

Simon Balle School

Mangrove Road, Hertford, SG13 8AJ

Inspection dates 17-18 September 2013

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Good	2
	This inspection:	Good	2
Achievement of pupils		Good	2
Quality of teaching		Good	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Good	2
Leadership and management		Good	2

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school.

- Students make good progress. The proportion of students achieving five GCSE grades at A* to C, including English and mathematics, is typically above average.
- Teachers plan imaginative activities which encourage students to show initiative and find things out for themselves. There are examples of outstanding teaching across a number of subjects, including English, mathematics and science.
- Care and support for students are outstanding because students' well-being is a high priority for school leaders.
- Attendance is above average because students value what the school offers them. The school is a happy, friendly and caring community where students thrive.
- The headteacher and her senior leadership team are relentless in their drive to make sure that the school provides a high quality all-round education for all so that teaching and students' achievement have improved.
- Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is strong. Students' excellence in sports and music is recognised both regionally and nationally.
- Governors hold senior leaders to account through a good balance of challenge and support. The governing body has an excellent understanding of the school's performance.
- Achievement in the sixth form is outstanding because teaching is at least good and often outstanding. Students make excellent progress on a range of courses and are well prepared for their futures.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- A minority of teaching requires improvement because less-able students do not always receive the challenge they need to accelerate their progress.
- Senior leaders recognise that developing the role of subject leaders in ensuring teaching is never less than good is a key area for development.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 44 lessons, seven of which were observed jointly with senior leaders.
- Inspectors held meetings with senior and subject leaders, groups of students, the Chair and members of the Governing Body, and spoke with a local authority representative who supports the school's work.
- Inspectors considered the views of the 194 parents who responded to Parent View, the online questionnaire, and the 46 parents and staff from local primary schools who contacted the inspection team by email. They analysed the results of the staff questionnaire to which 34 replies were received.
- Inspectors looked at the school's data on students' progress, lesson plans, minutes of meetings and records relating to behaviour, safety and attendance. They also reviewed the school's checks on how well it is doing and school improvement plans.

Inspection team

Lisa Fraser, Lead inspector	Additional Inspector
David Belsey	Additional Inspector
Pankaj Patel	Additional Inspector
David Webster	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The school is larger than most secondary schools.
- The majority of students are from White British backgrounds.
- The proportion of students eligible for the pupil premium, which provides additional funding for those pupils who are known to be eligible for free school meals and those children that are looked after, is below average.
- The proportion of disabled students and those who have special educational needs supported through school action is below average. The proportion of students supported at school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is also below average.
- The headteacher is a local leader in education.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for students' attainment and progress.
- Four students in Years 10 and 11 attend off-site alternative provision for part of their learning at Broxbourne College or at a local school.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of teaching by:
 - making sure students are engaged in all lessons by increasing the level of challenge even further, particularly for less-able students
 - sharing the existing outstanding practice in some subjects more widely to enable all teachers to develop new skills.
- Improve the quality of leadership at subject level by:
 - ensuring that heads of subject and other leaders receive the training and support they need to drive improvements so that teaching is never less than good.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils is good

- Students enter the school with skills in reading, writing and mathematics which are significantly above national average. By the end of Year 11, the proportion of students achieving five passes at GCSE grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, is typically significantly above average. Higher numbers of students make the progress expected in both English and mathematics than that expected nationally. This indicates that students are making good progress.
- Within these results there are significant successes: students' achievement in art, geography and religious education all exceed national averages. Almost a third of students consistently achieve the highest grades at GCSE in five subjects or more.
- In 2013 the proportion of more-able students who attained the top grades increased. A third of Year 11 students entered for GCSE mathematics attained an A* or A grade pass. Above-average numbers of students also achieved the top grades in English, history and the sciences. The school does not enter students early for examinations.
- Disabled students and those who have special educational needs supported at school action plus are making good progress overall as a result of initiatives such as reading support programmes which have recently been introduced under the strong new leadership of special educational needs.
- Year 7 catch-up funding has been used to fund additional teaching assistants who work with selected students. As a result, three quarters of these students exceeded their targets by the end of last academic year. Students in Year 10 who study off-site for part of their learning are achieving well in these first few weeks.
- Gaps in attainment between students eligible for the pupil premium and their peers are improving over time. Pupil premium funding is used to fund a range of initiatives including mentors who monitor students' progress and small group teaching for students who are falling behind. Current school data indicate Year 10 students eligible for the pupil premium are half a grade behind their peers in English and just over a grade behind in mathematics.
- Achievement in the sixth form is outstanding. Students' attainment at both AS and A2 level is well above average and continuing to improve. Top grades are achieved by above-average numbers of students across the range of subject areas, including sociology, music technology and chemistry. Students' attainment in level 3 vocational qualifications is similarly high.
- All students are well-prepared for the next stage in their learning. Many go on to study at top universities, including Oxford and Cambridge.

The quality of teaching is good

- The quality of teaching is good with some examples of outstanding teaching across a number of subjects, including English, mathematics and science.
- In the majority of lessons, relationships between students and teachers are excellent. Teachers skilfully plan opportunities for students to take the lead in their learning and find things out for

themselves and from each other. In these lessons, expectations are high and students rise to the challenges their teachers set. For example, students in a Year 11 English lesson on 'An Inspector Calls' made outstanding progress in their understanding of the play's themes by exploring the text through group discussion.

