

Verulam School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	137038
Local Authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	385567
Inspection dates	19–20 September 2011
Reporting inspector	Roger Whittaker

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

Type of school	Academy
School category	Non-maintained
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Boys
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1140
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	252
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Richard Kennedy
Headteacher	Paul Ramsey
Date of previous school inspection	N/A
School address	Brampton Road St Albans AL1 4PR
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by five additional inspectors, who observed 43 lessons and saw 38 teachers. Inspectors held meetings with staff, members of the governing body and groups of pupils. They observed the academy's work, and looked at the school improvement plan, reports to the governing body, and monitoring data in relation to pupils' progress and the quality of teaching. They analysed 324 questionnaires from parents and carers, 174 from pupils and 50 from members of staff.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at a number of key areas.

- How successfully has the academy addressed the variation in progress made by different groups of pupils and faculties?
- How effectively has the academy improved learning and progress in lessons?
- Is care, guidance and support effective in helping the very small minority of pupils with behavioural learning difficulties to achieve at the same rate as other pupils?
- How successfully has the academy improved learning and progress in the sixth form?

Information about the school

Verulam is a large academy, with a sixth form that is a part of a consortium of three local schools. The number of pupils has increased significantly over the last year. The large majority of pupils are of White British heritage. The proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language is slightly above average. The proportion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities, including those with a statement of educational needs, is below average. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is also below average. The academy has specialisms in mathematics, science and technology. It also holds many awards including the Quality in Study Support award and Healthy Schools status. It converted to academy status in September 2011 and has gone through a period of significant change in staffing, both at senior and middle management level and in terms of teaching staff.

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

Verulam School is a good academy. Strong senior leadership is ensuring that well-thought-out strategies for improvement are having a positive impact on provision and, in turn, on outcomes for pupils. It has some outstanding features, such as its effectiveness in engaging with parents and carers and high attendance levels. The good and improving curriculum and good care, guidance and support ensure that the needs of most individual pupils are met well. Improvements in the quality of teaching are engaging pupils more effectively so that their behaviour, attitudes to learning and progress are now good. As a result attainment has improved significantly since 2008 and results in 2011 were above averages. Pupils are now working at levels consistently above national averages, and an increasing number are significantly exceeding national expectations. This is evident from the lessons seen and the school's accurate tracking data. Other outcomes for pupils have benefited from improved provision. For example, pupils' good behaviour underpins their improved learning and they contribute well to both the academy and wider communities.

The academy has good capacity not only to sustain current levels of performance, but also to improve even further. It has improved the tracking of pupils' progress and the monitoring of teaching, and meets and in many cases exceeds the challenging targets it has set itself. Staff understand fully what the academy is striving to achieve are committed to this goal. Good self-evaluation systems are increasingly improving the quality of monitoring and evaluation at faculty levels.

Despite the significant improvements that have been made, some areas of unevenness remain. The academy has accurately identified these and set them as priorities in its improvement plan. There is still some variation in the progress pupils make in lessons. This is because although teaching has improved significantly with many good and outstanding lessons, not all teachers use assessment data effectively to plan lessons so that all pupils are able to make progress at their own level. A very small minority of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities, particularly behavioural learning difficulties, are making improved progress but not yet at the same rate as other pupils. This is because the introduction of a new behaviour for learning strategy has not yet had a full impact on their progress. Students in the sixth form continue to make only satisfactory progress, and while strategies to raise standards have been introduced they have not yet had a full impact on students' achievement. As in the main school, this is largely because of variations in the quality of teaching but also a general lack of opportunities for students to build up their independent learning and research skills.

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What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that teaching and learning are good or better in the very large majority of lessons for all age groups by the end of the academic year, particularly in the sixth form, by ensuring that:
 - learning activities consistently meet the needs of all individual pupils so that they achieve as well as they can
 - in the sixth form, students are consistently encouraged to develop and use independent learning skills.

- Improve provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities so that they make progress in line with their peers, by:
 - ensuring that the new behaviour for learning strategy helps all pupils to make better progress, but especially the small minority of pupils with behavioural learning difficulties.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

2

From broadly average beginnings, almost all pupils leave the school with attainment that is above expected levels. The restructured leadership team, led by the newly appointed headteacher, were quick to deal with variations in progress between different groups of pupils and different subject areas. Consequently, the present Year 11 pupils are on track to exceed the challenging targets set for the proportion gaining five A* to C grades including English and mathematics, and so achieve above the national average.

