

St Alban's Academy

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	135970
Local Authority	N/A
Inspection number	381993
Inspection dates	12–13 October 2011
Reporting inspector	Jacqueline Wordsworth HMI

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	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	443
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Peter Marsh
Headteacher	David Gould
Date of previous school inspection	N/A
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Age group	11–16
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and two additional inspectors. The team visited 41 lessons, saw 41 teachers and held meetings with members of the governing body, the academy's sponsor, staff, groups of students and 30 parents and carers. Inspectors observed the academy's work, and looked at students' work and records of their progress. They also looked at a range of documents, including minutes of the local governing body, its improvement plan, a range of policies and the sponsor's and the academy's monitoring of its performance. The inspectors took account of 51 questionnaires from parents and carers, 73 questionnaires from students in Key Stages 3 and 4, and 24 questionnaires from staff.

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

- The team evaluated the quality of teaching and learning in the departments with the most and least successful examination results to examine whether the teaching places sufficient demands on students.
- Inspectors analysed the performance of different groups of students including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, those who speak English as an additional language and those who are looked after in public care.
- Inspectors assessed whether the curriculum is sufficiently well matched to the needs of all students.
- The team assessed how effectively the school's monitoring and evaluation systems promote better outcomes for students.

Information about the school

The St Alban's Academy is a smaller-than-average Church of England school sponsored by ARK, with specialisms in engineering and mathematics. It opened in September 2009 replacing St Alban's CE Specialist Engineering College. St Alban's is the only state-funded Church of England secondary school in Birmingham and is the nearest secondary school to the city centre. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is very much higher than the national average. The percentage of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is over four times higher than the national figure and the proportion of those who speak English as an additional language is high. The percentage of students registered by the academy as having special educational needs and/or disabilities is well above the national figure; however, the proportion of students with a statement of special educational needs is in line with that found nationally.

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?

1

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

1

Main findings

St Alban's Academy gives richness and meaning to many students' lives and provides an outstanding standard of education. The Principal provides the key inspiration for the overall success of the academy. Not only does he personally provide outstanding leadership and management, he is also able to develop high standards of leadership in others. Consequently, leaders and other senior managers carry out their roles to a high standard. There is a clear vision that all can succeed. This aim is central to the academy, where learning is the way of life. Staff and students alike work hard, display an ambition to succeed and a commitment to do their best. There is palpable evidence of a passion and hunger for change and innovation rooted in the belief that all students should have access to high-quality learning experiences. Consequently, from exceptionally low attainment on entry, students leave with above average attainment and outstanding achievement.

The key strengths of the academy include:

- teaching that is consistently good and very often outstanding
- an ethos for learning that nurtures mutual respect and tolerance, motivates students and encourages their positive self-esteem, particularly for Muslim girls
- excellent care, support and guidance for students through the close relationships staff have with students
- the removal of the significant barriers to learning for students whose circumstances make them most vulnerable which enables them to make outstanding progress
- outstanding spiritual, moral, social and cultural development that underpins students' exemplary behaviour and makes an exceptional contribution to their excellent learning
- excellent attention paid to students adopting healthy lifestyles, particularly in relation to their emotional well-being
- rapidly improving examination results at GCSE, with above average attainment in many subjects.

In those areas where attainment is average, standards are improving strongly. As a result, most students are successful in gaining the grades they need to follow their ambitions for higher and further education or employment. Although the proportion of students who gain grades A* or A in GCSE examinations is low by comparison with other schools, it is in line with expectations given students' low starting points.

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The academy has a strong track record of improvement and leaders have an extremely clear and accurate grasp of how well it is doing and where further improvements might be made. This means that the academy has outstanding capacity to consolidate its successes and to bring about further improvements in the future.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Increase the proportion of students who gain grades A* or A in GCSE examinations.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of students

1

Students enter the academy with levels of attainment that are exceptionally low. The academy presents a year-on-year picture of steadily improving results in almost all subjects. Examination results for 2011 show that students make excellent progress. While results in science dipped in 2011 and were below average, current assessment information indicates that attainment is likely to be back to the above average levels recorded in 2010.

Excellent relationships, supported by students who cooperate and follow the academy's code of conduct without fuss, result in high levels of engagement in lessons. A vibrant, purposeful work ethic means that students greatly enjoy their learning and the challenge posed for them by their teachers. Consequently, students make outstanding gains in their learning.

