

Valley Park School

Huntsman Lane, Maidstone, Kent, ME14 5DT

Inspection dates 18–19 April 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, chief executive officer and governing body have extremely high expectations of just how good the school should be. This vision is clearly understood by all staff and by students. Strong teamwork has led to continuing rapid improvement since the school opened as an academy.
- Students' achievement is outstanding because of the fast progress students make from their below-average starting points. Attainment has risen rapidly, particularly in the proportion of students achieving five good GCSE grades including English and mathematics. Students' attainment is above average.
- The extensive range of activities organised through the expressive arts specialism contributes very well to building students' self-esteem and confidence. The many performances and extra-curricular activities ensure that the school is a vibrant place.
- Parents and carers are supportive and recognise that students are safe, happy and taught well. Students' achievements are valued and celebrated, as seen in rich visual displays, particularly of ceramics, around the school.
- Students have a thirst for learning and readily subscribe to 'The Valley Park Way', which is highly effective in fostering individual talent. Students' excellent behaviour and attitudes are a key factor in their successful learning.
- The sixth form is outstanding, with students building securely on their earlier achievements. Students in the sixth form and main school choose from an exceptionally wide range of vocational and academic courses. These programmes meet their talents and interests, and equip them extremely well for their future education and working lives.
- Teaching is outstanding because teachers know their students very well and plan carefully to meet the needs of all abilities and needs. Consequently, all groups of pupils, including disabled students and those with special educational needs, make excellent progress. Students are given good guidance about how to improve their work but the quality of marking is not uniformly excellent across the school.
- The leadership of all aspects of school improvement, including that of teaching, is highly effective. The governing body is extremely well informed and effective in its work.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 50 lessons, of which five were observed jointly with the headteacher and senior leaders.
- Meetings were held with school leaders, representatives of the governing body and directors of the trust board, staff and groups of students.
- Inspectors observed the school's work and attended an assembly. They scrutinised students' work, progress data, evaluation and development documents, information about how the school cares for and protects students and staff, and records relating to behaviour and attendance.
- Inspectors took account of 125 responses to the online Parent View survey submitted prior to and during the inspection, together with questionnaires completed by 70 staff.

Inspection team

Helen Hutchings, Lead inspector	Additional inspector
Helen Blanchard	Additional inspector
Sue Cox	Additional inspector
Najoud Ensaff	Additional inspector
Roger Fenwick	Additional inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- Valley Park School converted to become an academy in April 2011. When its predecessor school was last inspected by Ofsted in April 2010, it was judged to be outstanding overall.
- The school is an above-average-sized secondary school.
- Most students are of White British heritage, with a number of other ethnic backgrounds represented in small numbers. Very few pupils speak English as an additional language.
- The proportion of students for whom the school receives the pupil premium (additional government funding for students known to be eligible for free school meals, looked after children and children from service families) has doubled over the last three years, and is almost one in five, which is below the national average. There are currently no students from service families in the school.
- One in eight students is disabled or has special educational needs supported through school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs, which is high. The proportion supported through school action at about one in 10 is lower than the national average.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for students' attainment and progress.
- The school is sponsored by Valley Invicta Academies Trust. It is federated with Invicta Grammar School, a neighbouring girls' selective school, sharing a governing body and chief executive. It is a member of the Mid Kent Teaching School Alliance providing training for trainee teachers.
- The school does not use any alternative provision for students.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the consistency of marking and feedback so that misconceptions are addressed at the earliest possible stage, and that students are routinely required to correct mistakes or undertake new work to make the most of the advice they are given.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils is outstanding

