

Birchwood High School

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

Inspection dates

27–28 June 2019

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- School leaders have addressed the areas needing improvement identified at the previous inspection.
- The progress that pupils make at key stage 4 has been in line with the national average for the last two years.
- Leaders are open in evaluating their school and know its strengths and weaknesses well.
- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is improving, because leaders have ensured that training and performance-management targets are closely aligned to improvement priorities.
- Leaders, including governors, continually evaluate the curriculum to ensure it remains rich and relevant.
- Disadvantaged pupils in the school now make strong progress, because leaders have sharpened how they spend pupil premium funding.
- The personal development and welfare of pupils are outstanding. Pupils play a key role in contributing to the ongoing improvement.
- The school's inclusive ethos ensures that diversity is celebrated, and this encourages all pupils to believe they can succeed.
- Pupils attend well, because they enjoy school.
- The sixth form is effective and successful. Students who attend it feel very proud to be part of it.
- Teachers use skilful questioning and have very high expectations of the presentation and organisation of work.
- Teachers promote literacy well, including reading skills. Sometimes, they do not place enough emphasis on pupils mastering subject-specific vocabulary.
- Pupils conduct themselves well around the school and in lessons. They do not behave consistently as well with staff who are not their regular teachers.
- Teaching is less consistently strong in a small minority of subjects, including science.
- Teachers do not always set homework which embeds or deepens learning.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Strengthen teaching, learning and assessment by:
 - improving the impact of homework so it consistently deepens and consolidates learning
 - ensuring that teachers place more emphasis on pupils mastering and using subject-specific vocabulary
 - eliminating the remaining variability in the quality of teaching, including in science.
- Strengthen behaviour by ensuring that standards of behaviour are high when pupils are not taught by their regular teacher.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- The determined and reflective leadership of the principal and other senior leaders has ensured that the school has improved rapidly since the previous inspection. The strength of leadership is recognised overwhelmingly by parents and pupils.
- The school articulates its ethos as 'the Birchwood ABC'. This embodies the belief that every pupil can 'achieve, belong and conquer.' This is a highly inclusive school, where there are high expectations that this can be true for all pupils, regardless of their background, race, religion or sexuality.
- School leaders ensure that the school retains a positive position at the heart of its local community. The school is a thriving centre of activity and learning for people of all ages well beyond the normal school day.
- Since the previous inspection, school leaders have undertaken a rigorous evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses. There is now a clear understanding of what the school does well and the priorities for further improvement. This knowledge informs plans to improve teaching and learning.
- The school's professional development programme is carefully planned to improve the skills of individual teachers, while enabling the school to meet its development priorities. Performance management systems have been strengthened and targets are linked to the school's priorities. As a result, the quality of teaching is improving, and teaching is highly effective in a range of curriculum areas.
- Teachers in charge of curriculum areas and pastoral teams are effective. They appreciate both the clear systems that guide their work and the support of senior leaders. They are becoming more confident so that they can bring about positive change in their own areas.
- School leaders have re-evaluated their use of pupil premium funding since the previous inspection. They have strengthened the support that disadvantaged pupils receive outside the classroom, while introducing a new focus on how they are taught within their subject lessons. This is now having a positive impact on the progress of disadvantaged pupils, and they are rapidly catching up with their peers. Leaders also ensure that literacy and numeracy Year 7 catch-up funding is used effectively.
- The curriculum is rich and relevant and covers the humanities and linguistic, mathematical, scientific, technical, social, physical and artistic learning. Leaders regularly evaluate how the curriculum is supporting teaching and learning and how it can be strengthened further. There is a wide range of extra-curricular activities, which are well attended and help to enhance pupils' learning and positive attitudes.
- The school develops pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural understanding through subject lessons, assemblies, themed days and tutorial periods. As a result, pupils are well prepared for life in modern Britain. They receive high-quality careers information and guidance in all year groups, and this helps them move successfully to the next stage of their education, training or employment.

