and identify quickly those students at risk of underachieving. Effective support and mentoring help students with both their academic work and personal issues.

Personal development is outstanding. Students develop excellent personal and social skills, with many making a very positive contribution to the school and wider community. They learn how to understand their own emotions and how to work well with others. Relationships between students and between students and staff are very positive. Attendance is above average and the vast majority of students behave well in lessons and around the school.

Achievement is good and standards are above average. Attainment on entry is at the national average and, by the end of Year 11, the proportion of boys who achieve 5 or more A* to C grades at GCSE, including English and mathematics, is above the average for boys in similar schools. Rigorous monitoring of individual students' progress is effective in identifying any areas of underachievement and the school takes prompt action to provide the support necessary to secure improvements. As a result, most students are now making good progress and are on course to meet challenging targets. However, the school is aware that there remains a small group of more able students who do not always achieve their full potential.

Inspectors observed much good teaching and some outstanding practice. The school has made significant improvements in its systems for monitoring and evaluating the quality of teaching since the last inspection. Managers have a clear understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement in teaching. Teachers value the good feedback they receive on their lessons and the range of development activities which help them improve their practice. Teachers plan work well to meet the wide range of students' needs and interests, though in a few lessons observed, there was not sufficient challenge for the more able.

The curriculum is well planned to meet students' needs and the specialist status has widened provision in modern foreign languages and technology. Good practice and expertise are shared with all of the feeder primary schools. Successful partnerships with others schools and colleges have ensured appropriate vocational options for students in Years 10 and 11 and a wide choice of A-level subjects in the sixth form. Students' economic awareness and workplace skills are considerably enhanced by extensive links with local industry. These are used well to enrich the technology curriculum.

Managers and governors have a good understanding of the main strengths and areas for improvement. Self-evaluation is effective in supporting this and the school has good capacity for further improvement.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

A well-established partnership with Didcot Girls' School give students a very wide range of AS- and A-level subjects to choose from. Pass rates on these courses are high. Over half the students achieve A and B grades on A-level courses, but the proportion achieving these higher grades on AS courses is below the national average. Most students make good progress relative to their prior attainment and students on advanced level vocational courses achieve well.

Just under two thirds of boys in Year 11 stay on for sixth form studies in the school, mostly on A-level courses. There is a small number of vocational or Level 2 courses and the school is aware that there is not a great enough range of such courses to enable more boys to progress to the sixth form.

Personal development is good. Students are articulate and communicate confidently with adults. Many sixth formers willingly take on a range of responsibilities within school and provide excellent support for younger students. The student management team organises a number of social and charitable events to raise money for the disadvantaged, for example translating books into braille for the blind. They prepare well for their future economic well-being through work shadowing, and a high proportion of Year 13 students progress to higher education, many being the first in their family to do so. However, attendance rates are lower than usually seen in school sixth forms. The school acknowledges that there are shortcomings in its system for monitoring students' attendance, particularly as many attend lessons on two sites. Subject teachers complete class registers, but there is not an effective means of compiling attendance data across different classes and school sites.

The quality of teaching is good and students consider that they get good feedback on their major written tasks. Students are set targets for each subject and their progress is closely monitored. Additional support and mentoring are put in place where there is risk of underachievement. However, the quality of the day-to-day marking of their work varies between subjects and not all students are sure how close they are to their targets.

Care, guidance and support are good. Students new to the school receive a good induction so that they quickly feel at home. Tutors know their students well and offer excellent personal and pastoral support. Students also receive very good guidance about higher education and career options. Sixth form leaders work closely together to monitor the quality of the sixth form and are aware of strengths and areas for improvement.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve systems for monitoring attendance in the sixth form to increase attendance rates.
- Increase the challenge in lessons for the most able students to raise achievement of the highest grades.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

While students' attainment on entry is around the national average, many have relatively low literacy levels. Levels of prior attainment are higher in science and mathematics than in English. This has been reflected in the school's results in national tests in Year 9, where results have been above national averages in mathematics and science, but below average in English. In

2008, the school made significant improvements in English, and results were above average for boys nationally.