Students hold clear views about their learning and well-being, and are rightly very proud of what they have achieved. Almost all students make a full and valuable contribution to life of the academy and beyond. Numerous examples of groups, such as the sister's group enable students to have voice on particular issues. Others make regular presentations to the local governing body. Students value the very safe academy environment and embrace the very strong spiritual, moral, social and cultural values that determine and guide their personal development. The academy takes students' backgrounds into account exceptionally well and ensures that they study examples of literacy that reflect their cultural heritage, for example poetry from the Yemen.

Very strong emphasis on improving students' literacy and numeracy skills ensures that the level of attainment in English and mathematics is rising rapidly. Highly effective work to support students in Years 7 and 8 with poor reading levels, including the strong emphasis on the sounds that letters make (phonics), enables students to make excellent progress in improving their levels of comprehension when reading.

Almost all groups of students perform equally well within school and, with the exception of a minority of White British students, achieve more highly than their

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peers nationally. The work of the academy in securing high aspirations for these students is beginning to pay dividends in terms of increased attainment. Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities, those who speak English as an additional language or those who are potentially vulnerable, including those in public care, receive excellent personalised intervention and guidance that makes an important contribution to their quality of learning and allows them to make outstanding progress. Consequently, a number of students have had the protection of a statement of special educational needs removed.

Attendance has improved since the academy was opened, though not as rapidly as other outcomes. There are still issues with some persistently absent students despite the best attempts of academy staff to resolve problems, particularly in Year 11, where attendance is lower than for the rest of the academy. However, attendance figures for the current term are above the national average.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	1
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment ¹	2
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	1
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	1
The extent to which pupils feel safe	1
Pupils' behaviour	1
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	1
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	3
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1

How effective is the provision?

Teaching in lessons typically includes the following features:

- teaching that inspires students, provides them with high levels of challenge and accelerates their progress towards specific targets
- teachers with excellent subject knowledge, who are able to convey ideas with clarity and who provide a clear structure to the students' learning
- teaching styles and strategies common to all classrooms, including excellent

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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classroom management and highly effective targeted questioning to which students are expected to respond by not only giving answers but usually a reason for their answer

- effective strategies for teaching basic literacy skills and numeracy skills that build on students' experiences in primary school and are systematically reinforced in all subjects areas
- in many lessons, students are encouraged to use speech as a precursor to writing, and teachers expect them to speak and write using full sentences.

Students' needs, interests and aspirations are met very well through the outstanding curriculum. Excellent provision for the academy's specialist subject of engineering in all of its facets is a significant strength. All students follow an engineering-related course and many study at the local higher education college for part of the course.

Support from business and industry has provided equipment and training that are at the cutting edge of technology. Lessons are often very exciting. Mathematical aspects are identified within teachers' plans so that students often cover these elements in context, for example, considering the margin of error when cutting a length of wood in engineering. Relevance, excitement and enjoyment of learning can be seen in lesson after lesson. This typifies the approach that the academy's specialist status engenders.

Extra-curricular music has been a long-standing part of the academy's life and there is a wide range of clubs that many students enjoy. Links with neighbouring schools, and with local further education colleges and training providers, have helped to extend the options available in Key Stage 4.

In Key Stage 4, students follow a range of appropriate courses. The change to the curriculum has meant greater numbers of students are now studying a combination of courses that will enable them to complete the English baccalaureate. The proportion of students studying a modern foreign language, including Arabic, Urdu and Spanish has increased significantly so that now almost three quarters follow a full GCSE course.

The outstanding care, guidance and support that students receive is vital to the students' excellent achievement. This, along with very effective partnerships with a range of agencies, results in excellent support for students with specific needs, particularly, those whose circumstances make them most vulnerable. Staff are highly successful in supporting students at risk of disengagement from education and re-integrating those returning to education after being excluded from other schools. There is a clear belief in the importance of expecting the best from all students. The success of this belief is reflected in the progress, and increasing confidence and readiness to learn, of several students who are in public care and those who have been through some very traumatic experiences.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

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The quality of teaching	1
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	1
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	1
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

How effective are leadership and management?

