

Birchwood High School

Parsonage Lane, Bishop's Stortford, Hertfordshire CM23 5BD

Inspection dates

9–10 May 2017

Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Requires improvement
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Requires improvement
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Requires improvement
16 to 19 study programmes	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement

- Leaders have not yet brought about sustained improvements in the achievement of pupils. In 2016, pupils did not make enough progress from their starting points.
- Staffing turbulence and difficulties in recruiting teachers, most notably in science, have hampered leaders' efforts to bring sustained improvements to the quality of teaching.
- Disadvantaged pupils are not yet making good progress. Leaders have acted on a recent review of how the additional funding that they receive is being used. However, it is too early to see the impact of this work on disadvantaged pupils' outcomes.
- Leaders have an overgenerous view of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Their systems for monitoring teaching and staff performance do not focus sufficiently on whether pupils are making enough progress.
- Teaching, learning and assessment, although improving, remain inconsistent in their impact on pupils' achievement. Teachers do not all consistently use pupils' prior assessment information to plan learning that meets pupils' needs.
- Although those leaders who are newer to post are starting to make a difference in their respective areas, they have not had time to have an impact on raising achievement.
- Governance, although improving, does not challenge leaders rigorously enough about the progress of different groups of pupils, or across subjects.

The school has the following strengths

- The school's provision for personal development and welfare is outstanding. Pupils are safe and are exceptionally well cared for.
- Sixth-form students make good progress and are well prepared for their next stages in education, training or employment.
- Pupils' behaviour is good. Pupils are polite, courteous and show respect for fellow pupils, staff and visitors.
- The curriculum, including the extra-curricular provision, offers a wide range of interesting subjects and opportunities which are well matched to pupils' interests. Mathematics is well taught across the school.
- Most parents are effusive in their praise for the school and its support for their children.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of leadership and management by:
 - ensuring that recently appointed middle leaders are held accountable for securing rapid improvements in the school
 - sharpening the monitoring of the quality of teaching so that there is a more precise evaluation of the impact that it has on the progress of different pupils, most notably disadvantaged pupils, from their various starting points
 - ensuring that the performance management system holds staff to account for the progress groups of pupils make
 - continuing to improve the way in which the school spends funding for disadvantaged pupils to make sure that these pupils catch up with other pupils nationally
 - ensuring that governors hold the school to account more rigorously for the progress groups of pupils are making across the school.
- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by ensuring that:
 - teachers use assessment information to plan learning that takes into account the different starting points of all pupils, ensuring that it has an impact on improving their progress
 - support and training are provided for short-term staff to ensure that they plan lessons to engage pupils and enable them to make good progress.
- Raise achievement by:
 - improving provision and outcomes for disadvantaged pupils through higher-quality, and more consistent, teaching and leadership
 - supporting the leader in science to raise the quality of teaching and standards in science for pupils across key stages 3 and 4.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Requires improvement

- Despite improvements since the previous inspection, leaders have not secured enough consistency in the quality of teaching, learning and assessment and in pupils' achievement. In particular, the achievement of disadvantaged pupils, the consistency of teaching and learning, and the quality of provision in some subjects, including science, are not good. The principal and his leadership team have established systems but these are not yet well embedded across the school.
- Systems for managing the performance of staff are not focused sharply enough on the progress being made by groups of pupils in all subjects and across all year groups. More recently appointed senior and middle leaders are not being held fully to account for areas they are responsible for. Improvements have been made, but the pace of improvement is not yet rapid.
- Leaders have not secured high enough standards for disadvantaged pupils. Progress measures in 2015 and 2016 show that standards were low for these pupils, most notably in English and science. Leaders' actions have not secured consistently high-quality teaching that meets their needs. Where there has been some improvement in provision this year, most notably in English, these actions have not had time to improve disadvantaged pupils' achievement.
- Following an external review of spending of pupil premium funding, leaders are now making better use of this to support disadvantaged pupils. Leaders are using research findings to implement strategies which are known to improve progress. However, more time is needed to see the impact of the school's actions on disadvantaged pupils' achievement.
- Although improving, middle leaders are not yet securing consistent improvement across the full breadth of the curriculum. While leaders, some of whom are newer to post, are beginning to bring improvements to their respective areas, these are not yet secure. Moreover, until recently, leaders have not been able to recruit teachers into these areas. More recent teaching appointments and strong middle leadership in mathematics are starting to raise standards, but these are not well established. Leaders have ensured that the school is fully staffed from September with no agency staff.
- The Year 7 catch-up premium is being used effectively. Year 7 pupils read well and are able to use a range of strategies to decode new words. Paired reading with older pupils has been effective in helping them to improve their reading, along with computer programmes that they can use in the 'personalised learning centre'. They are making good progress and this work is having a positive impact on literacy standards across the school.
- Leaders have made sure that the funding to support pupils who have a statement of special educational needs and/or disabilities, or an education, health and care plan, is well spent and they are well supported. Effective use of teaching assistants in lessons helps to ensure that they are making good progress.

