

Larkmead School

Faringdon Road, Abingdon, Oxfordshire, OX14 1RF

Inspection dates

3–4 February 2015

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Requires improvement	3
	This inspection:	Good	2
Leadership and management		Good	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Good	2
Quality of teaching		Good	2
Achievement of pupils		Good	2
Sixth form provision		Good	2

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school.

- All teachers are clearly focused on helping students learn quickly. As a result, students' achievement has risen sharply in recent years.
- The school's leadership, strongly supported by governors, has improved the quality of teaching. It is consistently at least good and some of it is now outstanding. Teachers know their subjects well and plan lessons carefully so that students make good progress and achieve well in their examinations.
- Students are keen to learn. They cooperate very well with one another and their teachers. The rates with which they progress in their learning have improved as a result.
- Students behave very well outside of lessons. They are courteous to others when moving around the school.
- The school ensures that students are safe at all times. They know how to keep themselves safe, including when outside school, and also when using the internet.
- The sixth form is well managed. Students make good progress and do well in their examinations. All either go on to university, further education or into employment or training.

It is not yet an outstanding school because:

- Those students who enter the school at below the expected levels in English and mathematics do not make progress as quickly as their peers.
- In a few cases students who struggle with their learning are given work which is too hard for them. As a result they find learning even more difficult at times, and do not progress as well as they could.
- Some teachers do not always make sure that students follow up written advice about how to improve their work.
- Students are given too few opportunities to practise their mathematical skills in other subjects so do not benefit from using their knowledge to progress as rapidly as they should.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors visited 41 lessons, 28 of them together with one or other of the school leaders.
- Inspectors looked at students' work, including the frequency and quality of marking. They assessed the progress that students make, and considered case studies of some individual students.
- Meetings were held with three groups of students, seven governors including the Chair of the Governing Body, and senior and middle managers.
- Inspectors took account of the 130 responses to the online questionnaire, Parent View, and 76 staff questionnaire responses.
- Inspectors observed the school's work and looked at a number of documents. These included the school's self-evaluation and development plan, the school's information on students' current progress, and records relating to monitoring, behaviour and attendance, and safeguarding.

Inspection team

John Mallone, Lead inspector	Additional Inspector
Victor Chaffey	Additional Inspector
Elizabeth Hitch	Additional Inspector
Carol Worthington	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- Larkmead School is an average-sized secondary school with a sixth form.
- The students come from predominantly White British backgrounds. The proportion coming from minority ethnic groups, around one tenth, is below national averages. Few students speak English as an additional language.
- Approximately one fifth of students are disabled or have special educational needs, including those with a statement of special educational needs. This is in line with national averages.
- About a fifth of students are supported by the pupil premium, which provides additional funding for children who are looked after and students known to be eligible for free school meals. This is less than the national average.
- The school has a specialist unit which supports a very small number of students with hearing impairments.
- The school is part of a local sixth form consortium which includes John Mason School, Fitzharrys School and Abingdon and Witney Further Education College.
- The school shares support for the teaching of literacy with several of its feeder primary schools.
- The school does not access alternative provision for any of its students.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for students' attainment and progress by the end of Key Stage 4. It also meets the interim minimum standards for sixth form students.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Increase the proportion of teaching which is outstanding, and further accelerate rates of progress for all students by ensuring that:
 - work is consistently matched to the abilities of students, especially those who find learning difficult
 - those who join the school below the expected levels in English and mathematics make rapid progress to narrow the gap between their attainment and that of their peers
 - students consistently respond to their teachers' written suggestions about how to improve their work
 - increased opportunities are provided for students to apply their mathematical skills in other subjects.