There have been a range of very important changes leading to improvement at St Alban's in the two years since the school became an academy. For example, leadership across the academy has been strengthened. A number of highly effective strategies to improve the consistency of teaching and further drive up students' achievement have been introduced, including open and honest feedback on the quality of teaching and learning. Consequently, just over 40% teaching observed during the inspection was outstanding.

Significant strengths in leadership and management include:

- highly effective senior leaders who share and deliver the Principal's vision for improvement
- effective middle leadership with heads of department trained to assess lessons accurately and provide feedback to staff, although there is still some variability in the extent to which they provide challenge and support to staff in their teams
- setting very challenging targets for all students and not tolerating any lowering of expectations
- exceptional use of assessment information to track students' progress and to quickly intervene with additional support if necessary
- a well-conceived professional development programme for staff that is very well matched to the school's priorities
- highly effective procedures to promote equality and tackle discrimination that create a harmonious and socially cohesive environment where students from a very wide range of ethnic backgrounds work together and respect each other.

The academy does not shy away from tackling some of the very sensitive social and cultural complexities that exist within the local community and it adopts an insightful approach that has the full support of parents and carers, particularly when it involves the protection of their children. At the time of the inspection, secure and robust systems to safeguard students including effective systems for child protection were in place.

The local governing body sees the academy as an integral part of the community and students' involvement, for example in local charities, churches, mosques and businesses, contributes strongly to the work to promote cohesion in the local area.

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The governing body and the sponsor have very precisely delineated but complementary roles. The Vice Chair of the Governing Body has a very clear understanding of the strengths and areas for development of the academy. The minutes of the local governing body demonstrate that there is regular review of data and performance information leading to a high level of challenge to the school from both its sponsor and the governing body.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	1
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	1
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	1
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	1
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	1
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	1
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	1

Views of parents and carers

As seen in the table below, the majority of parents and carers who returned questionnaires have a positive view of the academy and are happy with their children's experience at St Alban's. A small number of parents and carers raised concerns regarding the way the school keeps them informed of their children's progress. Others raised concerns that their views are not always taken into consideration. The inspectors shared these and a small number of other constructive parental concerns anonymously with the Principal and inspection findings are highlighted elsewhere in the report.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted’s questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at St Alban's Academy 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 51 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 443 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	26	51	20	39	2	4	3	6
The school keeps my child safe	29	57	15	29	5	10	0	0
The school informs me about my child’s progress	30	59	13	25	7	14	1	2
My child is making enough progress at this school	23	45	24	47	4	8	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	25	49	22	43	1	2	3	6
The school helps me to support my child’s learning	23	45	22	43	6	12	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	19	37	20	39	9	18	1	2
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)	23	45	22	43	6	12	0	0
The school meets my child’s particular needs	22	43	18	35	7	14	1	2
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	29	57	17	33	2	4	2	4
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	18	35	19	37	9	18	3	6
The school is led and managed effectively	22	43	22	43	6	12	1	2
Overall, I am happy with my child’s experience at this school	26	51	20	39	0	0	3	6

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 08 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.



14 October 2011

Dear Students

Inspection of St Alban's Academy, Birmingham, B12 0UU

I am writing to inform you that inspectors agreed with the senior leaders of your academy that overall St Alban's Academy provides you with an outstanding education.

Inspectors were most impressed by:

- the number of students who achieved five or more A* to C grades at GCSE, including English and mathematics in 2011
- the care, guidance and support given to you as students, especially to those of you who for any reason have to face specific difficulties or challenges in life
- the way the academy is promoting engineering and mathematics which is helping you to develop key skills, for example, decision making and team working
- the fact that in 2011 nearly every student who finished their time at St Alban's went on to further education, training or employment
- how much outstanding teaching we observed in lessons.

We were also impressed by the work of the senior leaders and other staff. Their work proves that the academy has an outstanding capacity to improve further. To do so, we agreed that the academy should look especially to improving the following:

- increasing the numbers of students gaining A* and A in GCSE examinations.

St Alban's Academy has been opened for two years and has shown significant improvement in the quality of education it provides, in this short space of time. We wish you well as you help to make St Alban's Academy the very best it can be. We were impressed with a motto in one of your classrooms that said, 'Only dead fish go with the flow – swim against the tide and you will reach the mountain.' That is exactly what you have all done – well done.

Yours sincerely

Jacqueline Wordsworth

Her Majesty's Inspector

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