- Students achieve exceptionally well because they learn within a culture of high expectations which very effectively fosters their commitment to succeed.
- Students' progress is monitored closely against very challenging targets, and sharply focused support is given to any student who is falling behind. Consequently, students make consistently rapid progress across their subjects, with the proportion making better-than-expected progress nationally in English, and mathematics being above average. For the last two years, the school has been in the top 1% of schools nationally with regard to progress across a range of subjects. This represents outstanding achievement for students.
- Students join the school with below-average attainment in English and mathematics. Last year, over three fifths achieved five good GCSE grades including English and mathematics, in line with the national average. Currently a higher proportion of students are working at this level. Overall attainment in GCSE and equivalent vocational qualifications is above average, including attainment in science. The school does not enter students early for GCSE examinations. The school's checks on students' progress show that attainment is set to increase further because students throughout the school are making more-rapid progress than in previous years.
- In the sixth form, there is a similar trend of improvement. The proportion of students gaining the highest grades at A and AS level has risen considerably since the school opened. Students use their study skills acquired in the main school very effectively, which results in rapid progress. Achievement is high in vocational courses, with attainment above average.
- There is no significant difference between the progress of groups of students, including boys and girls, and those from different ethnic backgrounds. Disabled students and those with special educational needs make outstanding progress because of the highly effective support they receive, individually, in small groups and in lessons. This means that those who join the school with low levels of reading, writing and mathematical skills do very well. The emphasis placed on boosting literacy and numeracy as essential skills in Years 7 and 8 is particularly successful so that these skills are developed to a level where they are fully integrated into lessons for students who find learning easier.
- Across the school, reading is promoted regularly, for example, in form groups. Older students are competent readers and read regularly. They regularly use their reading skills to very good effect to research and analyse information from the internet.
- The progress of students for whom the pupil premium provides additional funding is significantly better than for this group nationally. Consequently, although there is still a gap between their performance and that of other students, it is narrower than that found nationally. In both English and mathematics, the grades gained by students who were eligible for free school meals were about two thirds of a grade lower than other students, where the national differences were over a grade and a grade and a quarter respectively. In that year, there were no students in the care of the local authority, or any currently in Key Stage 4. The school's tracking data show that the gap is also narrowing in other year groups in the school.

The quality of teaching is outstanding

- Teaching in nearly all lessons is at least good, and it is very often outstanding. The school's checks of the quality of teaching show that, year-on-year, teaching is improving since the school opened. Consequently, students have high-quality teaching on a daily basis.
- Lessons are challenging because students are routinely expected to think things through for themselves and to apply their knowledge in new and different situations. For example, in a mathematics lesson, Year 7 students had to use their understanding of percentages to decide on the best buys when presented with a series of complex sales offers for electronic equipment. Such relevance to the skills needed for everyday life is a key feature of learning in this school.

- Teachers very effectively encourage students to develop resilience and deepen their understanding by responding to probing questions. They regularly require students to research information and to work together in groups, discussing issues and developing their ideas together. As well as developing students' knowledge and understanding, they develop their social and communication skills by making presentations and explaining their thinking to others. Homework is used very effectively to extend and consolidate students' learning.
- Teachers use time very well to pace learning. For example, starter activities are undertaken immediately students enter the room so that no time is lost, but learning is not rushed in group and independent work, giving time for consolidation and reflection. Consequently, students have the confidence to raise issues when there is something they do not understand.
- There is a strong whole-school emphasis on helping students to understand the level of their work and what they have to do to improve, for example by discussing the requirements of different grades or levels. Marking is frequent and detailed, and often students respond by correcting misconceptions or, on occasion, tackling another task to check that they have fully understood the advice given by the teacher. This excellent practice, however, is not fully in place across the school.
- Teachers have a very good knowledge of the needs of all their students, including disabled students and those with special educational needs. They use the training they have received to plan lessons which closely match students' abilities and aptitudes. As a result, those who find learning more challenging thrive because they are fully integrated into lessons with their peers, but also receive additional, highly focused help when required.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are outstanding

- Students respond extremely well to the school's firmly established culture of high expectations for work and behaviour. Students flourish in an atmosphere of mutual respect.
- Students' keenness to learn is a key contributor to the rapid progress they make during their time at school. They routinely come prepared with essential equipment and homework completed. Their exemplary attitudes and enjoyment of school are shown in above-average attendance and calm, considerate behaviour around the school. Property and displays are respected around the school, so that students learn in a stimulating, litter-free environment. Sixth-form students give younger students excellent support as mentors.
- Students are mature in their reflections about the school's 'zero tolerance and no bullying' policies. They know how to keep themselves safe, including when using the internet and social networking sites, and what to do if they have concerns. They have a very good understanding of different forms of harassment, including racist, verbal, physical and homophobic bullying, because issues are discussed openly and frequently in lessons, assemblies and tutor group meetings, and in special events.
- Incidents of bullying are extremely rare, and students say that when they do occur they are dealt with very well so that they do not recur. Because of the school's highly consistent approach to inappropriate behaviour, exclusion rates, which have been above those found nationally, are now declining quickly. The school takes clear action to ensure that students who have been excluded are reintegrated effectively so that there is no adverse impact on their achievement. Students are fully aware that any form of discrimination is not tolerated, resulting in a cohesive community.

