

The Priory School

Bedford Road, Hitchin, SG5 2UR

Inspection dates 19–20 March 2013

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Satisfactory	3
	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.

- The proportion of students gaining five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C including English and mathematics is in line with the national average. Student progress has improved and is now good.
- Teaching is good. It has improved since the last inspection and some is now outstanding. Most lessons are well planned, with a range of interesting activities.
- Students' literacy and numeracy skills are developed well through a range of subjects.
- Students who need extra help to catch up are given good support. As a result, they are making at least good progress and the gaps between different groups are closing.
- Students are keen to learn and they behave well in lessons and when moving around the school. They say they feel valued and respected, and appreciate the range of activities available to them.
- The sixth form is good. Students achieve well and make a positive contribution to the life of the school.
- School leaders have rightly focused on raising standards and improving the quality of teaching and learning.
- The governors know the school well. They know its strengths and what it needs to do to improve further. They hold staff to account for the school's performance and the quality of teaching.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- While improvements in science are leading to students making better progress, teachers do not always plan lessons to meet the students' differing needs.
- Students are not always given enough encouragement to take more responsibility for their own learning and progress.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 46 lessons or part lessons, of which 11 were joint observations with senior leaders.
- Inspectors spoke to groups of students and looked at samples of students' work.
- Meetings were held with a wide range of staff, including the headteacher, senior leaders and middle leaders, members of the governing body and a representative of the local authority.
- Inspectors took account of the 292 responses to the online questionnaire, Parent View, three letters from parents and the 95 responses to the staff questionnaire during the inspection.
- Inspectors looked at a range of documents including the school's summary of its strengths and weaknesses, records of student progress, other monitoring records and safeguarding documentation.

Inspection team

David Talbot, Lead inspector	Additional Inspector
Miranda Perry	Additional Inspector
Jane Ladner	Additional Inspector
Mehar Brar	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- This is an average-sized secondary school with a sixth form.
- The proportion of students eligible for the pupil premium, which provides additional funding for students known to be eligible for free school meals, children looked after by the local authority and those who have a parent in the armed forces, is lower than the national average.
- The school receives additional government funds for students now in Year 7 who did not achieve the expected Level 4 in English at the end of Key Stage 2.
- Less than a quarter of students are from minority ethnic groups.
- The proportion of students whose first language is not English is well below that found nationally and is declining.
- The proportion of disabled students and those who have special educational needs is above that found nationally. The proportion supported at school action plus or through a statement of special educational needs is also above average.
- The school is part of the Hitchin Sixth Form Consortium with Hitchin Boys' School and Hitchin Girls' School.
- A small number of students attend off-site provision at North Hertfordshire Education Support Centre and North Hertfordshire College.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which are the minimum levels expected for students' attainment and progress.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise student achievement further by building on the current improvements in science by:
 - recognising and responding to students' prior learning
 - adapting lessons so that students make at least as good progress as they do in English and mathematics.
- Improve the behaviour of the students so that it is outstanding by encouraging them to take greater responsibility for their own learning.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils is good

- Students mostly join the school with attainment that is broadly similar to the national averages. However, the attainment of current Year 11 students was significantly lower than average when they joined the school.
- The proportion of students gaining five or more GCSE grades A* to C including English and mathematics was average in 2012. The attainment of the majority of Year 11 students in five or more GCSE subjects including English and mathematics is currently above average. Student attainment in some subjects, including French, history, sociology and statistics was high in 2012.
- Progress in mathematics is improving rapidly and the percentage of students making at least the progress expected of them is above the national average. The progress of students in English has been similar to national averages in recent years but data held by the school shows that this has accelerated during this school year. Students are currently making at least good progress in both English and mathematics, and this was confirmed by progress observed in lessons, evidenced in work samples and acknowledged by students in discussion.
- In the past students have not made good progress in science but progress is now improving rapidly. In a Year 11 physics lesson, a sequence of well-chosen and exciting tasks kept the students interested and encouraged them to think for themselves.
- The school makes good use of the pupil premium to provide extra staffing and intervention programmes to help students make progress. Results in English and mathematics for these students have been equivalent to one grade lower than their peers. However, as a result of the very well targeted support they receive, that gap is closing rapidly and, in the case of mathematics, students eligible for the pupil premium are making better progress than other students.
- The progress of disabled students and those who have special educational needs is improving as a result of the extensive support offered by teachers and other adults who are well aware of each individual student's needs.
- The school provides good support for those students in Year 7 who find reading difficult and this is helping them to make progress. The Year 7 students find the support they receive from Year 12 students each week both enjoyable and helpful.
- Students are entered for GCSE mathematics early in Year 11, and those meeting or exceeding their target grade begin to study either a Level 3 Additional Maths qualification, or a work-related course in personal finance. All students continue studying mathematics until the end of Year 11 and they continue to make good progress in the subject.
- The progress of students who attend off-site provision is monitored carefully and they achieve well.
- Students make at least the progress they should make in the sixth form in the broad range of subjects offered by the school and the other two schools in the consortium. At AS level, students make good progress and in vocational subjects their progress is outstanding. The progress of sixth-form students is monitored very carefully and students who are underachieving are provided with support that helps them to improve.