- Leaders have made changes to the curriculum to make sure that it matches the interests of the pupils. This includes the small numbers of pupils who attend off-site alternative provision. The school offers a broad range of options to pupils including vocational subjects, such as construction. There is an extensive range of extra-curricular activities which pupils participate in and enjoy.
- Leaders and staff ensure that pupils receive outstanding personal welfare. The school's work to promote tolerance, respect and equality is exemplary. Pupils receive a vast number of opportunities to take part in enrichment activities and leadership roles, such as within the elected school council and the BLISS group (Better Learning in School Society). Leaders give pupils meaningful opportunities to influence decisions in the development of the school. Moreover, leaders' work to promote pupils' mental health and well-being is highly effective.

Governance

- Governance has improved since the previous inspection. Governors have acted quickly on the recommendations of an external review of governance to ensure that they are becoming increasingly effective in their roles. However, governors are not holding school leaders rigorously to account for the progress made by all groups of pupils across all subjects and all years.
- Governors have taken effective action to ensure that the school meets all of its statutory obligations relating, for example, to performance management, the website and safeguarding. Governors ensure that their statutory duties in relation to safeguarding are met. They keep their safeguarding training under review so that they continue to be well informed about safeguarding issues. They also review leaders' decisions about the performance and pay of teachers and staff effectively.
- Governors bring a range of expertise to the school and are highly committed to its success. They make regular visits to the school so that they can hold leaders to account more effectively in relation to information about the progress of key groups of pupils across the school. This work is at an early stage of development.
- Governors hold leaders to account for the finances of the school. They provide financial challenge, and support the school in making improvements to school facilities and site security. Governors know the impact of the additional funding for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and children looked after, and ensure that it is being spent to meet pupils' needs. Governors are aware that the progress of disadvantaged pupils continues to be well below that of other pupils nationally, and challenge leaders over the effectiveness of spending for this group.
- Governors have worked with the school to carry out a full risk assessment of site safety. Staff are on duty at key times of the day to minimise risk.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Leaders ensure that all statutory pre-employment checks on staff are carried out. Leaders also ensure that they provide staff with the most up-to-date training and guidance on safeguarding and the signs of abuse. This training also includes the 'Prevent' duty, supporting pupils who are vulnerable to extremism or radicalisation. Staff understand and apply the school's procedures and policies appropriately.

- Pupils say they feel safe and trust staff to support them when they need help. They know whom to go to if they have a problem. Pupils say that the support they are given is one of the things they like most about their school. Parents believe that their children are safe and well cared for. One said, 'This is a school that puts children first.'
- Leaders work well with the relevant agencies to support vulnerable pupils. Leaders take appropriate action to secure the safety and well-being of pupils, and maintain the records of these actions well.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- Although improving, there remains variability in the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in the school.
- Teachers do not consistently use pupils' prior assessment information to plan lessons which help pupils to make good progress from their various starting points. Too often, pupils are completing the same work as the rest of their classmates, no matter whether it is too easy or too hard for them. As a result, the most able disadvantaged pupils, and some who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, are not provided with work or support that allows them to make consistently good progress.
- Pupils and parents expressed continuing concerns about the quality of provision in science throughout the school. Pupils experience too many changes of teacher due to difficulties in recruitment and staff absence. Short-term staff do not know the different starting points of pupils and, as a result, teaching relies too heavily on long periods where pupils copy work out, with little understanding of what they are writing.
- Short-term staff have not had sufficient help and support to plan lessons which interest pupils and are matched to their abilities. They need more support and guidance to help them follow school policies, for example the schools' behaviour policy.
- In some lessons, teachers' strong subject knowledge and effective questioning techniques support pupils' learning and deepen their understanding. For example, in a Year 8 Spanish lesson, pupils were learning about places in a town. The teachers' skilful questioning allowed pupils to refer back to their prior knowledge and deepen their learning. However, this is not a consistent picture across the school. While there are high expectations of pupils' behaviour in most lessons, there are still occasions where work is not pitched appropriately and results in the low-level disengagement of a minority of pupils.
- In mathematics, work is well matched to the abilities of pupils. Pupils work well together to solve problems. They can clearly articulate their learning to their peers and to the teacher. Assessment is used well to identify regular errors and misconceptions which are then corrected. Pupils know the level they are working at and what they need to do to improve. This results in progress which is good for all groups of pupils.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding.