Inspection judgements

The leadership and management

are good

- The headteacher and other leaders have created a strong learning culture in the school. They have a good understanding of the school's strengths and the ways in which it needs to develop further. Clear and effective planning has brought about a significant improvement in the quality of teaching and students' achievement.
- Leaders have high expectations of teachers and students. This is reflected in the setting of ambitious targets for students which are reviewed regularly to make sure that when students reach their targets early, they are revised, leading to increased progress. As a result of this strong focus on progress, students' achievement has risen sharply, although those who join the school with below expected levels in English and mathematics do not make progress so rapidly.
- The school's leaders have adopted a robust approach to improving the quality of teaching. Leaders have a good understanding of the areas where teachers need to improve their practice, and provide them with training which is well tailored to their individual needs. Any who are experiencing difficulties are given good support to help them improve. As a result, the quality of teaching has improved significantly.
- The middle leadership of the school is very effective. Subject leaders work with teachers on a regular basis to improve teaching in their areas. They track closely how well students are doing and quickly provide support for those who are falling behind. As a result, students are making progress more rapidly.
- The pupil premium funding has been well used to provide a wide range of support for disadvantaged students. This has been effective in bringing about improvements for this group of students and reducing the gap in achievement between them and their peers.
- The curriculum covers a wide range of subjects and enables students to make choices which meet their needs, including the most able and those who are disabled or have special educational needs. Sixth form students benefit from a wide range of academic courses offered in the school, as well as some additional subjects which they can access at other schools in the local consortium.
- Management of the unit for those with hearing impairments is excellent. Students are well supported and enabled to gain access to the full curriculum.
- The values of tolerance, respect and fairness are woven throughout the school and feature regularly in many of the subjects being taught. These values are bolstered through being covered more directly in the school's 'philosophy and belief' lessons. Students are well prepared for life in modern Britain and have a good awareness of issues in the wider world beyond.
- Students receive extremely useful advice on careers, further and higher education, and training. As a result, all students who leave school either stay in education or enter employment or training.
- The school works very effectively to promote equality of opportunity and does not tolerate discrimination of any kind. It provides financial support to disadvantaged students so that they can take part in a variety of additional activities, and runs a summer school for primary students who may need extra help when joining the school. There is a zero tolerance approach to name calling, including anything of a racist or homophobic nature, instances of which are extremely rare.
- The local authority has provided useful support which has helped the school bring about recent improvements in the quality of teaching and students' achievement.
- The school's arrangements for safeguarding meet all statutory requirements and have been effective in keeping students safe while in the care of the school.

■ The governance of the school:

- Governors are very knowledgeable about all aspects of the school's work and are strongly committed to helping it improve. They challenge school leaders effectively, which has helped bring about recent improvements. They understand where the strengths in teaching lie and what needs to be done to raise standards further. They have detailed knowledge about how well students achieve compared with others nationally and have helped maintain a focus on the achievement of those who are disadvantaged. This has helped improve the progress of these students. Governors oversee the performance management of the headteacher and know that staff who perform well are rewarded, providing that pay rises will only be given to those who meet their targets. They oversee the financial management of the school with a good eye for detail, helping ensure that future plans match the funds available.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are good**Behaviour**

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- Students have very good attitudes to learning. They come to lessons properly equipped and ready and keen to learn. They cooperate very well with one another when asked to work together, and are able to stay focused on their work. They quickly follow their teachers' instructions, and lessons flow without interruption. As a result, students make rapid progress.
- However, they do not always respond diligently enough to the guidance they receive to improve their work, which prevents their progress from being outstanding, and some students' presentation of their work in books is not always good enough.
- Outside of lessons, students conduct themselves well. They move calmly and quietly around the school, and arrive punctually at lessons. They politely hold open doors for others and wait patiently where narrow spaces restrict the flow.
- Students care for the school environment. The attractive wall displays, including students' work, are all in good condition. There is very little litter, and no graffiti was seen anywhere during the inspection.
- Students are aware of the different kinds of bullying, but report that it is extremely rare. They know who to go to on the rare occasion that bullying occurs and say that it is always very quickly sorted out. The school's own records show that bullying is infrequent.
- Attendance is above national averages and has steadily improved. The attendance of disadvantaged students is improving also but is not yet as good as that of other students.

Safety

- The school's work to keep pupils safe and secure is good.
- Staff, students and parents and carers all agree that the school is a safe place. Students are clear about the different kinds of risk they face, both inside school and beyond. They know how to keep themselves safe, including when using the internet, and especially when accessing social media.
- Staff and governors have been well trained in how to ensure that students are kept safe. Visitors to the school have their identities checked and are kept under supervision at all times. Governors have been trained in safer recruiting, and all new staff are subject to rigorous checks.

