

Birchwood High School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117549
Local Authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	339031
Inspection dates	19–20 May 2010
Reporting inspector	Mark Phillips HMI

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1276
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	192
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Pauline Mackenzie
Headteacher	Dr Chris Ingate
Date of previous school inspection	14 December 2006
School address	Parsonage Lane Bishop's Stortford CM23 5BD
Telephone number	01279 655 936
Fax number	01279 757 459
Email address	admin@birchwood.herts.sch.uk

Age group	11–18
Inspection dates	19–20 May 2010
Inspection number	339031

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, work-based learning and skills training, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It rates council children's services, and inspects services for looked after children, safeguarding and child protection.

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.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 08456 404045, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may copy all or parts of this document for non-commercial educational purposes, as long as you give details of the source and date of publication and do not alter the documentation in any way.

Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester M2 7LA

T: 08456 404045
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

Introduction

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four additional inspectors. The inspectors observed 38 lessons in which 38 teachers were observed, together with two assemblies and three form periods. Three of the lesson observations were conducted jointly with the headteacher and two senior leaders. Inspectors held discussions with senior and middle leaders, and also with two governors. They also met with panels of students from Key Stage 3, Key Stage 4 and the sixth form. Inspectors looked at a range of the school's documents including achievement data, the school's systems for monitoring the quality of teaching, and teachers' lesson plans. They also considered records on behaviour, exclusions and attendance, racist incidents and bullying, as well as the school's strategies for promoting, monitoring and evaluating equality of opportunity and community cohesion. In addition to the survey of parents' views, to which 517 replies were received, students were also invited to complete a written questionnaire. A staff survey was also conducted. The headteacher helped HMI to plan aspects of the inspection and accepted HMI's invitation to observe inspection team meetings, including the final meeting where judgements were discussed and made.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at the following:

- how well students achieve in the main school, given their attainment when they join compared with their results at the end of Key Stage 4
- the extent to which teachers use assessment to help them plan lessons that meet the full range of learners' needs
- the impact that the curriculum has on improved outcomes for students
- the support given to the most vulnerable students and the success of the school's intervention strategies to support these students
- the effectiveness of the sixth form in enabling students to achieve consistently good outcomes, particularly in their examination results.

Information about the school

Birchwood High is a larger than average school, having expanded considerably in recent years. It has been a specialist technology college since September 2000, with an additional specialism in sport added in 2004. In June 2009, Birchwood High became a Trust school. Since the last inspection, a major building project has been completed and the school now enjoys excellent facilities, particularly for sport. The great majority of students, but not all, are from White British backgrounds. A slightly above average number move in or out of the school during the school year. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is just below average. The proportion known to be eligible for free school meals is much lower than average, reflecting the generally advantageous context in which the school is located.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?

2

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

2

Main findings

Birchwood High is a good school. There are a number of good outcomes for students that help them develop into mature, confident, and personable young adults who are generally well-prepared for their future studies or employment when they reach the end of Year 11.

Overall GCSE results are above average, achieved from average starting points. In 2009, standards in the specialist subjects of design and technology and physical education were high. However, while they were also particularly high in mathematics, they remained average in English and English Literature.

Students' behaviour is good and attendance is above average.

Students have good healthy lifestyles and make good contributions to their school community.

These good outcomes are the result of good provision for education and care.

The large majority of teaching is good; some is outstanding. However, there is also a small amount that is satisfactory, particularly where there have been recent changes of staff and, while there are some good assessment practices, teachers do not always plan lessons to meet individual needs.

The curriculum is good overall, with the school taking an outstanding lead in the local development of the new diplomas and other courses for 14-19 year olds.

Students are supported well, with good safeguarding arrangements and well-organised help for the most vulnerable students.

Overall, the sixth form is satisfactory; A-Levels results were poor in 2009, but current students are making satisfactory progress. Raising standards at A-Level is a key area for the school's improvement.

