

School inspection report

Date 27 to 29 February 2024

St Albans High School for Girls

Townsend Avenue

St Albans

AL1 3SJ

The Independent Schools Inspectorate is appointed by the Department for Education to inspect association independent schools in England. Our inspections report on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards and other applicable regulatory requirements are met, collectively referred to in this report as 'the Standards'.

Contents

SUMMARY OF INSPECTION FINDINGS	3
THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SCHOOL MEETS THE STANDARDS.....	4
RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS.....	4
SECTION 1: LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT, AND GOVERNANCE.....	5
THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SCHOOL MEETS STANDARDS RELATING TO LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT, AND GOVERNANCE.....	6
SECTION 2: QUALITY OF EDUCATION, TRAINING AND RECREATION	7
THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SCHOOL MEETS STANDARDS RELATING TO THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION, TRAINING AND RECREATION.	8
SECTION 3: PUPILS’ PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING	9
THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SCHOOL MEETS STANDARDS RELATING TO PUPILS’ PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING.	10
SECTION 4: PUPILS’ SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EDUCATION AND CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIETY.....	11
THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SCHOOL MEETS STANDARDS RELATING TO PUPILS’ SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EDUCATION AND CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIETY.	12
SAFEGUARDING	13
THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SCHOOL MEETS STANDARDS RELATING TO SAFEGUARDING.	13
SCHOOL DETAILS	14
INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL.....	15
INSPECTION DETAILS	16

Summary of inspection findings

1. Governors ensure that leaders have the skills and understanding to fulfil their responsibilities well. They are well informed and have robust oversight of school policy and practice. They discuss improvements and developments, supporting the leaders well in managing change.
2. Leaders and governors want pupils to gain life skills and personal understanding to fully equip them for life at university and beyond. The school's 'Teach to 25' philosophy helps pupils gain the life skills and understanding to enable them to flourish long after they have left school. In this way, leaders promote the wellbeing of the pupils throughout their school careers and beyond. This approach is a distinctive aspect of the school.
3. The curriculum is extensive and carefully considered. Pupils have the opportunity to learn and make progress in all the required aspects. This academic year the SuperCurriculum has also been implemented in the senior school. Teachers guide pupils through the abundance of options to provide flexibility for later in their careers. Pupils achieve well in their academic qualifications.
4. All pupils make good progress including those who have special educational needs or disabilities (SEND). Attainment in terms of examination results, university and other career destinations is high compared to the national average. Throughout the school, pupils who have SEND are well supported.
5. Safeguarding practices and procedures are effective. Leaders carefully consider the safety and wellbeing of the pupils.
6. Leaders and teachers support the wellbeing of the pupils as individuals with compassion and respect. The pastoral team is highly effective in addressing the concerns of most pupils, suggesting strategies and working with them to resolve issues. However, a small proportion of middle school pupils perceive that there is not sufficient support for their physical and mental wellbeing. Leaders want to explore this perception and devise further ways to support them.
7. Leaders focus on broadening pupils' experiences and relevant life skills, many of which are delivered through the personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education programme referred to as 'Skills for Life'. These are introduced in the prep school and influence careers and economic education as they thread through whole school. Acutely aware of discrimination and unconscious bias in the wider world, teachers support well-rounded personal development so that pupils take their place in society with confidence.

The extent to which the school meets the Standards

- Standards relating to leadership and management, and governance are met.
- Standards relating to the quality of education, training and recreation are met.
- Standards relating to pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing are met.
- Standards relating to pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society are met.
- Standards relating to safeguarding are met.

Recommended next steps.

Leaders should:

- develop the school's strategy to support pupils' wellbeing so that pupils in the middle school are confident to use the initiatives already in place.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