- Pupils are proud of their achievements and of their school. The school's open culture promotes all aspects of pupils' welfare. Pupils feel very safe and well cared for. They know how to keep themselves safe, including when using social media and the internet. They know whom to go to if they have a concern and trust staff to take action to resolve any concerns they may have. Pupils know how to keep healthy both physically and emotionally.
- The school's work to promote respect and tolerance of diversity is exemplary. Displays around the school, the use of external speakers and pupil-led assemblies contribute well to this. Inspectors saw an assembly delivered to Year 9 by a group of pupils called 'Fusion'. This helped pupils to learn more about the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils. Pupils listened intently showing great support and respect.
- Pupils respect the views of others and have a good understanding of the school's and British values. Members of the school council enjoy the responsibilities they are given. They, along with pupils who are part of BLISS, have been able to work with school leaders to make changes to school uniform and the reward system. BLISS members observe lessons and feed back to teachers with their views of what helps them to learn. Pupils told inspectors, 'Our voice is heard'.
- Pupils are aware of different types of bullying and a very large majority say that staff deal with it effectively and that they know whom to go to if they have a concern. Most parents said that the school deals effectively with bullying and ensures that its pupils are well behaved.
- Pupils are well informed about the next steps in their education through high-quality careers information and guidance. They know about different types of qualification at GCSE and how these can lead to A-level or BTEC qualifications and then university, apprenticeships or employment.
- Pupils from all year groups make good use of the early morning provision. The library and café provide a safe environment for pupils to do homework, use computers, revise or simply talk to each other before school. Pupils benefit from a wide range of extra-curricular activities.
- Displays around the school show pupils' strong spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, for example in learning about challenging stereotypes, taking part in charity and community work, and celebrating pupils' success through the 'wall of fame'.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- Pupils are courteous and polite. The school is a calm orderly environment with clearly established routines. In most lessons, pupils concentrate and try hard.
- Most pupils want to be in school and attend well. Leaders have implemented rigorous strategies to improve attendance. As a result, attendance is improving and was in line with the national average last year. Pupils arrive at school, and to their lessons, punctually and are well prepared for learning.

- Pupils arrive at school in an orderly, sensible way. They congregate in social areas to talk and to use school equipment appropriately, such as for table tennis. Pupils move between lessons quickly and purposefully, and during social time behave well. Relationships between staff on duty are good, with pupils showing courtesy and respect to staff and visitors.
- Leaders have raised expectations about behaviour across the school and monitor behaviour systems effectively to ensure that they are doing all that they can to bring about improvements and support for pupils. As a result, behaviour continues to improve. For example, there have been no permanent exclusions this year and the number of fixed-term exclusions remains low.
- The very small number of pupils who are educated in the school's alternative provision are well cared for and behave well.

Outcomes for pupils

Requires improvement

- Pupils' progress is variable and still requires improvement. In 2016, while the attainment of pupils was broadly in line, the overall progress made by pupils was below the national average. In particular, disadvantaged pupils and those who had special educational needs and/or disabilities did not make the progress of which they were capable.
- In 2016, disadvantaged pupils' progress, including the most able, was well below that of other pupils nationally. In particular, these pupils underachieved considerably in English and science. Currently, new actions taken by leaders, following a recent pupil premium review, have not had time to make a positive impact on disadvantaged pupils' outcomes.
- The progress and outcomes of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is inconsistent across the school. In 2016, these pupils made progress considerably below the national average for all pupils. However, these pupils are now making better progress, although not consistently across a range of subjects.
- While achievement across the school in key stages 3 and 4 is starting to improve in English and mathematics, science achievement remains low. Inconsistency and turbulence in staffing have meant that pupils receive a variable experience in their learning in science over time.
- In 2016, the most able pupils' progress was well below that of other pupils nationally and within the school. In particular, these pupils underachieved considerably in English, science, languages and humanities. Teaching across a range of subjects now challenges the most able pupils. Attainment and progress for this group of pupils are starting to improve.
- There is an ethos of reading across the school. Pupils read widely and often, with fluency appropriate for their age. Leaders place an emphasis on this, promoting reading for understanding and enjoyment. The school's latest assessment information shows that Year 7 pupils eligible for the catch-up premium are making good progress in developing their reading skills.