Governance of the school

- Governance is very effective. Governors are expert and experienced. They make a highly positive contribution to determining the strategic direction of the school. They successfully analyse and evaluate information about the school's performance and ensure that effective plans are in place to promote further improvement.
- Governors undertake their responsibilities rigorously. They fulfil all their duties, such as ensuring that safeguarding procedures, including those concerned with dealing with the threat of radicalisation, are rigorous and thorough. Governors undertake relevant training and regularly make visits to the school so they are in the strongest possible position to ask challenging questions of the school's leadership.
- Governors do not necessarily take the information they are given by school leaders at face value. They have strengthened their oversight of how additional funding is spent, including the funding for those in receipt of the pupil premium, since the previous inspection.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Leaders have a relentless focus upon ensuring the safety and well-being of pupils, in particular those who are vulnerable or at risk. This has contributed to a transparent and robust culture of safeguarding. All staff are aware of their role in ensuring pupils' safety and welfare. Child-protection policies are clear and understood by staff. They have had relevant safeguarding training, which is regularly updated.
- Pupils say they feel very safe in school. They all say that there is an adult they trust to speak to if they have a problem. The curriculum helps pupils to deal with any risks they may routinely face, including the use of the internet and social networking sites. Pupils report that the advice they receive does help to shape their behaviour. Pupils are confident that poor behaviour, including bullying, is rare and is dealt with effectively if it does occur.
- Staff are quick to identify any concerns that they have about pupils and always follow them up with due urgency. They liaise effectively with external agencies so that pupils get the support that they require quickly. Information is shared effectively with parents and carers on these occasions, and constructive working relationships with other agencies help to keep pupils safe. The school successfully coordinates the care and welfare of the small number of children looked after who attend the school.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Effective teaching has a positive impact on learning, and pupils make strong progress in a wide range of subjects as a result.
- There is a purposeful and productive atmosphere in almost all lessons. Teachers create very positive, trusting relationships. Pupils listen attentively to teachers' explanations and follow instructions diligently. They are quick to ask for help if they need additional support.

- Teachers plan lessons thoughtfully and thoroughly. They use the detailed information which is made available to them about pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) to ensure that the work is accessible to them.
- Teachers use skilful and well-judged questioning to evaluate what their pupils understand and to encourage them to reflect upon their learning. Pupils are confident to offer answers and are not afraid to make mistakes.
- Teachers ensure that pupils with lower starting points are not left behind. They are patient in identifying and addressing misconceptions.
- Teachers usually have high expectations of what all pupils can achieve in lessons. The strongest teaching, over time, routinely incorporates tasks which stretch the most able pupils from the outset of every lesson.
- In most lessons, pupils take great pride in producing work, because teachers have high expectations of presentation. As a result, most pupils write coherently to support future revision.
- The school has made progress in improving the literacy of pupils across the curriculum. Pupils regularly read extended texts and write in a range of styles in subjects other than English. However, in some lessons, teachers do not give pupils a secure enough mastery of important subject-specific vocabulary.
- Teaching is particularly strong in mathematics. This is because teachers use regular assessment systematically to identify any gaps in what pupils understand and to plan their teaching to address them. The quality of teaching is less consistent in a minority of other subjects, including science.
- Some teachers do not plan homework which coherently builds upon or embeds what pupils have learned in lessons to the extent that the school expects. This means that homework does not always maintain the same level of challenge that pupils have experienced in their lessons.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding.
- Pupils have an exceptional range of leadership opportunities to give them a genuine say in developments at the school. The 'Better learning in school society' (BLISS) provides a mechanism for pupils to provide feedback about their learning experience and therefore helps to improve teaching and learning. The school council has representatives from every year group and provides another way for the voice of pupils to be considered when any changes are being planned.
- The school is an inclusive community in which diversity and difference are positively valued and championed. The 'Fusion' group, which promotes equality, including for lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils, has a very high profile within the school and has its own dedicated room. Pupils are actively taught about tolerance through assemblies, the tutorial programme and lessons across the curriculum. All these activities contribute positively to how pupils act in school and treat each other.