There is no doubt that the headteacher and his senior team lead the school with dedication and much ambition. They empower and are supported well by some increasingly effective middle managers. Internally, the school has a strong sense of community. Students and staff get along with each other well and share a common sense of purpose. There are good links with other local schools, and also some well-established links with schools abroad. However, while the school has a good understanding of its communities, it does not plan for or evaluate the further development of its contribution to community cohesion. Two years ago, the school took a deliberate decision not to provide religious education and understanding for all through the curriculum in Key Stage 4 or through pastoral time across the whole school, including the sixth form. While the school has stated its principles and reasons for this

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

decision very clearly, nevertheless these omissions put the school in breach of statutory requirements. As these are the responsibilities of the governing body, governance is therefore judged inadequate, although inspectors are also keen to recognise the efforts that governors give to other aspects of their role. There is no doubt from discussions with governors and school leaders, and from observations during the inspection, that the school is fully aware of its strengths and weaknesses. However, while understandably and successfully aiming to boost the self-belief of staff and students and celebrate their achievements, the school's leaders have overestimated their judgements of the school's effectiveness. Neither outcomes for students or provision are outstanding. Nevertheless, the school provides good value for money, and improvements in the academic standards achieved by students since the last inspection together with maintained standards of behaviour and attendance, all achieved during the completion of the building project and the school's rapid expansion, give confidence in the school's good capacity for further improvement.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- – Continue to raise attainment by securing standards that are firmly and consistently above average in GCSE English, and bringing A-Level results above average in all measures by September 2012.
- Ensure that there is consistent use of teachers' good knowledge of students' capabilities and progress to plan lessons that identify the needs of individuals, as well as the class as a whole.
- Required actions
- To ensure that all statutory requirements are met for the provision of religious education and for the promotion of community cohesion, and to improve students' spiritual and cultural development, the governing body must
 - by September 2010, ensure that appropriate religious education curriculum programmes and other opportunities for spiritual development are provided for all students, including in the sixth form
 - by November 2010, ratify an appropriate policy and action plan for promoting all aspects of community cohesion, including in response to the school's faith context; this strategy should be subject to an interim review by the governing body in May 2011 with a full evaluation in November 2011.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils**2**

Most students are very positive about learning, and show good attitudes to study. They apply themselves well to classroom activities and are keen to practise their practical skills, particularly in sport and the arts. Students join Year 7 having attained average standards in their Key Stage 2 tests. In 2009, the proportion of Year 11 students gaining five good GCSEs including English and mathematics was above average. Year-on-year, this proportion has improved since the last inspection. The school's records show that

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

the current Year 11 students are on track to better these standards. While the great majority of students make at least their expected progress in English, achievement in mathematics is much better and was outstanding in 2008 and 2009. The school recognises that further raising standards in English and English Literature, so that they are consistently and firmly above average for all students, is key to moving students' overall achievement to the next level.

Behaviour is generally good, both in classes and around the school site. Many students behave in an exemplary manner, although there is also a small minority who still require their behaviour correcting through temporary exclusion. Attendance is above average, reflecting the strong sense of safety and enjoyment that students feel when at school. Overall, students make good contributions to their school community, although some groups are more represented than others. Students develop very good social skills and these, together with their good basic literacy and numeracy skills, prepare them well for future employment. However, limited opportunities in school for reflection and developing religious understanding, particularly after Key Stage 3, hinder their spiritual and cultural development.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	2
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment ¹	2
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	2
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	2
The extent to which pupils feel safe	2
Pupils' behaviour	2
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	2
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attendance ¹	2
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	3

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

How effective is the provision?