While the proportion of students who achieved 5 or more A* to C grades at GCSE, including English and mathematics, was at the national average in 2008, results were above average for boys in similar schools. Current data indicate that the focus on further improving English and mathematics is having a positive effect and overall progress is good.

In 2007/08, the school identified that students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities did not always make the expected progress. As a result of the excellent support provided for these students, they are now making good progress.

The proportion of students achieving A* to C grades in specialist technology subjects such as mathematics, design and technology, and science is in line with national averages. All students study at least one modern foreign language - almost all at GCSE. In 2008 results were around the average in Spanish, but a little below average in French.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

The majority of boys really enjoy their time at school and their personal development is outstanding. The words of one parent reflected the views of many: 'We feel our son has been given a very good start to secondary education and makes good progress thanks to his teachers'. The school strongly supports the development of students' self esteem and confidence, particularly in boys who lack confidence when they start in the school.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. Students have ample opportunity to understand human feelings and emotions and the effect these have on them and other people. This understanding is developed through their work on charity events, their responsibilities within the school and in devising assemblies. There are regular opportunities to participate in arts and music events, as well as trips and residential visits.

Behaviour in lessons observed by inspectors was good and often exemplary. However, a small minority of parents commented that learning was sometimes affected by the behaviour of a few boys in lessons, although this was not observed during the inspection. Attendance is good, often with very high attendance at extra-curricular activities.

Students know how to keep safe through a strong pastoral programme. They feel very secure in school and say there are many adults they can talk to about their problems. They really appreciate the mentoring and support they receive from older students. They are encouraged to live a healthy lifestyle through sensible eating. Many participate in sports activities and they are justifiably proud of their school's record of producing national athletes.

Students' contributions to community activities are outstanding. Many act as prefects or ambassadors for the school, helping younger students settle into school life, or as teachers and coaches in primary schools. They also raise funds for charity. Through these various responsibilities, they develop important workplace skills, such as teamworking and leadership.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teachers make sure that students are clear about what they are expected to learn. Lessons are characterised by excellent, good-humoured relationships between teachers and students, contributing strongly to an enjoyable and productive learning environment. As one boy said 'As long as teachers keep us interested we enjoy our work and, most of the time, behaviour is good'.

Inspectors observed much lively teaching and, in the best lessons, the pace is brisk. Teachers involve students in their learning through good questioning, group or pair work and interesting practical activities. Opportunities for students to learn independently are increasing and students are encouraged to conduct their own research. Students are set challenging targets and say they have ample opportunities to discuss their progress with teachers. Work is regularly marked but not all teachers use their marking to tell students how they can improve their work and move on to the next steps in their learning. In lessons that are only satisfactory, the pace is slow and work does not match the needs of all students. There is not always sufficient challenge for the more able students.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum has many strengths, and provides well for students, including those with particular talents and interests. The school's specialist status has ensured that modern foreign languages and technology have a high profile and, as a consequence, good practice is shared across the curriculum and with local primary schools. Over half the students study two modern foreign languages in Key Stage 3 and the number doing so in Key Stage 4 is increasing. Additional opportunities for language learning are available for the most able GCSE pupils before the start of the school day. Many students use the school's facilities, including the library and computers, after school.

There are some weaknesses in the provision of information and communication technology (ICT) because there are insufficient opportunities to support and consolidate skills across the curriculum. Some students have little access to computers other than in discrete ICT lessons.

The curriculum is further enriched by a number of themed activities, such as Annual World Week, the Science Festival and 'Futures Forum'. Students have good opportunities for European travel, combining language learning, water sports and fieldwork. The curriculum is further well supported by events such as the 'Mock Magistrates' competition in Year 9 as well as by a comprehensive programme of educational visits. There is a remarkable range of after school activities on offer, catering for most interests and talents. The weightlifting club has produced national champions.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

The school excels in identifying the different needs of its students and in providing well-tailored support to meet individual needs. Vulnerable students and those with behavioural or emotional needs are very well supported through well-established links with external agencies. The school

has established a 'nurture group' to support vulnerable boys when they join the school and this has been extended through Years 8 and 9. Students are proud to belong to this group and benefit from the additional support. Close working with families has helped to improve the attendance of boys who had often been absent at primary school.