- Parents and carers who expressed a view were overwhelmingly positive about the progress their child was making and the information the school provides about that progress.

The quality of teaching is good

- The quality of teaching has improved since the last inspection, with most of the teaching observed being good. Outstanding teaching was seen in all key stages and in a range of subjects, including English, mathematics, science, history and citizenship.
- Most teachers make good use of information about students' previous learning to plan lessons with more demanding work for all students, including more-able students. This is less successful in science, where planning does not always take account of the differing needs of the students in the class or build on knowledge they have already gained.
- Teachers provide helpful feedback to students. This includes useful information about the students' current progress as well as what they need to do to improve. In some subjects, the students are encouraged to respond to the teacher's comments and this helps them to think carefully about what the teacher has said.
- Where teaching is outstanding, teachers provide a range of activities that result in students making rapid gains in their learning. In an outstanding A-level mathematics lesson, a very high level of challenge from the teacher helped the students to work together to solve some complex problems and so make outstanding progress.
- A minority of lessons require improvement. In these lessons, students sometimes spend too much time listening to the teacher and are not given enough opportunities to begin learning for themselves. In a few lessons, teachers do not make enough use of the information they have to make sure that the teaching is matched to the individual needs of the students.
- Other adults are very well used to help those students that need additional support with their learning. This support helps these students to make progress.
- Teaching in the sixth form is good and students have positive attitudes to their learning.

The behaviour and safety of pupils is good

- Students told inspectors that behaviour has improved since the last inspection and is now typically good. The students put the better behaviour down to the consistent use of the behaviour system by all teachers. A Year 7 student commented, 'It is important to us to behave well.'
- Students are polite and courteous; they mix well with each other and value the school environment. One Year 13 student noted that, 'Students are happier and friendlier now because we know how to respect each other.'
- Students feel safe at school and are well aware of different kinds of bullying relating to race, gender or sexual orientation. The school is effective at tackling any sign of discrimination.

Students say that bullying is very rare and is always dealt with swiftly.

- Students' attitudes to learning are positive. Behaviour in lessons is generally good or better.
- Sometimes students can be passive in class. In these situations, they could take more control over their own learning by being encouraged to act more independently and not rely so much on the teacher.
- Attendance is above average and there are good systems in place to monitor it. The students understand the importance of attending school regularly and punctually.
- Sixth-form students make a positive contribution to the life of the school through sporting activities, drama performances and supporting readers in Year 7. They are good role models for younger students.
- The overwhelming majority of parents and carers who expressed a view said that behaviour is managed well. They also said that their child is happy at the school and feels safe.
- Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is encouraged very well through assemblies, tutor time and in class. For example, the inspection team observed an inspiring assembly promoting equality of opportunity. They have a clear understanding of right and wrong.

The leadership and management is good

- Leaders set high expectations of staff and students. Improvements have been made since the last inspection. For instance, behaviour management is more consistent. School leaders are clear about what the school needs to do next and have the capacity to make it happen.
 - The management of teaching is good. The school is accurate in its assessment of the quality of teaching and has good support programmes to help staff when teaching falls short of expectations. There is a close link between teachers' performance and pay progression, with demanding targets linked to student achievement.
 - Staff morale is high and all those who responded to the staff questionnaire agree that they are proud to be a member of staff at this school. One member of staff commented, 'It is a privilege to work with such great colleagues and students.'
 - The curriculum is appropriate to the needs, aspirations and interests of the students. It is reviewed every year to make sure that it continues to meet the needs of the students. There is a good mix of academic and work-related subjects that students can study in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form. Students are given good advice and support when they move from one key stage to another.
 - The promotion of students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is a strength. This is evident in lessons and through an extensive range of after-school activities. For example, students are given time for reflection in lessons, they consider life in other cultures and they learn about the importance of sustainable resources on a global scale.
 - The school's arrangements for safeguarding meet statutory requirements, including checks on
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the attendance, welfare and safety of students at the alternative provisions.

- Parents and carers agree that the school is well led and managed. One parent referred to 'the immense ambition and support the team who lead, teach and maintain the school have for all its students'.
 - The local authority provides a good range of support for the school and it is well received. For example, the local authority has worked with staff on accurately predicting student performance, as well as providing training for both middle leaders and governors.
 - **The governance of the school:**
 - Governors have a good understanding of how well the school is doing and the quality of teaching and learning. They are knowledgeable about the school's strengths and weaknesses. They actively check the school's performance through analysis of examination results, reports from senior leaders and middle leaders, and visits by governors to subjects with which they are linked. They make sure that the pupil premium is targeted at the right students and check that it is closing the gap in the performance of different students. Governors know how the system for setting targets for teachers to improve their work operates, how good teaching is rewarded and how underperformance is tackled.
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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	117499
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	405710

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1020
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	145
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Charles Lacey
Headteacher	Peter Loach
Date of previous school inspection	2 March 2011
Telephone number	01462 622300
Fax number	01462 622300
Email address	admin@priory.herts.sch.uk

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