The majority of teaching seen by inspectors was good or better. Comparison of inspectors' findings with the school's records of lesson observations, and scrutiny of students' work, confirm that teaching is good. The best teaching is not afraid to use a variety of appropriate activities and approaches to secure students' interest. There is some outstanding practice. For example, in a Year 8 physical education lesson, students of all abilities were enthused and engaged through a fine balance of teacher explanation, a strong emphasis on the development of skills, and support for the most vulnerable students. As a result, all made at least good progress in improving their performance in the long-jump. Teachers throughout the school have good subject knowledge. Resources are used well, including confident use of new technologies. Teachers have good knowledge of how well students are doing; detailed records are kept of assessments, and there is good oral feedback and detailed marking in response to students' efforts. What is inconsistent, and what makes assessment satisfactory rather than good, is evidence of teachers using this good knowledge of students' capabilities and progress in their lesson planning. Too many lessons are planned on a whole-class basis. Students told inspectors that they thought teaching in the mathematics department to be consistently excellent; examination results support this view. Students also commented, perceptively, that teaching was weaker in areas that had experienced recent or rapid turnover of staff, a view also expressed by some parents. Inspection evidence supports this view, as seen in the small number of lessons that were no better than satisfactory.

There are some really excellent elements to the curriculum, including an increasing range of academic and vocational courses available in Key Stage 4 which are used to create personalised learning programmes for students. This includes a good range of courses in the specialist subjects. Recently introduced courses are having a demonstrably beneficial effect on students' achievements and attitudes. Whilst there is excellent provision for the development of numeracy across the curriculum, provision for cross-curricular literacy and information and communication technology is not as strong and there are significant gaps in the provision of religious education for all.

There are very good transition arrangements for when students join the school. The great majority join in Year 7 but a number transfer at other times, particularly if they need to make a fresh start. The school serves these students well. The most vulnerable students are well known to the school and to staff. Teachers liaise well with classroom assistants to support these students, and others with special educational needs and/or disabilities. However, the effectiveness of systems for writing and reviewing individual education plans is variable and, rightly, is presently under review.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

<p>The quality of teaching</p>	<p>2</p>
<p>Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning</p>	<p>3</p>

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms	
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	2
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	2

How effective are leadership and management?

There are two distinctive features to the way that the headteacher and his senior team organise the school's leadership and management. First, management structures and practices are such that a good number of able middle managers are empowered and trusted to take responsibility for different initiatives. Second, there is a strong ethos of ongoing leadership development; as one head of faculty commented, in a very positive way, 'being here is like being on a never-ending in-service course!' Self-evaluation strategies are thorough and widespread across the school although, as with the whole-school self-evaluation, subject and pastoral leaders are overgenerous in their views about the quality of provision and the outcomes achieved by their students.

There are some very robust arrangements for safeguarding, including rigorous staff identity checks. There are some excellent partnerships with other providers to offer curriculum opportunities and through the sports specialist status, with the school showing strong leadership in key initiatives to promote students' learning. However, there are also some areas where partnerships are weaker, particularly in developing students' spiritual and cultural awareness. While the wider promotion of community cohesion is a significant concern, the school makes good efforts within its own community to ensure that everyone is treated fairly and able to make good progress in improving their overall standards of work and personal development.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	2
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	2
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	4
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	2
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	2
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	4
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	2

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Sixth form

Over the past three years, the sixth form has grown considerably. There is now a very broad range of curriculum courses available. Most of these are traditional A-Level subjects but there are also several vocational options, including the popular football academy, that are delivered in partnership with other providers. Examination results have varied over the past three years. While results in 2008 were of a broadly average standard, those in 2009 were poor in a number of important respects. As in the main school, achievement in mathematics was very good but in other subjects, such as history and biology, it was inadequate. Not enough passes were achieved, either overall or at the highest grades, and the school recognises that these results were not good enough. Tracking of current Year 13 students suggests that they will achieve more positively in this year's examinations, and learning seen during the inspection showed that they are making satisfactory progress. Nevertheless, in order to realise better progress, the school must raise standards at A-Level to above average, including in the overall pass rates and points scores, and the proportion achieving at the highest grades. This is particularly important because many students now join the sixth form having achieved above average standards in their GCSEs. Sixth form students contribute well to the school community, including through their work as mentors and sports leaders. Their attendance is high, although only an average proportion continue into Year 13. The quality of teaching in the sixth form is satisfactory. Students have good access to information and communication technology and study facilities to support them in their independent learning. There is a well-organised tutorial programme, including arrangements for individual mentoring where necessary. However, while many students said that individual teachers were very helpful, some students told inspectors that they did not feel well supported.