- School leaders have adopted a range of successful strategies to encourage very positive pupil attitudes. The school's positive rewards system and personal development curriculum are successful in encouraging pupils to reflect on their own attributes as learners. As a result, pupils are confident and self-assured, and they can explain how the school has supported them in their learning.
- The school develops the physical and emotional well-being of pupils through a range of subjects across the curriculum, including drama, dance, physical education, religious education and food technology. A large number of pupils benefit from the range of extra-curricular activities available, including sport, music and the arts. Pupils can contribute to ensuring that they can eat healthily through the school nutrition action group (SNAG).
- Pupils are taught effectively about risk and how to keep themselves safe. They understand different types of bullying and know whom to speak to if they experience anything which makes them feel unsafe.
- Pupils are very well informed about the next steps in their education through high-quality careers information and guidance, and this contributes to high proportions of pupils moving on to destinations which are right for them.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- Teachers apply the school's behaviour policy of 'choices and consequences' consistently and effectively. As a result, behaviour in lessons does not usually impede learning.
- Pupils look after the school site very well and are polite and courteous to adults and each other. They move around the school in a measured, calm and orderly fashion. They wear their uniforms smartly and are careful of how they dispose of any litter.
- Pupils enjoy school, so they attend regularly and punctually. The school has worked very effectively to maintain high levels of attendance. Levels of both absence and persistent absence are better than the national average.
- The proportion of fixed-term and permanent exclusions is lower than the national average. The school's records show that the number of other behaviour-related sanctions remains small. The school has dealt effectively with the very small number of bullying incidents that have occurred. Pupils say they have confidence in the systems that are in place to deter and respond to bullying.
- The school monitors effectively the behaviour and attendance of pupils who are taught off site. The impact of educating some pupils in this way is highly positive in terms of improving their attitudes, punctuality and attendance.
- Pupil behaviour is not as consistently positive when pupils are taught by staff who are not their regular teachers. This is because the school's discipline policy is not so rigorously applied on these occasions.

Outcomes for pupils

Good

- The achievement of pupils at the school has strengthened markedly since the previous

inspection. The progress made by pupils at key stage 4 over the last two years has been in line with the national average.

- Progress has been particularly strong in some curriculum areas. In 2018, the progress made by pupils at key stage 4 in mathematics and modern foreign languages was significantly above the national average. Subjects which were identified as making weak progress at the time of the previous inspection, such as science, have made progress in line with the national average in each year since.
- Pupils currently in the school are making strong progress in a wide range of curriculum areas. From their different starting points, pupils make good progress. Pupils with SEND are also making strong progress from their individual starting points.
- The school's focus on literacy across the curriculum is having a positive impact on developing pupils' skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening. The skills pupils develop equip them effectively for the next stage of their education or employment.
- Disadvantaged pupils did not make the progress they should have at key stage 4 in 2018 because of gaps in their learning due to previously weaker teaching. The progress of current disadvantaged pupils is improving rapidly and is now very close to that of other pupils in the school. This is as a result of highly effective teaching and a well-planned programme of additional support.
- The school closely monitors the progress of the small number of pupils who are educated off-site through programmes of alternative provision, ensuring they attend regularly and follow appropriate courses. Consequently, both the attitudes and progress of these pupils are better than they had been before they started attending such provision.
- The pupils who join the school behind their peers in English and mathematics benefit greatly from the additional support provided by the school. This ensures that they have made strong progress towards catching up with their peers by the end of Year 7.
- The proportion of pupils entered for the EBacc combination of subjects in 2017 and 2018 was below the national average. Leaders have identified this as an issue, and the steps they have taken have led to an increase in the number of pupils currently in key stage 4 choosing to follow these subjects.