8. Governors keep themselves well informed and have a comprehensive understanding of the school. They readily engage in discussions with leaders concerning school evaluation and development, offering appropriate expertise and challenge.
9. The governors effectively operate their 'policies into practice' initiative. They scrutinise policies, visit leaders, teachers and support staff to see how each policy works in practice. They have a clear understanding and oversight of all areas of the school, including the specific areas of safeguarding, recruitment and complaints.
10. Governors appoint leaders and staff with the necessary skills, knowledge and understanding to fulfil the requirements of their roles and to create a vibrant and warm community which supports the pupils' wellbeing.
11. Leaders have a strong approach to checking and reviewing the school's effectiveness. They frequently consult with staff, parents, alumni and pupils to guide the decisions they make around what needs to improve further. Leaders clearly and purposefully identify areas for development that benefit all aspects of pupils' wellbeing. Where these areas are identified, initiatives are then planned and implemented in timely fashion with consideration and mitigation for any potential risks.
12. Since the previous inspection the 'Teach to 25' philosophy has been established. The wellbeing hub has been equipped and staffed and is making a positive impact. It has made access to counselling support or simply to a quiet space easier for pupils. This academic year, the structure of the school day has been changed. Leaders made this decision to allow more time for the 'SuperCurriculum' and 'Skills for Life'. This change is so recent that the impact of this is still under review.
13. Although the senior school and prep school sites are separated in both distance and surroundings, leaders collaborate well to ensure a cohesive approach. This is so that pupils experience a smooth transition from the prep school to the senior school and continue to thrive.
14. In the early years, leaders promote the wellbeing of all children effectively so that children behave well and are ready to learn. Exemption from the Statutory Framework to allow an earlier start for children to formal learning is proving successful. Young children flourish personally, socially and academically and are supported in all aspects of their development by effective teaching.
15. Leaders and staff use systematic and dynamic risk assessment in all areas of school life. Premises are regularly checked. Events and trips offsite are carefully considered. The pastoral team including the wellbeing hub staff monitor pupils who may need more care than most. Leaders establish effective links with external agencies and other schools to share expertise and best practice in support of the pupils' wellbeing.
16. Information concerning the school aims and vision, academic results, and how to make a complaint is readily accessible on the school website. Key policies such as safeguarding, behaviour management and antibullying are also available.
17. Leaders address concerns and complaints appropriately and as promptly as possible, following the published procedure.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to leadership and management, and governance.

18. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

19. There is an extensive curriculum which ensures that all pupils experience all the required areas. The choice of subjects is sufficiently varied to provide opportunities for gaining a wide range of knowledge and skills. Pupils appreciate the abundance of options and the guidance in choosing the most appropriate ones for them to succeed.
20. The school has recently undergone a timetable structure change to give greater flexibility and shorter but more frequent lessons. This has facilitated the introduction of a super-curricular programme throughout and a greater choice of languages in the lower school. The 'SuperCurriculum' programme entails sessions that extend pupils beyond the examined curriculum. Leaders intend that this should support and complement pupils' academic experience as guided by the 'Teach to 25' philosophy. Pupils acquire knowledge and make good progress based on their ability. Through carefully planned schemes of work and a range of teaching methods including questioning, and tasks and projects that stretch and challenge, pupils make progress, think and learn for themselves.
21. In the senior school, individual needs are identified by the well-qualified and dedicated staff who support pupils who have SEND. In the prep school, pupils who have SEND are given work at an appropriate level so that they make good progress and have positive attitudes to learning. The school is reviewing the continuity of support for pupils who have SEND as they move into the senior school.
22. Many pupils who have English as an additional language (EAL) are fully bilingual. Care is taken, particularly with younger pupils and those who are less fluent, to ensure that they develop their understanding of vocabulary and inference.
23. Teachers demonstrate enthusiasm and secure knowledge and understanding of their subjects. They plan thoroughly and lessons are fast moving and challenging. Pupils respond with enthusiasm and work hard. They are highly motivated to achieve and aware of how to improve their individual understanding. Pupils appreciate the encouragement, and feedback provided by the teachers in classwork and assessments.
24. Teachers know the pupils and their abilities well. They use appropriate information to adapt their approach for pupils who have SEND according to their specific needs. Regular review meetings between pupils and academic leaders allow for reflection on pupils' progress and the evaluation of any interventions. These meetings often result in an action plan with targets and timescales for some pupils. Pupils who have SEND make comparable progress with their peers.
25. There are a broad range of activities available during lunchtimes and after school. Pupils appreciate the abundance of choice and opportunity. The resulting high levels of participation, and opportunities to explore something new, promote pupils developing personal skills such as confidence and independence. Pupils also gain social and other life skills, such as personal organisation and prioritisation.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to the quality of education, training and recreation.

26. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 3: Pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing

27. Leaders and teachers are effective role models showing respect, tolerance and compassion in this diverse and outward-looking school community. Difference is accepted, and individuality in terms of race, gender and culture are introduced into discussion at a young age. Pupils are socially adept. They express themselves well, and readily discuss and appreciate other points of view.
28. Leaders have consulted with recent alumnae, pupil members of the pride club, parents and members of staff to develop the equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) strategy to more sensitively support individual pupils. Pupils develop a clear sense of belonging and respect for protected characteristics. There is also an active school council in which pupils raise issues and make suggestions for improvements.
29. Leaders oversee well-planned schemes of work and unbiased nonpartisan teaching so that pupils gain relevant and timely skills and knowledge from the 'Skills for Life' programme which combines PSHE and relationships and sex education (RSE). In the prep school, the equivalent PSHE and RE programmes are particularly effective.
30. Effective pastoral systems enable pupils to feel safe and understood as individuals. The pastoral team addresses pupils' concerns with compassion and respect, suggesting strategies and working with pupils effectively to resolve issues. A small proportion of middle school pupils perceive that there is not sufficient support for their physical and mental wellbeing. Leaders are aware of this and are considering how to improve pupil understanding. Pupils can talk to an adult if they have a concern. Behaviour and antibullying policies are implemented effectively so that pupils feel secure and able to be themselves. In the early years, children behave well and enjoy their learning.
31. There is a nurturing atmosphere throughout the school which is based on strong relationships and mutual respect. Pupils behave well. Leaders have implemented a robust behaviour policy which incorporates suitable rewards and sanctions. The needs of pupils who have SEND are taken into consideration. Sanctions are proportionate and records show that there is limited escalation of issues. The behaviour policy also applies to the senior school.
32. Unkindness and bullying are rare, but when it happens, staff follow the school procedure which involves restorative conflict resolution. Pastoral staff work with any pupils involved to ensure appropriate closure of the incident and all parties can move on successfully.
33. School officers support the behaviour management of the school appropriately. Year 6 captains and ambassadors fulfil similar roles in the prep school.
34. Leaders ensure that attitudes to health and safety and risk assessment are robust and dynamic. Premises are well maintained and secure to provide a safe and attractive learning environment.
35. In the prep school, all staff are trained in first aid and a full-time nurse is available throughout the school day. Appropriate records are kept. Children in the early years always have access to staff trained in paediatric first aid.

36. In the senior school, the hub is a useful addition that enhances the medical and first aid provision, and wellbeing support.
37. Physical education is at a high standard in terms of participation, enjoyment and inclusivity. A healthy balanced lifestyle is actively encouraged from the start, including consideration of mental wellbeing.
38. In the prep school, pupils learn to express how they are feeling, starting in early years where they select how they are feeling first thing in the morning. Pupils are taught how to keep themselves healthy in sport and PSHE. Year 1 learn about healthy eating and the benefit of a balanced diet.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing.

- 39. All the relevant Standards are met.**

Section 4: Pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society

40. Democracy and diversity are stated priorities. Teachers help pupils understand the democratic values of openness, personal freedom and tolerance so that they learn to make a positive contribution to society. Pupils vote in elections for the posts of school officers, house captains, or school council representatives. Once elected, pupils perform their roles responsibly.
41. In the prep school, pupils have leadership opportunities which they fulfil with pride. With classroom responsibilities or as house or sports captains, eco or wellbeing ambassadors or pupil committee members, pupils learn to consider the views of others and work together to improve their school environment.
42. Pupils behave well. Young pupils understand the principles of right and wrong. They learn to appreciate the importance of rules and laws as they go through the school. As role models, older pupils demonstrate the principles of justice and good citizenship, learned from discussion, debate and the example of their teachers.
43. Issues concerning gender and sexual orientation are freely discussed within 'Skills for Life' sessions and the active pupil-led pride club. Teachers, pupils and visiting speakers also share different religious and racial cultures. As a result, pupils show interest, understanding and tolerance in all aspects of cultures in wider society.
44. The prep school is also inclusive, and individuality is celebrated. Older pupils share their faiths in assemblies and younger pupils talk with pride about speaking more than one language. This is developed through language days and cultures festivals. Lessons incorporate other faiths and cultures, including special places of worship. Knowledgeable teachers encourage children to hypothesise and question their understanding of the world. They skilfully tackle difficult topics including racism and suppression.
45. Through SuperCurriculum sessions, teachers provide activities through which pupils develop different skills such as independent research, debating and exploring topics beyond examination specifications. The sixth-form 'STAHS Diploma' also complements pupils' academic studies, providing additional wellbeing life skills, and opportunities for service and leadership. Consequently, pupils are well prepared for life beyond school.
46. Careers education is well planned and tailored to the needs of the pupils. This is influenced by the 'Teach to 25' philosophy, particularly in the building of relevant skills for pupils as they progress towards university or further training. Pupils value the impartial staff careers guidance in Year 10 and Year 12. Invited alumnae, parents and local employers provide valuable insights into professions, skills and general advice to the pupils.
47. Well-planned economic education occurs throughout the school. In the prep school, young pupils use role play to learn about buying, selling and money, while older pupils explore the issues that can arise relating to world trade. Middle school pupils learn about national insurance, pay and tax and the implications for their first jobs. Sixth formers discover how to manage student finance, credit and debt, rent and mortgages.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society.

