

Helena Romanes School and Sixth Form Centre

Parsonage Downs, Great Dunmow, CM6 2AU

Inspection dates 13–14 November 2012

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected	
	This inspection:	Good	2
Achievement of pupils		Good	2
Quality of teaching		Good	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Good	2
Leadership and management		Good	2

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school.

- Students achieve well across a wide range of subjects. By the time they leave school, they develop into well-rounded young people ready for their next steps in education or the wider world.
- Literacy skills are very effectively promoted across the school in different subjects. Consequently, students express ideas well, both orally and in their written work.
- The sixth form is good. Students are taught well and given good support to manage their workloads. Hence, they achieve well.
- Additional support for learning for students who need this is well organised and effective in enabling them to achieve creditable results.
- Behaviour is good around the school and in lessons. Students feel safe, get on well with one another and are prepared to work hard because they want to do well.
- School leaders, including governors, have established strong systems to check the quality of the school's work, including teaching, and students' progress. Information gathered through these is used highly systematically to identify and tackle areas for development. Hence, teaching and learning have improved and continue to improve further.
- Governors have good oversight of the school and how well it is doing. They challenge school leaders effectively to do better still.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- In some lessons, teachers talk for too long giving less opportunity for students to participate actively in their learning.
- Work is not always tightly enough tailored to the different capabilities of students in the class.
- The use of numeracy in different subjects is not as well developed as the use of literacy.
- While leaders' feedback to teachers is clear and comprehensive, sometimes, not enough guidance is given on how to make their teaching outstanding.
- The quality and range of training for support staff are not quite as well developed as those for teachers.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 44 lessons, of which six were jointly seen with members of the senior leadership team. In addition, the inspection team made a number of shorter visits to lessons to focus on specific aspects such as behaviour or how well teachers check pupils' on-going learning.
- Members of the inspection team held meetings with four groups of pupils, the headteacher, senior and middle leaders and members of the Chair and Vice-Chair of the governing body. A meeting was also held with a representative of the local authority.
- The team observed the school's work and scrutinised a number of documents including school improvement plans, data on pupils' current progress, pupils' written work, and records relating to behaviour, attendance and safeguarding.
- Inspectors took account of 87 responses to the online questionnaire for parents and carers, Parent View, in informing the inspection findings.

Inspection team

Gulshanbir Kayembe, Lead inspector	Additional Inspector
Paul Bartlett	Additional Inspector
Duncan Cooper	Additional Inspector
Isobel Randall	Additional Inspector
David Whiteside	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The school is much larger than the average-sized secondary school.
- The majority of pupils are White British and only a small proportion is from minority ethnic backgrounds.
- The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for the pupil premium is below average. The pupil premium is additional funding from the government to ensure that certain groups of pupils, such as those receiving free school meals, who may be at a disadvantage are able to achieve as well as others.
- The proportion of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs who are supported at school action is well below the national average. The proportion at school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is below average.
- The school meets the current floor standards, which are the government's minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress.
- The school makes arrangements for a small group of students in Years 10 and 11 to access alternative provision or courses of a vocational nature on a part-time basis in other local institutions. Courses attended include hairdressing, vehicle maintenance and animal care.
- Helena Romanes School and Sixth Form Centre converted to become an academy on 1 April 2012. When its predecessor school, of the same name, was last inspected by Ofsted, it was judged to be satisfactory overall.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of teaching by:
 - making sure that all lessons provide students with enough opportunities to participate actively in their learning so that they can practise skills and develop understanding through first-hand experiences and discussions with one another
 - setting work that is at the right level for students of different capabilities in the lesson so that it is neither too easy nor too hard
 - extending the use of numeracy in subjects across the school so that it is as well established as the use of literacy.
- Improve the leadership and management of teaching by:
 - developing feedback to teachers that identifies clearly how to move good teaching to outstanding
 - ensuring that the quality and range of training and help given to support staff is as well developed as it is for teachers.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils is good

