

St Albans Girls' School

Sandridgebury Lane, St Albans, AL3 6DB

Inspection dates 22–23 January 2013

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected	
	This inspection:	Outstanding	1
Achievement of pupils		Outstanding	1
Quality of teaching		Outstanding	1
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Outstanding	1
Leadership and management		Outstanding	1

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school.

- The headteacher, senior and middle leaders along with governors aspire for excellence in achievement, the quality of teaching and the personal development for every student.
- Leaders thoroughly check all aspects of the school's work, and address any identified shortcomings speedily. High-quality training for teachers and leaders has played a major part in raising standards.
- Students in all age groups make outstanding progress and reach exceptionally high standards across a wide range of subjects.
- The school has excellent systems for keeping a close eye on how well all students are doing. Those identified as not being on track to meet their ambitious targets are given valuable and personalised support which enables them to make outstanding progress.
- Teaching is outstanding. Well-planned lessons provide activities that are matched very precisely to different ability levels. Students are challenged to think deeply and encouraged to develop their independent learning skills.
- Students' work is marked thoroughly, with useful comments to help them improve. Just occasionally, they do not get enough chance to reflect on and respond to these comments.
- Students' attitudes to learning, behaviour and all aspects of school life are exemplary. They value and thrive on the many opportunities to take on responsibility, as well as the exciting range of enrichment activities on offer. As a result, they develop very strong spiritual, moral, social and cultural values.
- Students have a well-developed and mature understanding of how to keep themselves and others safe. Attendance is consistently above average.
- The sixth form is outstanding. Students' learning and aspirations are extended through partnerships with neighbouring schools and colleges. Their achievement and the quality of teaching are outstanding, and they leave the school extremely well prepared for later life.
- Parents are overwhelmingly positive about all aspects of the school's work. Virtually all would recommend it to others.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 41 lessons taught by 40 teachers. Many of these observations were made jointly with the headteacher, deputy headteacher and other leaders of the school.
- Meetings were held with the Chair and vice-chair of the Governing Body, parents and carers, staff, including senior and middle leaders, and groups of students.
- Inspectors observed the school's work and looked at school documentation, including teachers' planning, the school's self-evaluation and development plans, assessment information, monitoring files, governing body minutes, safeguarding documentation and samples of students' work.
- Inspectors considered the 216 responses to the online questionnaire (Parent View) and 33 responses to the staff questionnaire.

Inspection team

David Radomsky, Lead inspector	Additional Inspector
Gillian Scobie	Additional Inspector
Janet Allcorn	Additional Inspector
Kanwaljit Singh	Additional Inspector
Sandra Teacher	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- This is a well-above-average sized girls' secondary school. A small number of boys are admitted into the sixth form.
- The school converted to academy status in September 2011. When the predecessor school, St Albans Girls' School, was last inspected its overall effectiveness was judged to be good.
- A well-below-average proportion of students are supported by additional funding through the pupil premium, including those known to be eligible for free school meals.
- The proportion of students supported through school action is below average. The proportion supported through school action plus or a statement of special educational needs is well below average.
- An above-average proportion of students speak English as an additional language.
- Most pupils come from White British backgrounds, with the remainder coming from a range of minority ethnic groups.
- A very small number of students have work-related alternative provision away from the school site. Some aspects of the post-16 curriculum are taught in partnership with three other schools.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that all teachers consistently help students make best use of written feedback to fully extend their learning.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils

is outstanding

- Students join the school with standards in English and mathematics that are well above average. Because of extremely high expectations, skilled teaching, and well-targeted support they make outstanding progress across all subjects. In the 2012 GCSE examinations, students' overall progress across the subjects was within the top 7% nationally.
- An exceptionally high proportion of students attain five or more A* to C grades at GCSE including English and mathematics. Over half the grades awarded in 2012 were A* or A. Last year 26 students took GCSE mathematics in Year 10 and almost all attained an A* grade. Leaders have decided to stop entering students early for GCSE examinations. The most able mathematicians are instead studying GCSE statistics in addition to GCSE mathematics as university admission tutors have told school leaders that they prefer students to sit GCSE examinations at the end of Year 11.
- All students have an equal opportunity to succeed, including disabled students and those who have special educational needs, those from different ethnic backgrounds, and those who speak English as an additional language. Students told inspectors that when they enter the school their individual learning styles are assessed. Staff, who know all the students extremely well, use this information effectively to plan work and activities that caters for individual needs. As a result of this well-focused support, all groups of students make outstanding progress and develop excellent skills in reading, writing and mathematics.
- Students supported by the pupil premium funding have benefited from extra tuition and opportunities to enhance their personal development. As a result, the attainment gap between students known to be eligible for free school meals and other students is narrowing rapidly. For example, over the recent autumn term, the attainment gap for Year 11 students on track to attain five or more A* to C grades at GCSE including English and mathematics narrowed by 17 percentage points.
- Students' achievement in the sixth form is outstanding. Regardless of their different starting points, all students make outstanding progress and reach ambitious targets in almost all subjects. Their attainment is high. The very few cases where attainment was not at this level in 2012 were in subjects taught off-site. As a result, leaders have now arranged for these or similar courses to be taught in the school's own sixth form.