Pupils' attitudes to learning and their ability to apply themselves in lessons are good, and this is reflected in the good progress they make in most lessons. For example, in a technology lesson pupils were able to develop problem-solving skills rapidly when making a toy. The teacher had encouraged them to think for themselves and only use him as a resource when all else failed. Even in the few lessons where teaching is satisfactory, pupils continue to make good progress because of their positive attitudes. The progress of individual pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities is generally in line with the overall rate of progress. However, a very small minority of pupils with behavioural learning difficulties are making slower progress than their peers.

Pupils show a good understanding of how to be safe. They say that there is always a member of staff around for them to turn to if they need help. Pupils are particularly enthusiastic about the opportunities to contribute to the academy community, for example as prefects or ambassadors. Most take advantage of the many opportunities to join extra-curricular clubs and societies. Behaviour has improved and is now often exemplary around the academy and in lessons, but in a few lessons pupils' behaviour does not contribute to them learning as well as they can. Pupils' adoption of healthy lifestyles is outstanding with some taking responsibility for organising healthy

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activities and initiatives. The technology status has contributed to pupils working with feeder schools and so helps their transition to Verulam School. Pupils show curiosity in the world around them and are keen to participate in a good range of social settings. They confidently express opinions on a range of issues.

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	3
The extent to which pupils feel safe	2
Pupils’ behaviour	2
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	1
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	1
The extent of pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2

How effective is the provision?

In most lessons good relationships between pupils and teachers create a positive environment for learning. Work is regularly marked and detailed comments help pupils to understand how to improve. Pupils know their targets and are actively involved in assessing each other’s work. Teachers plan lessons which stimulate and engage pupils. They are enthusiastic about their subjects and pass this on to the pupils. Planning follows an agreed format and so activities are planned to meet the different needs of pupils. However, this is not always effectively transferred to lesson activities. In a mathematics lesson a small minority of pupils with behavioural learning difficulties were working on activities, which were not matched with individual learning needs, and so did not enable them to make progress at the same rate as their peers.

Pupils comment very positively about the good range of opportunities available to them, both within the curriculum and as part of an outstanding extra-curricular programme. The school recognised the need to review the curriculum and has developed three pathways to take account of the academic, vocational and personal needs of pupils. The curriculum encompasses a strong element of technology, which

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

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builds on opportunities gained through the specialism. Improved tracking has enabled pupils in need of additional literacy support to be targeted for extra provision which enables them to transfer their developing literacy skills to other subjects. Subject leaders take responsibility for evaluating their part of the curriculum and enthusiastically ensure that pupils’ views are part of the process. The academy recognises that some recent curriculum developments have not yet had time to have a full impact on the progress made by pupils.

Pupils and their parents and carers are enthusiastic in their praise of how well the academy takes care of them. One pupil said, ‘Staff are always available if you need help or someone to talk to.’ Pupils are known as individuals and a strong system of intervention is available including, when necessary, outside agencies. Evidence was seen of the effective provision made for most pupils who had diverse and challenging needs. Good transition arrangements for pupils when they join the academy enable them to settle in quickly and smoothly. Good systems to promote attendance have resulted in improved attendance figures, which are well above national averages.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	2
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	2
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

The drive and enthusiasm of the outstanding headteacher have focused the academy on raising standards through creating a culture of high expectations. He has been very well supported by a highly committed core senior leadership team. Effective recruitment strategies have been used to ensure that restructuring of the staff, at all levels, has played a significant part in improving pupils’ progress. This has resulted in most staff showing a strong willingness to improve their practice. Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and staff are held to account for their performance. Within this system the headteacher has built a ‘working together’ culture, which has resulted in staff supporting and helping each other. Delegation to working groups has led to ownership of developments by all staff. However, while a large majority of lessons are good and a few outstanding, some are still satisfactory because teachers do not consistently make sure that activities meet the needs of individual pupils within their class. The academy’s self-evaluation has identified this, and leaders have suitable plans to tackle the inconsistencies.

The academy has developed excellent systems to communicate with parents and carers, as reflected in their questionnaires. Good partnerships enhance provision and contribute well to the achievement and well-being of pupils. The academy tackles

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any instances of discrimination well, and ensures that pupils whose circumstances make them potentially vulnerable are not disadvantaged. However, it has not yet ensured that all groups of pupils achieve at the same rate and so a few pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities have not yet closed the gap fully. The academy’s approach to community cohesion is satisfactory, but it is at an early stage in the implementation of plans to fill the gaps in provision it has identified. The governing body, well led by the chair and vice chair, has made a significant contribution to the changes which have taken place in order to raise standards. It takes account of the views of pupils and their parents and carers, and uses them to inform strategic planning. Satisfactory safeguarding procedures involve accurate record keeping, which is constantly reviewed and updated.