The school works closely with local feeder schools to help students make the transition from primary to secondary school, making good use of students as ambassadors and mentors. Many parents commented very positively on how these arrangements helped their sons to settle in well. One said, 'We are pleased with the transition process, coming from a small school. Our son has settled in well and taken up a range of opportunities'.

The new coordinator for special educational needs has raised the profile of special needs across the school, through staff training in the school and local primary schools. Effective learning support and good tracking systems have improved the progress of students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Their difficulties are quickly diagnosed and appropriate strategies are put in place.

Very good information, advice and guidance support students making subject choices in Year 9, and Year 11 students progressing to the sixth form, further education, training or employment. Sixth form students receive very good advice on higher education.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The headteacher has developed a very good team of senior and middle leaders, committed to securing further improvement. The school is well managed and systems work effectively to ensure students receive the support they need. Managers have identified the key issues they need to tackle and are setting challenging targets for further improvement. The ongoing vision for excellence is shared by the staff and there is a common sense of purpose. There is an enthusiasm for exploring new ideas and evaluating their impact. Rigorous monitoring and staff development are helping to raise the standard of teaching further.

The innovative introduction of a shadow leadership team is already working well to develop further capability in the school and bring about a greater focus on specific aspects. The school is a very significant part of the local community and also makes a very strong contribution to national issues. For example, their work on producing a video about gun culture is very highly regarded and widely used. The strong emphasis on respect for each other and valuing all parts of a multicultural society makes the school's contribution towards community cohesion outstanding. Equality of opportunity runs through all aspects of the school's work. Governors provide good levels of support and challenge, and are well informed about the performance of the school and its students.

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

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?	1	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	1	
The attendance of learners	2	3
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	2	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of 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	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	1	
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 eliminated	1	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	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	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**

20 April 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of St Birinus School, Didcot, OX11 8AZ

On behalf of the inspectors who visited your school recently, I would like to thank you for making us so welcome and helping us with the inspection. We enjoyed meeting and talking to you in your lessons and around the school. Many of you and your parents/carers spoke very positively about the school. We have taken these views into account in arriving at our judgement that your school is a good and improving school with a good sixth form.

You achieve good results in tests and examinations at the end of Years 9 and 11 and in the sixth form. Most students are making good progress towards achieving challenging targets, but there are still some more able boys who do not achieve as much as they could. The school is working hard to improve this, through close monitoring of progress and additional support. We hope that all of you will work hard to respond to this and ensure you really achieve your potential.

Inspectors saw much good teaching, with some outstanding practice. The majority of lessons are well planned but occasionally the work is not challenging enough to make sure the more able boys achieve the best they can. We have asked the school to make sure that all teachers plan work which stretches the most able students so they can make the best possible progress.

Most of you told us that you really enjoy school and the vast majority of students behave well in lessons and around the school. Attendance is good in the main school, but not so good in the sixth form. We have asked the school to find more effective ways of monitoring attendance in sixth form lessons across both sites to raise attendance rates for these students.

Lots of you participate regularly in sports and arts activities out of school and told us how much you enjoy team events, competitions and arts performances in drama and music. Many of you take up the opportunities to get involved in school and local community events and contribute strongly to helping others, for example in local schools, through fundraising activities and mentoring other students in school.

You told us how much you value the help and support you get from staff in the school. They are very committed to ensuring you all achieve as well as you can and aspire to making St Birinus an outstanding school. We hope you will all contribute to this by working hard to achieve your full potential.

With best wishes for the future.

Yours faithfully

Janet Mercer

Her Majesty's Inspector