- Despite underachievement in key stage 4, the number of pupils who go on to further education or training remains high. This is because the quality of information, advice and guidance is tailored to individual pupils, and helps them to achieve appropriate next steps in their education or training.

16 to 19 study programmes

Good

- Leadership and management of the sixth form are strong. Leaders have taken action since the previous inspection to bring sustained improvements to the provision for students. The sixth form has increased in size and offers a broad range of academic and vocational options. These changes to the curriculum, plus improved teaching, support and guidance, have led to improved outcomes. In 2016, students made good progress, including progress in vocational options that was above the national average. Consequently, provision in the sixth form is securely good.
- Teaching, learning and assessment in the sixth form are effective. Teachers use their subject knowledge to plan and support students in making good progress. Questioning is a strength of the teaching in the sixth form, because it supports students to develop their understanding and skills. For example, in a Year 12 media lesson, the teachers' questioning and interaction with students enabled them to define stereotypes of men in media studies, with the emphasis on audience and representation.
- Students take part in a range of extra-curricular activities and have opportunities to take on leadership roles. Some are members of the sixth-form leadership team. Others are whole-school prefects, subject prefects, peer mentors, paired readers or part of the BLISS group. The head boy and head girl present students' views to the governing body.
- Sixth-form students feel that they are well cared for. They are well motivated and behave well. They provide excellent role models to the younger pupils. They are extremely positive about the school, describing it as a 'great school'. They said that the school has really helped them to choose the right courses and to be fully aware of opportunities when they leave.
- The majority of Year 12 students go on into Year 13 with a small number going to college or leaving to take up apprenticeships. Leaders have taken action to improve retention in biology and chemistry through the introduction of an applied science course. In psychology, changes in staff and entry requirements have led to improved progress and an increase in the number of students carrying on with the course into Year 13.
- Students are well supported with impartial careers advice and guidance, and they go on to apprenticeships, university or employment. Students say that they feel well prepared for the next stage of their education. An increasing number go on to Russell Group (prestige) universities and those applying to Oxford or Cambridge are well prepared. Year 13 students mentor Year 12 students who aspire to go to Oxford or Cambridge universities.

- Students who need to resit qualifications are well supported through timetabled lessons and good teaching. As a result, they are in line with the national average for resit achievement.

School details

Unique reference number	137637
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	10031398

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in 16 to 19 study programmes	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1,400
Of which, number on roll in 16 to 19 study programmes	250
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mark Stocker
Principal	Chris Ingate
Telephone number	01279 655 936
Website	www.birchwoodonline.co.uk
Email address	cingate@birchwoodhigh.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	1–2 July 2015

Information about this school

- The school is a larger than average-sized secondary school. It has a sixth form which is increasing in popularity and continues to expand.
- The school has faced turbulence in staffing, most notably in science.
- The school uses the alternative provider, Reintegration Team West, to provide alternative provision for a very small number of pupils.
- The school meets requirements on the publication of specified information on its website.

- The school complies with Department for Education guidance on what academies should publish.
- Almost all pupils are White British. The vast majority of pupils speak English as their first language.
- The proportion of pupils who have support for special educational needs and/or disabilities or an education, health and care plan is broadly in line with the national average.
- The proportion of disadvantaged pupils supported by the pupil premium is below the national average.
- The school meets the current government floor standards, which set minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress by the end of key stage 4.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors visited 47 lessons and scrutinised a range of pupils' work. Some of these lesson visits were undertaken with members of the school's leadership.
- Inspectors met with senior leaders, middle leaders and governors. Inspectors also met with teachers who are new to the profession, trainee teachers, support staff, the school council and pupils. Meetings were also held with governors and a representative from the local authority who works with school leaders.
- Inspectors scrutinised a range of school documentation including that relating to policies, the minutes of governors' meetings, external review documents, school improvement documents, self-evaluation documents, and student achievement, behaviour and attendance data.
- Inspectors took account of 143 relevant contributions made by parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and 77 responses from the staff survey.

Inspection team

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David Davies	Ofsted Inspector
Carole Herman	Ofsted Inspector

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