- Students begin at the school with broadly average attainment, though this is rising and is above average for students in Years 7 and 8. Students achieve well whatever their starting points and make good progress, including in English and mathematics.
- Attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 has been on a rising trend over the last few years and is above average. The proportion of students who took their GCSEs in 2012 and gained five or more good GCSEs, including GCSEs in both English and mathematics, was above average.
- Students for whom the school receives pupil premium funding are doing well. Good use is made of the funding throughout the school to support these students. For example, in Year 7, a summer school and additional support for literacy and numeracy this term have ensured that these students are academically on an even footing with others. Overall, the achievement gap between those eligible for the pupil premium and others is narrowing.
- Alternative courses enable less academic students to achieve well and to gain valuable vocational qualifications that help them to continue their education or vocational training beyond school. Students are put in for GCSE examinations in some subjects such as mathematics early if they are ready.
- Disabled students and those who have special educational needs are well supported both by teaching assistants in mainstream classes and opportunities to be taught in small groups, especially for literacy and numeracy. Consequently, they make good progress. Attainment in mathematics is being improved rapidly by providing additional support and one-to-one teaching for lower ability students, including some with special educational needs.
- In lessons, students work well and good teaching enables them to make good progress. Students explain their ideas and thinking clearly, often giving extended answers to questions. They also show curiosity and ask questions of their teachers. The good opportunities for developing reading and writing skills in different subjects contribute to students' good progress in literacy. Students are not given as many opportunities to use their numeracy skills in other subjects.
- Sometimes, students' learning slows because they are expected to listen to introductions that are too long. These reduce the opportunities for students to practise, and hence improve, important subject-related skills or to develop their understanding through group discussion or by completing relevant tasks.
- Setting arrangements in subjects such as English, mathematics and science enable different ability groups to work at appropriate levels. However, even in ability sets, work is sometimes not set just at the right level for all in the group. It is too easy for some and too hard for others.
- Students join the sixth form with lower attainment than the norm nationally, and make good progress in their learning. Hence, A-level results are broadly in line with national averages. They compare well with national data in relation to the proportion of students gaining grades A* to E. The proportion of students gaining grades A* to B is similar to the national average and has been rising steadily.
- Sixth form students work well in lessons and benefit particularly from the detailed and personal

feedback from their teachers on how to improve their work.

The quality of teaching is good

- Students are taught well. All lessons begin with a clear outline of what teachers expect students to learn. These learning outcomes are often helpfully linked to assessment levels or grades so students are aware of the levels or grades they are aiming to achieve. Teachers refer back to the learning outcomes at relevant points in the lesson, enabling students to be clear about what key learning points they have covered.
- Teachers question students well, which helps to extend students' understanding and develop their thinking. Teaching assistants are also good at questioning the students they work with so that they learn to think for themselves. Teachers make good use of teaching assistants to help students, particularly lower attainers and those with special educational needs. Other resources, such as information and communication technology, are used well to support learning.
- Where teaching is good or better, practical activities engage students well in their learning. They are able to learn from one another by discussing their thinking and sounding out their ideas. They have the time to get their ideas down on paper and practise subject-related skills. However, in some lessons, teachers talk for too long or spend too long giving instructions, thus reducing the time for students to have a go at, for example, the mathematical problems the teacher has been explaining or rehearse the drama techniques they have been hearing about.
- Work for students is mostly pitched at the right level for them and setting by ability helps teachers to give students work that challenges them but is not too difficult. Extra support from teaching assistants or teachers during lessons, small-group and one-to-one teaching provides particularly effective support for lower attainers or those with additional needs. The way that teachers group students together also helps those of different abilities to make equally good progress. However, sometimes, work is either too difficult for some students or too easy for the most able, thereby slowing learning.
- A rigorous and systematic teaching technique helps students of all abilities to tackle complex ideas and themes successfully. This technique, consisting of identifying a key point and then systematically providing the evidence and analysis to back up the point, is used consistently across the school including in the sixth form.
- Marking is rigorous and both oral and written feedback to students provides them with good guidance on how to improve their work further. Consequently, students know how well they are getting on and how to make their work better. They also know their individual targets, which are used well by teachers to help students to achieve the best they can.
- Sixth form students are positive about their learning and the teaching they receive. They benefit from teachers' good subject knowledge and ability to explain complex ideas clearly. There are examples of exceptionally good feedback to students on their performance.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are good