- Senior leaders have worked hard to develop students' reading and speaking skills. Opportunities to meet published authors and the weekly 'Speakers corner' session in the refurbished library, where both students and staff have the chance to speak to an audience about a topic of their choice, are popular with students.
- The quality of marking is generally good. Students receive high-quality verbal feedback from their teachers in lessons. In the majority of subjects students know their targets and what they need to do to improve their work.
- Teaching is good but not outstanding because a small minority of teaching requires improvement. Less-able students are not always challenged to meet and exceed their targets.
- Outstanding progress was made in a Year 8 hockey lesson as a result of the teacher's excellent questioning techniques which enabled students to understand and then self-correct errors in their performance. In less effective lessons students do not always have the opportunity to revisit their learning to check that no misunderstandings remain.
- In the sixth form, teaching is never less than good and often outstanding. Lessons are characterised by a positive working atmosphere and numerous opportunities for thoughtful debate and high-quality discussion. Teaching expertly guides learning, prompting and encouraging students to show initiative and think for themselves.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are good

- Behaviour and safety are good and some aspects are outstanding.
- Students have exceptionally positive attitudes to learning as a result of the school's outstandingly positive ethos. In the vast majority of lessons students participate enthusiastically, are keen to do well and work especially well collaboratively. Around the school students are polite, well-mannered and friendly.
- Attendance is excellent because students are happy and value what the school offers them. Both persistent absence and fixed-term exclusions are well below average as a result of the excellent leadership of this area and good relationships with families. There have been no permanent exclusions for many years.
- Leaders care for students very well and understand their needs. Students are given plenty of individual support which makes an outstanding contribution to their well being and promotes their good achievement. Good working with specialist outside agencies and the school counsellor provide help for students experiencing problems because leaders are committed to promoting equality and tackling discrimination.
- Students say they feel very safe at school and parents agree. Incidents of racism and bullying are particularly low and students understand the dangers of bullying in all its forms, including that based on racism and homophobia. Transition arrangements with local primaries are strong and students in Year 7 who have just joined the school say they have settled in well.

- Year councils and the student parliament offer students the opportunity to have their views heard. In discussions on topical and sometimes sensitive issues during registration time students consider their own views and those of others with great maturity.
- Older students demonstrate both an understanding of different cultural perspectives and empathy for others. Students are keen to explore how they can make a difference. For example, a group of sixth form students delivered a passionate assembly to their peers about the problems facing students in the school's South African link school.
- Behaviour and safety are not outstanding because in a minority of lessons, where teaching is less effective, students are not always fully engaged in their learning.

The leadership and management are good

- The headteacher and her team of senior leaders demonstrate a high degree of ambition, drive and determination for the school to succeed. Together they have ensured that several aspects of the school's work are outstanding. Senior leaders have the full backing of staff because they are good and outstanding teachers who lead by example.
- Self-evaluation indicates that leaders have an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses, are not complacent and are continuing to drive the school forward. Leadership of the sixth form is outstanding because students are making excellent progress.
- Systems for monitoring and evaluating the quality of teaching are good. Where teaching is observed to require improvement, staff benefit from focused mentoring from senior leaders. High numbers of staff have signed up voluntarily for the school's coaching programme which aims to share best practice.
- The management of teachers' performance is linked to the national 'Teachers' Standards' and is used to inform decisions around pay and reward good performance. Targets are appropriate for teachers at every stage in their careers and link clearly to the school's development needs.
- Local primary schools highly rate the support they receive from school leaders to improve their quality of teaching as part of the school's 'Professional Learning Community'. Senior leaders make good use of support from local authority advisers and external consultants to target the few areas for improvement.
- The curriculum combines academic rigour with alternative in-house provision which meets students' individual needs. Students speak positively about the strong guidance they receive when choosing their options subjects.
- Much of the school's improvement work is driven by the headteacher and her team. Subject leaders are developing in their role but are not yet taking full responsibility for leading improvements, including ensuring that teaching is never less than good within their subject teams.
- Leaders work exceptionally hard to ensure good communications with parents. High numbers of parents contacted the inspection team to express their appreciation for the school's work, particularly around opportunities in music and the outstanding care and support students receive.

- Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is strong, reinforced by the school's positive ethos and students' outstanding achievement in history, geography and religious education. Students are well-informed about communities which may be different to their own and demonstrate high levels of understanding and respect for the views and beliefs of others. Students' excellence in sporting and musical activities is recognised both regionally and nationally. High numbers of students participate in extra-curricular activities with over a third learning a musical instrument.
- All safeguarding requirements are met. Staff are fully trained and knowledgeable about risk assessment and child-protection issues. The school takes all reasonable steps to ensure the behaviour and safety of students when attending off-site provision.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - The governing body brings a wide range of skills from business and industry to the school. Governors have an excellent understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses and know about the quality of teaching, performance management and what the school is doing to reward good teaching and tackle underperformance. Governors hold senior leaders to account by asking challenging questions and providing support in equal measure. Governors have a detailed understanding of published data and are keenly determined to reduce the gap in achievement for students eligible for the pupil premium still further. Governors have played an active role in improvements in the sixth form since the previous inspection. The governing body is committed to supporting the school by attending appropriate training.

What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>

School details

Unique reference number	117519
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	429552

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	1056
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	240
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Viv Jones
Headteacher	Alison Saunders
Date of previous school inspection	14 January 2009
Telephone number	01992 410400
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