The leadership and management are outstanding

- The headteacher and senior leaders lead the school with determination and skill to eradicate weaknesses as soon as they arise and sustain improvements over time. This has resulted in a school with a strongly collective approach, where adults lead by example, and work of the

highest quality is the norm.

- Leaders set challenging targets for staff performance and students' achievement. Teachers use the regular checks on students' progress exceptionally well to identify and address potential underachievement so that no one falls through the net. Similarly, senior leaders and governors have a precise understanding of how well the school is doing. They use this information very effectively to research and plan initiatives to bring about further development. Planning documents are clear and concise, and show how the school is constantly challenging itself.
 - High-quality teaching is the result of consistency in the way teachers plan lessons to meet the individual needs of all students in their groups. This is only one example of the school's focus on the individual to ensure equality of opportunity and that all students progress at similar rates. The school holds comprehensive records about behaviour incidents so that the needs of individuals are well known.
 - The school's outward-looking approach is exemplified in its partnership with a local teacher training college to support its training programme for teachers. Teachers benefit from carefully focused training programmes to extend their skills and expertise. Procedures for managing teachers' performance are robust, with links between students' progress and salary progression set out clearly and rigorously applied.
 - The curriculum is extremely broad, allowing programmes to be personalised to meet the needs of all students. The foundation learning programme very effectively helps students whose attainment is below average for their age to accelerate their progress. A wide range of academic and vocational subjects and individual guidance ensure that students are prepared well for their next steps. The on-site farm promotes students' knowledge of farming as well as their personal development. Challenge for those who are gifted or talented is achieved through the rich range of specialist expressive arts courses and the introduction of Latin, classics and short projects.
 - Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is promoted very well, for example through the school's specialism, which gives students exceptional opportunities for participation in expressive arts events, including art, music, drama and dance. Students regularly debate ethical issues as part of their lessons, for example in science, where students consider the dangers of using mobile phones and the siting of transmitter masts close to schools.
 - Parents and carers recognise the school's continued improvement in surveys carried out by the school. A very few parents and carers expressed some disagreement with aspects of the school in the online questionnaire, but most of them are supportive of the school and would recommend it to others.
 - The school's use of pupil premium funding, for example to subsidise laptop leasing, and to provide enrichment activities and after-school study support, has been very effective in supporting those pupils who are eligible for additional support. This has had a particular impact in improving students' literacy levels. The gap between the performance of this group and other students is closing rapidly, with the difference in the proportion achieving five good grades including English and mathematics halving in the last year.
 - **The governance of the school:**
 - The governing body is extremely well informed about all aspects of the school. Governors are experienced and astute, and work closely together to set the school's direction and rigorously monitor its performance, while ensuring that support is readily available for leaders when required. Governance is well organised and precise so that all aspects of school's work are kept under regular review. Governors monitor the rate of change to ensure that the necessary expertise is in place as the school broadens its activity to support other schools in challenging circumstances. Governors know about how achievement compares to that of other schools, about the quality of teaching and how teachers move up the pay scale, and the impact of the pupil premium. Governors have taken a key strategic role in improving facilities, for example in securing funding for the current building programme, and know that more has to be done to enhance physical education and sports facilities, which currently restrict the range of activities students can undertake at any one time. They ensure that safeguarding procedures and practice fully meet requirements.
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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	136581
Local authority	Kent
Inspection number	412455

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

Type of school	Academy converter
School category	Foundation
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	1,204
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	191
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Judi Taylor
Headteacher	Vic Ashdown
Date of previous school inspection	26–27 April 2010
Telephone number	01622 679421
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