- Students are polite and helpful. They are happy at school and the very large majority of parents and carers agree. Their above-average attendance reflects students' enjoyment of school.
- Behaviour in the school is typically good. Older students agree that it has improved. This is supported by the school's behaviour records which show reducing numbers of recorded incidents

and a definite decline in the seriousness of incidents.

- Students also agree that issues of bullying are rare. They are confident that the school deals with bad behaviour, including any incidents of bullying, effectively. Racism, along with any other prejudice-based harassment, is rare and not tolerated.
- Lessons run smoothly because students behave well. Even when, on occasion, the introduction to the lesson is rather long, students tend to remain attentive. Students work well with one another in groups and pairs. In a media studies lesson where Year 9 students were planning a group project, they listened to one another's ideas and tactfully made alternative suggestions.
- The good care and support for students means that they are safe and feel safe. Almost all parents and carers agree that their child feels safe. Students read or socialise in the library at lunch times and this provides a safe environment for those of a more sensitive disposition.
- Students attending alternative courses in other institutions are checked on regularly to make sure that they attend regularly, their behaviour is in line with school expectations and that they are well supported and safe.

The leadership and management are good

- The headteacher and governors are ambitious for the school to continue to build on its successes to date in order to make it the best that it can be. Their ambitions are communicated well to staff and students.
- Targets set for teachers are linked to whole-school priorities and ensure that teaching has a positive impact on students' progress. Pay awards are linked closely to how well teachers are promoting students' progress and achievement, and governors keep a close check on this.
- A particularly strong feature of the leadership is the way in which the school's work is checked, the information gathered analysed and then used to inform not only whole-school priorities but also priorities for development for individual teachers and students. This is done across the school and involves senior and middle leaders well. Consequently, teachers and students know the next steps needed to improve their work, and hence the work of the school. The consistent use of literacy in subjects and good-quality marking are recent successes of the systematic approach to school improvement. Training is wide-ranging and tailored very effectively to individual teachers' to help them to achieve their targets and improve their skills.
- While support staff are managed well and make a good contribution to the work of the school, the quality and range of training to help them to extend their skills or gain further qualifications is not as well developed as it is for teachers.
- The school promotes equality of opportunity by checking how well different groups of students are achieving. The range of subjects on offer is adapted so that it provides the right options and alternatives for different abilities and interests. The pupil premium funding is spent well on activities such as individual tuition, extra sessions in literacy and numeracy in Years 7 and 8, a special reading programme and alternative education programmes in Key Stage 4. These are making a positive difference to achievement. In addition, the good range of enrichment and other activities outside the ordinary school day are extended to all through financial support via the pupil premium funding, including paying the cost of students learning to play a musical instrument. These opportunities, alongside those in lessons, also support students' personal development and spiritual, moral, social and cultural awareness.

- Though the school is now an academy, it continues to work with the local authority and to access helpful support and guidance to enable it to continue its trajectory of improvement.

- **The governance of the school:**

- Governors are closely involved in the work of the school. They systematically examine how well it is doing and where improvements are needed, and are well informed about the quality of teaching. Governors understand the data on students' performance and, therefore, how well pupils are achieving. Their links to different subjects and areas of the school's work enable them to have good oversight of, and first-hand information about, the school's effectiveness. Governors ask for reports as and when needed. For example, they have asked for an update on how effectively the pupil premium funding is being spent. They budget the school's funding, including pupil premium, wisely and evaluate the impact of their spending. Governors also ensure that safeguarding requirements are met.

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	137975
Local authority	N/A
Inspection number	402781

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Academy Converters
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	1378
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	200
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Janet Dyson
Headteacher	Simon Knight
Date of previous school inspection	N/A
Telephone number	01371 872560
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