The leadership of the sixth form is currently in transition. At the time of the inspection, the head of sixth form was on maternity leave and the sixth form was under the temporary leadership of three teachers, overseen by a deputy headteacher. There are regular monitoring systems; safeguarding arrangements, including signing-in and out procedures, are appropriate and secure. Nevertheless, the school recognises that, because the sixth form has grown in size in recent years, current management systems require further review.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	3
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	3
The quality of provision in the sixth form	3
Leadership and management of the sixth form	3

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Views of parents and carers

Around half the parents and carers returned questionnaires and these show high levels of satisfaction with most areas of the school's work. Most parents are happy with communications between them and the school. There are some parents who feel that the school could do more to promote healthy lifestyles, and a similar proportion of students surveyed agreed. While many parents are extremely complimentary about standards of teaching and care, a few raise concerns about the inconsistencies caused by changes of teacher in some departments. Inspection findings support this view.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Birchwood High School to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school. The inspection team received 517 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 1276 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	188	36	291	56	28	5	5	1
The school keeps my child safe	205	40	300	58	7	1	2	0
The school informs me about my child's progress	220	43	275	53	18	3	3	1
My child is making enough progress at this school	221	43	263	51	25	5	3	1
The teaching is good at this school	200	39	293	57	19	4	1	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	140	27	323	63	37	7	4	1
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	122	24	340	66	41	8	0	0
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	183	35	290	56	20	4	4	1
The school meets my child's particular needs	200	39	280	54	21	4	6	1
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	167	32	291	56	42	8	5	1
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	110	21	323	63	40	8	2	0
The school is led and managed effectively	261	51	227	44	14	3	3	1
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	272	53	218	42	20	4	3	1

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	51	45	0	4
Primary schools	6	41	42	10
Secondary schools	8	34	44	14
Sixth forms	10	37	50	3
Special schools	32	38	25	5
Pupil referral units	12	43	31	14
All schools	9	40	40	10

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above is for the period 1 September to 31 December 2009 and is the most recently published data available (see www.ofsted.gov.uk). Please note that the sample of schools inspected during the autumn term 2009 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100. Secondary school figures include those that have sixth forms, and sixth form figures include only the data specifically for sixth form inspection judgements.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement. ■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils. ■ The quality of teaching. ■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupil's needs, including where relevant, through partnerships. ■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



21 May 2010

Dear Students

Inspection of Birchwood High School, Bishop's Stortford, CM23 5BD

I am writing to thank you for the welcome and help that you gave us when we visited Birchwood recently. This letter is to let you know the result of our inspection in Years 7-11. Information about the sixth form is included in the main report, which I encourage you to read in full. I would also like to thank you, your parents and your teachers for completing and returning the inspection questionnaires. We were overwhelmed with responses, most of which were very positive about the school's work.

Birchwood remains a good school. Standards are above average and your behaviour and attendance are good. You feel safe and enjoy school, which is particularly encouraging. An important reason why you make good progress is because you have such positive attitudes to learning. Your teachers know you well, and you benefit from their good subject knowledge. While they work hard to respond to your efforts and needs in class, we think that they could make even better use of their knowledge of your individual abilities, when planning their lessons. There are some excellent aspects to your curriculum, including the wide range of options available to you. You are very fortunate to benefit from some splendid facilities. One aspect of the curriculum that is not good, however, is religious education for all. By law, all students in all key stages are required to develop their knowledge and understanding of religious issues. Your school does not meet this legal requirement, and I have told the governing body that this must be corrected immediately. The way that you respect each other in your school community gives us confidence that you will support this improvement completely. The headteacher and his senior team lead the school well in all other respects. They are very ambitious for you and for the school and, with continued help from your parents and yourselves, we also have confidence in the school's good capacity to improve further.

With best wishes for your future studies and career plans,

Yours sincerely

Mark Phillips

Her Majesty's Inspector

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaining about inspections', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk. If you would like Ofsted to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone 08456 404045, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.