The quality of teaching is good

- Teaching has improved. It is now consistently good, and sometimes outstanding, across subjects and all year groups.
- Teachers have high expectations of students' behaviour and the effort they make to achieve well in lessons. As a consequence, students take a pride in their work, learn well and make good progress.
- Teachers' subject knowledge is very good. They have good relationships with students and plan lessons carefully. As a result, students readily adapt to the different roles which help deepen their understanding, for example, when working in groups or pairs. Lessons run smoothly and students make good progress.
- Teachers use questioning effectively to check students' understanding. They make adjustments to lessons when it becomes clear that students need to spend longer getting to grips with new ideas. As a result, students do not get left behind. The school has worked effectively with teachers to improve their questioning techniques so that they are better equipped to establish that students understand more securely what they are learning.
- Teachers use resources effectively to support students' learning. For example, in a Year 10 English lesson, students were provided with a range of prompts of what to do if they got stuck, for example asking a friend or looking a word up in a dictionary. As a result, they did not need to wait for the teacher to help them, and made quicker progress.
- Teachers regularly set and mark homework. They provide helpful written suggestions about how students can improve their work, but students do not always follow this up. When this happens they do not make progress as quickly as they should. The progress and presentation of work in books is not so good in students who find the work more difficult.
- The teaching of literacy is good and this is reinforced across the broad range of subjects other than English. The school works hard to promote reading for pleasure and is especially effective at helping students who come to the school with achievement below what is typical in reading.
- The teaching of mathematics is good. Although it is improving, students have too few opportunities to

fully develop their mathematical skills by applying them in other subjects.

- Teachers use information about students' needs and abilities to set work at the right level. They are especially effective at working with students who are disabled or who have special educational needs. However, others who find study difficult do not always receive work which is at the right level for them.
- Teachers reflect carefully on the quality of their teaching and take advantage of the extra training they are offered. As a result, the quality of teaching continues to improve.

The achievement of pupils

is good

- Students make good progress and achieve well in their GCSE examinations. There has been a steady improvement in results in recent years. In 2014, 56% of students gained five or more GCSE grades at A* to C including English and mathematics. This was just above the national average.
- Students currently in the school are making better progress and the school's reliable data show that GCSE results are likely to be significantly better in 2015.
- The most able students achieve well. In 2014, 93% of this group gained five or more GCSE grades at A* to C including English and mathematics. This was also above the national average for this group.
- The school meets the needs of students who are disabled or who have special educational needs well, and their progress is good as a result. They make better progress in English than in mathematics, partly because of good additional support provided for those who have difficulties with reading.
- The small number of students from minority ethnic backgrounds make at least as good progress as others.
- There is a gap between the progress of disadvantaged students and others, but this is closing quickly throughout the school. In 2014, they were on average two thirds of a grade behind their classmates in their GCSE English examinations. In mathematics, the gap was a grade and a third. Compared with other students nationally, disadvantaged students in the school were two thirds of a grade behind in English and a grade and a half behind in mathematics. Students currently in the school are making much better progress. There is no gap in English for the current Year 11 and the gap is considerably reduced in mathematics.
- Students who join the school at below the expected levels in English and mathematics do not make as much progress as their classmates because they do not always receive work at the right level.
- The school does not enter any students early for GCSE examinations.
- There is a wide range of after-school clubs and activities which cater for all interests. Regular school productions showcase the talents of the school's musicians, actors and dancers, and give others the opportunity to help backstage. The many trips, both in this country and abroad, help deepen students' understanding of the wider world and prepare them well for life in modern Britain.

The sixth form provision

is good

- The sixth form is well led and improving strongly. Students achieve well in their examinations and the majority go on to university, including many who are the first to do so in their families. The proportion of students achieving top grades has risen steadily. In 2014, over half of all entries at A level received A* to B grades. This is higher than the national average. At AS level, 37% of all entries were graded A to B, which is in line with national averages. The small number of disadvantaged students in the sixth form are all achieving as well as others.
- The quality of teaching is carefully monitored and has improved. Teachers have high expectations of students and expect them to think for themselves. Students respond by taking the initiative and making strong and thoughtful contributions to lessons. This helps accelerate progress and prepare them for the more independent study they will experience at university.
- Sixth formers have very responsible attitudes to learning and manage their free time well, for example, by studying independently in the library. They act as mentors to younger students, helping those who have difficulties with reading, for instance. Their attendance is very high.
- Students are well informed about the risks they face in the transition to adult life. They receive information which helps them make informed choices about alcohol and drug use, road safety and sexual health. They report that they feel very safe at school.
- The advice and guidance students receive is very good. They are well prepared for applying to university and for entry into the world of work or training. As a result, in 2014 all students had a firm destination lined up before leaving school.
- The very few students who join the sixth form without a GCSE at grade C or above in English or

mathematics are well supported to help them obtain the necessary qualifications.

- The school ensures that attendance and behaviour of sixth formers who attend John Mason School, Fitzharrys School or Abingdon and Witney Further Education College for part of their studies is good, and that they are kept safe. Students who attend their courses make good progress.

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	123255
Local authority	Oxfordshire
Inspection number	427417

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	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	825
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	121
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	David Lever
Headteacher	Chris Harris
Date of previous school inspection	20–21 February 2013
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