16 to 19 study programmes

Good

- The leadership of the sixth form is very effective. Leaders have a clear vision for the development of the sixth form, which they communicate clearly. Leaders responded quickly and decisively to disappointing academic outcomes in 2018, and consequently a clear action plan has been put in place which is securing rapid improvement.
- Students currently in Years 12 and 13 are making strong progress in a wide range of A-level courses, which is consistent with the positive progress that was previously made in 2016 and 2017. The progress made by students following vocational courses has been in line with or above the national average for the last three years. Students currently in the sixth form continue to make strong progress in these subjects. Disadvantaged students also make positive progress.
- A small number of students join the sixth form without GCSE passes at grade 4 or

above in English or mathematics. The proportion of these students who improved their grade and achieved a good pass in these subjects in 2018 was better than the national average.

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment in the sixth form is strong. Lessons are well planned and routinely take account of the assessment information that is available to teachers about individual students. Teachers expect students to reflect in a sophisticated way on their own learning.
- Sixth-form students make a very positive contribution to the ethos of the wider school. They undertake leadership roles, including as head boy, head girl and prefects. They serve as constructive role models for younger pupils.
- The work of the sixth form to promote the personal development, behaviour and welfare of students is particularly effective. Sixth-form students know how to keep themselves safe. The student leadership team contributes constructively to shaping their curriculum. For example, students were keen to receive more information about financial planning, and this has been provided as a result.
- The behaviour of students in the sixth form is excellent. Students take pride in their school and in their work, and are committed to doing well. They conduct themselves in a mature and responsible way. They consistently follow the school's dress code and look very smart. There are high expectations of attendance and punctuality, and these have a positive impact.
- Careers advice and guidance for students in the sixth form are highly effective. They enable students to make informed decisions about the next steps in their education. These have contributed to improving the proportion of students who complete courses. A very large majority of students gain places at appropriate higher education courses. A significant proportion of students are accepted at the highly regarded Russell Group universities.
- The school meets the requirements for the provision of 16 to 19 study programmes. Leaders effectively monitor all elements of the study programmes, including non-qualification activities. There is an extensive programme of enrichment activities, and employability skills are well delivered. All students undertake a week of work experience in Year 12.

School details

Unique reference number	137637
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	10103373

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 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in 16 to 19 study programmes	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1,352
Of which, number on roll in 16 to 19 study programmes	219
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair	Mark Stocker
Principal	Chris Ingate
Telephone number	0127 965 5936
Website	www.birchwoodonline.co.uk
Email address	cingate@birchwoodhigh.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	9–10 May 2017

Information about this school

- The school is a larger than the average-sized secondary school.
- The school uses Reintegration West in Harlow, Rivers Education Support Centre in Hertford, CTP Training Academy in Harlow and Hertford Regional College at Broxbourne to provide alternative provision for a small number of pupils.
- The proportion of disadvantaged pupils supported by the pupil premium is below the national average.
- A large majority of pupils are White British. Almost all pupils speak English as their first language.

- The proportion of pupils with SEND who have support or an education, health and care plan is broadly in line with the national average.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors visited 50 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, teachers, governors and pupils. A meeting was also held with a representative from the local authority who works with school leaders.
- Inspectors scrutinised a range of school documentation, including that relating to policies, governors' meetings, school improvement, self-evaluation and information about attendance and behaviour.
- Inspectors took account of 179 contributions made by parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, which included 169 text responses, and 101 responses to the staff survey.

Inspection team

Paul Lawrence, lead inspector	Ofsted Inspector
Peter Whear	Ofsted Inspector
Rowena Simmons	Ofsted Inspector
Brenda Watson	Ofsted Inspector
Rob James	Ofsted Inspector

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In the report, 'disadvantaged pupils' refers to those pupils who attract government pupil premium funding: pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years and pupils in care or who left care through adoption or another formal route. www.gov.uk/pupil-premium-information-for-schools-and-alternative-provision-settings.

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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