48. All the relevant Standards are met.

Safeguarding

49. Leaders and staff work hard to make this school a safe place for everyone. Safeguarding is lead and promoted well. The safeguarding team ensures that a culture of promoting the wellbeing of every child is thoroughly embedded in the school.
50. The single central record is kept accurately and diligently and ensures that all the appropriate checks are carried out before the deployment of any staff or volunteers begins. Safeguarding is central in the recruitment process so that staff are suitable to work with pupils. Safeguarding training is robust and regular. The annual staff and governor training is appropriately updated throughout the year.
51. Safeguarding leaders including the designated safeguarding governor are all trained to the appropriate level. They fulfil the responsibility of updating, communicating and implementing the safeguarding policy regularly in line with statutory guidance.
52. The school has a variety of robust systems in place to safeguard pupils, including the effective use of external agencies. Detailed records are kept securely and used not only to track cases when they occur but used proactively to inform training and education to further strengthen safeguarding in the school.
53. Leaders ensure that pupils, staff and as many parents as possible are well versed in keeping themselves safe online. In school, there are robust filtering and monitoring systems to help protect the pupils when on the school network. Online safety advice is covered in 'Skills for Life' and as appropriate in other lessons. Teachers of 'Skills for Life' also advise pupils on personal safety, growing up safely and in relationships.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding.

- 54. All the relevant Standards are met.**

School details

School	St Albans High School for Girls
Department for Education number	919/6038
Registered charity number	311065
Address	St Albans High School for Girls 1–3 Townsend Avenue St Albans Hertfordshire AL1 3SJ
Phone number	01727 853800
Email address	info@stahs.org.uk
Website	www.stahs.org.uk
Chair of Governors	Ms Alison Arnold
Headteacher	Mrs Amber Waite
Age range	4 to 18
Number of pupils	1147
Date of previous inspection	27 to 28 November 2019

Information about the school

55. St Albans High School for Girls is a day school for female pupils located in St Albans, Hertfordshire. The school consists of a prep school and a senior school which includes a sixth form. The prep school is located on a separate site approximately five miles from the senior school. The school is a charitable trust and a company limited by guarantee overseen by a board of governors. Since the previous inspection a new chair of governors was appointed in December 2022.
56. There are 35 children in the early years comprising two Reception classes.
57. The school has identified 92 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). No pupils in the school have an education, health and care (EHC) plan.
58. English is an additional language for 93 pupils.
59. The school states its aims are to develop happy resilient young people who will embrace opportunities and lead lives of consequence. It seeks to ensure that pupils are prepared for the future by providing excellent pastoral care, in a diverse and inclusive community. It further provides an inspiring learning environment and opportunity to have a positive impact on the wider community.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

27–29 February 2024]

60. A team of ten inspectors visited the school for two and a half days.

61. Inspection activities included:

- observation of lessons, some in conjunction with school leaders
- observation of registration periods and assemblies
- observation of a sample of extra-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection
- discussions with the chair and other governors
- discussions with the head, school leaders, managers and other members of staff
- discussions with pupils
- visits to the learning support area and facilities for physical education
- scrutiny of samples of pupils' work
- scrutiny of a range of policies, documentation and records provided by the school.

62. The inspection team considered the views of pupils, members of staff and parents who responded to ISI's pre-inspection surveys.

How are association independent schools in England inspected?

- The Department for Education is the regulator for independent schools in England.
- ISI is approved by the Secretary of State for Education to inspect independent schools in England, which are members of associations in membership of the Independent Schools Council.
- ISI inspections report to the Department for Education on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards, the EYFS statutory framework requirements, the National Minimum Standards for boarding schools and any other relevant standards are met.
- For more information, please visit **www.isi.net**.

Independent Schools Inspectorate

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