The quality of teaching

is outstanding

- Teachers are highly skilled and demonstrate consistently high expectations for learning and behaviour. Lessons are planned in a way that challenges all students to make rapid progress. They are typically characterised by:
 - a wide variety of resources and varied activities that cater for the full range of students' learning needs and interests
 - skilled questioning that helps students to develop their thoughts and ideas, as seen in a geography lesson where students had to consider what lessons could be learnt from the tsunami
 - a quick pace of learning where students are actively involved in tasks and activities
 - opportunities for students to work together in groups and to help each other, as seen in a drama lesson where students gave each other constructive critical feedback on how to improve their performances
 - opportunities for students to carry out independent research
 - opportunities to debate topical issues, such as in a religious education lesson where students

debated the issue of same-sex marriage.

- Students say that teachers and other adults are always willing to give them extra help. This includes e-mailing them questions, and giving them access to learning resources the teachers upload onto the school's website.
- Teachers' marking gives students helpful guidance on how to improve their work. Teachers mostly ensure that students think about the feedback and then make improvements to their work or take on an even more challenging task. Occasionally, teachers do not ensure that students respond to their marking in this way, and so miss opportunities to extend their learning even further.
- Teaching in the sixth form is consistently outstanding, and this is reflected in the students' high achievements.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are outstanding

- Students are unfailingly polite, courteous and welcoming to all. The small number of boys studying in the sixth form say that they were made to feel very welcome and were well integrated into the school.
- Students' attitudes to learning are exemplary. They apply themselves with determination and resilience to succeed, happily working together and supporting each other in their studies so that all make outstanding progress.
- Students feel very safe at school. Through assemblies, class discussions and external visitors, students develop an astute awareness of a range of unsafe situations and how to deal with them. Year 9 students, for instance, told inspectors about the recent work they have been doing on domestic violence and also on how to stay safe on the internet.
- Students know about different types of bullying, including name-calling linked to race, religion and sexual orientation. They say that bullying is very rare. If it does happen, they are confident that it will be dealt with very quickly and competently by staff.
- Attendance is above average for all groups of students. No students have been permanently excluded in recent years, and the very few who have short-term exclusions are well supported to quickly catch up when back in school and modify their behaviour.
- Students are proud of their school and willingly take on responsibilities. For example, every Year 12 student's skills and interests are matched to those of a Year 8 student whom they support and mentor. Similarly, Year 11 students help Year 7 students who need additional support with their reading.

The leadership and management are outstanding

- The school benefits from the exceptional leadership provided by the headteacher, ably supported by the recently restructured leadership teams and governing body. Together they have ensured outstanding achievement, teaching and behaviour across the school.
- The school has excellent procedures for checking all aspects of its work. Consequently, leaders

have a thorough understanding of its strengths and weaknesses. Improvement plans focus on the right key priorities, and the effect of resulting actions is carefully checked.

- Leaders frequently check on every student's progress, and use the resulting information to provide high-quality support to help any students who are not on track to reach their targets. They also use this information to hold teachers to account for the progress of each of their students.
- Leaders observe lessons frequently and give teachers feedback on how to improve. Teachers are supported through coaching, learning from best practice and training. Where teaching is weaker, leaders organise additional training and individual targets for improvement.
- Middle leaders such as those in charge of subjects benefit from high-quality training such as being temporary members of the senior leadership team or spending a week working at another school. These opportunities help them to be highly competent in their respective roles.
- Leaders make sure that students study a range of subjects that are very well matched to their needs and abilities, preparing them well for their future. Leaders keep a very watchful eye on the progress of students who study part-time at other schools to make sure that they are receiving the same high-quality teaching. The school has planned to introduce more work-related options into the sixth form from September, so that more students can continue their studies in the school. All students go on to further education, training or employment.
- Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural awareness is extremely well developed. It is promoted through the many opportunities within taught subjects and additional activities, such as the expedition to the India and the chance to be house, sports and charity captains. It is central to the school's drive to develop well-informed, tolerant, caring young people who are very well equipped to face the next stages of their lives.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - The governors bring a broad range of experiences and expertise to their role. They have a clear understanding of the progress made by different groups of students, and of how the school's results compare to those of other girls' schools. Detailed information from the headteacher, combined with regular visits to the school, ensures governors are well informed about the quality of teaching and all other aspects of the school's work. They are fully aware of how performance management procedures are used to reward teachers or challenge them to improve. They understand how the pupil premium funding is allocated and check that it is having the desired impact on the achievement of the students who qualify for it. Governors both support and challenge senior and middle leaders to ensure the highest levels of performance. They are actively involved in the school's self-evaluation and improvement planning processes, and have regular training to maintain their effectiveness. They ensure that arrangements for safeguarding follow good practice and meet national requirements.

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	137339
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	403694

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

Type of school	Academy converter
School category	Non-maintained
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Girls
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1137
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	236
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Claire Barnard
Headteacher	Margaret Chapman
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	01727 853134
Fax number	01727 831157
Email address	admin@stags.herts.sch.uk

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