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	2
The effectiveness of the school’s engagement with parents and carers	1
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	3
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	3
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	3
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	2

Sixth form

Students’ attainment is in line with national averages by the end of Year 13, as a result of satisfactory progress, although accurate tracking data show that there has been some improvement. The majority of courses offered are at AS and A2 level, but an increasing number of level 3 BTEC courses has broadened the options and helped the curriculum to better meet the needs of all students. Students are generally well matched to their courses and retention figures are improving. Better tracking of students’ progress means that those at risk of underachievement are identified more quickly. Teaching is satisfactory overall and improving, but leaders have identified that there is still some inconsistency. For example, teaching does not always take account of the different needs of students in the class and too few opportunities are available for students to use and develop their independent learning skills.

Students feel that they are well supported, for example in university selection and

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applications. Opportunities for the wider dimensions of being in the sixth form are welcomed by students. They are able to take responsibility and be involved in activities that affect the whole academy. There is a full range of enrichment programmes including sport, music and drama. In addition students are encouraged to be involved to cultural activities and debates. Students’ views are taken account of and they are represented in strategic decision-making about the academy.

Leadership and management of the sixth form are satisfactory and improving. Tighter monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning has led to improvements in some lessons, where learning is now good. However, strategies to improve teaching have not yet had time to ensure that all lessons result in good learning.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	3
Taking into account:	3
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

Views of parents and carers

The parents and carers who responded to the questionnaire were very positive about the education their children received at Verulam School. Their views were in line with the judgements made by the inspectors, particularly in relation to how well the academy is led and managed and how much their children enjoy attending. A very small minority said that they felt that their children were not making enough progress at the academy. The inspectors found that the academy was aware that this was the case for a few pupils, and its leaders were making every effort to ensure that all pupils achieve as well as they can.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted’s questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Verulam 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 324 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 1140 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	179	55	138	43	6	2	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	178	55	137	42	3	1	0	0
The school informs me about my child’s progress	185	57	110	34	6	2	3	1
My child is making enough progress at this school	161	50	122	38	12	4	2	1
The teaching is good at this school	161	50	143	44	6	2	0	0
The school helps me to support my child’s learning	154	48	135	42	13	4	1	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	100	31	193	60	21	6	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)	176	54	114	35	13	4	0	0
The school meets my child’s particular needs	162	50	130	40	10	3	2	1
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	153	47	137	42	9	3	2	1
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	121	37	149	46	13	4	0	0
The school is led and managed effectively	221	68	95	29	3	1	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child’s experience at this school	212	65	99	31	6	2	0	0

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 all 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	43	47	10	0
Primary schools	6	46	42	6
Secondary schools	14	36	41	9
Sixth forms	15	42	41	3
Special schools	30	48	19	3
Pupil referral units	14	50	31	5
All schools	10	44	39	6

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 are for the period 1 September 2010 to 8 April 2011 and are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2010/11 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.

Sixth form figures reflect the judgements made for the overall effectiveness of the sixth form in secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units.

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 pupils' 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 September 2011

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Verulam School, St Albans, AL1 4PR

Thank you for the warm welcome you gave the inspection team when we visited your academy recently. We enjoyed being in your lessons and were impressed with the maturity with which you told us your views. We have decided that it is a good academy. It continues to improve and has some outstanding features.

These are some of the academy's strengths.

- You now make good progress so that standards you reach by the end of Year 11 are above national averages. Coupled with your high levels of attendance, this means that you are well prepared to move on to further education or training.
- You contribute well to your academy, especially when taking responsibility as prefects and as members of the school council.
- The teaching is good and you are given opportunities to be involved in interesting activities.
- Staff take good care to ensure you are looked after well and supported during your time at the academy.
- Your headteacher and senior staff are enthusiastic and committed to improving the work of the school further so that you are progressing and achieving as well as you can.

In order to help the academy continue to improve, we have asked its leaders to iron out the remaining inconsistencies in the quality of teaching so that as many lessons as possible are good or outstanding. They should do this by making sure that activities in lessons enable all pupils to work on tasks which meet their individual needs, and that the new behaviour for learning strategy helps all pupils to do well. We have also asked them to improve the satisfactory provision in the sixth form, so that it enables students to achieve as well as they can.

You can help the teachers by continuing to work hard in all lessons. We wish you well in your future at Verulam School.

Yours sincerely

Roger Whittaker
Lead inspector

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