

Downlands Community School

Dale Avenue, Hassocks, West Sussex BN6 8LP

Inspection dates

29–30 November 2016

Overall effectiveness	Outstanding
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Outstanding
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Outstanding
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Outstanding
Outcomes for pupils	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school

- The headteacher's commitment to place learning at its heart permeates all aspects of this caring school. Morale is high among pupils, staff and parents.
- Pupils benefit from exceptionally strong teaching which is leading to outstanding outcomes for nearly all pupils.
- Pupils' behaviour is exemplary. They engage enthusiastically in lessons and show respect and care for each other.
- Staff benefit from an excellent training programme that makes sure they are always perfecting their expertise to help pupils excel.
- Disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are well supported and make strong progress.
- Highly effective governors skilfully support and challenge the school. They are ambitious for the school and contribute strongly to its further development.
- The school makes an exemplary contribution to the community; it is a community school in action as well as in name.
- Staff cater for pupils' needs very well. Relationships are strong and this enables pupils to thrive academically and personally.
- The academic curriculum is rigorous and challenging. It is enriched by provision for the arts and a strong programme of extra-curricular activities which further enhance pupils' social, moral, spiritual and cultural understanding.
- Leaders' insightful evaluation and effective management skills lead to continuous improvement. They set high standards, which they achieve. Their monitoring of the impact of their actions occasionally lacks precision.
- Attendance is above average. Expert pastoral care and improved monitoring is leading to better attendance of most vulnerable groups, although disadvantaged pupils still attend less well than others.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Further improve the attendance of disadvantaged pupils.
- Finely tune leaders' monitoring of the effectiveness of their actions.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Outstanding

- Senior leaders and governors have created a caring and inclusive environment which fulfils the school commitment, 'to place learning at the heart of everything we do'. The outstanding outcomes which pupils consistently achieve are a result of this commitment. As one parent said, 'I would not hesitate to recommend Downlands – the teaching is excellent, the staff really care, and my children are developing into lovely young adults.'
- The new headteacher and his senior colleagues are ambitious for all pupils in the school. They have led improvement through setting high standards and supporting pupils' achievement through a calm, approachable style of leadership which parents, pupils and staff appreciate. Sharp self-evaluation underpins their leadership.
- Staff are proud to work at the school and their morale is high. Pupils value greatly the strong relationships between them and staff and this helps them to thrive both academically and emotionally. Pupils enjoy the responsibility of formal leadership roles, especially through becoming prefects in Year 11. They take seriously the opportunity to contribute to planning the strategic direction of the whole school through meetings with school leaders.
- The highly skilled leader of teaching and learning's clear vision has seen the quality of teaching flourish. A culture of collaborative learning in school and through liaison with a local teaching school alliance is enabling pupils to excel. New teachers and those who have been helped to fine-tune their teaching praise the quality of feedback they receive.
- The impressive and committed middle leaders appreciate the structured way they are held to account for individual pupils' progress. Leaders precisely identify actions to help pupils be successful through meetings which include pastoral, academic and careers leaders. This united approach has been particularly successful for disadvantaged pupils. Leaders are aware that by keeping an overview of pupil groups, such as disadvantaged pupils, they can also identify trends in pupils' attendance. This enables them to finely tune their approach to supporting pupils and their families.
- Leaders' shrewd identification, monitoring and review of aspects of the school which could be sharpened has led to academic excellence across the school. For example, leaders' 'root and branch' review of the mathematics department has led to pupils' achievement rising to be among the highest nationally. A similar process is underway for the languages department. However, on some occasions there is a lack of precision in monitoring the impact of leaders' initiatives. For example, leaders had not identified that the new 'green slips' feedback system is not fully embedded across the school.
- The curriculum is broad, balanced and responsive to pupils' needs and interests. Pupils follow a largely academic pathway, with the option of studying multiple languages and sciences to stretch the most able pupils. Arts subjects are an embedded part of the curriculum. Pupils are excited about the building of a new dance studio, which will broaden their options further. School assemblies and the personal development curriculum foster a well-rounded understanding of British values. A range of trips locally and abroad augment the curriculum and aid the social, moral, spiritual and

cultural development of pupils.

- Pupils pride themselves in belonging to a school which is truly part of its local community. High levels of pupil participation are typical in extra-curricular sporting and community activities. Pupils enjoy taking part in local competitions and raising money for charity, verbalising, 'We like to get involved in things.' Vast numbers of pupils and their parents join in the annual Christmas tree decorating event. Pupils were especially proud of designing their own flavour of sausage, which was sold in a local shop.

Governance of the school

- Governors are rigorous and skilful in holding the school to account to ensure that the highest standards are achieved. They scrutinise their own skills to identify strengths and gaps in membership to make sure that they recruit expertise in the areas they need it. They work in partnership with senior and middle leaders, systematically challenging leaders in their work so that the school continues to drive ever forward.
- Governors implement the school's performance management procedures adeptly, ensuring that targets set are appropriately challenging and that any pay progression is linked to evidence about pupils' performance.
- Governors are committed to making sure that all pupils succeed. They monitor the additional funding they receive to support disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities well, so that these pupils achieve at least as well as pupils nationally. Catch-up funding for low attainers in Year 7 is used well to make sure these pupils are nurtured as they start secondary school.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. A culture of care and community pervades the school. Clear and appropriate systems are in place to ensure the health, well-being and safety of pupils. Pupils are knowledgeable about how to keep themselves and their classmates safe, including online. Most parents say that their child feels safe at school.
- Staff receive regularly training in child protection and safeguarding procedures that reflects the most recent government legislation and guidance. They know what to do if they have any concerns. Leaders liaise effectively and in a timely manner with parents and outside agencies who support pupils' welfare so that the most vulnerable pupils are protected from harm. Leaders and governors have been trained in safer recruitment and make thorough checks on the adults who work or volunteer at the school.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Outstanding

- The exceptional quality of teaching and learning is a significant strength of the school. As one parent told inspectors, 'The teachers are hardworking, dedicated and motivated, and are highly respected by their pupils.'
- Teachers have excellent subject knowledge which they use to stretch and challenge

pupils of all groups and abilities to achieve highly. For example, in an English class the teacher and teaching assistant skilfully supported pupils of different abilities to fine-tune their writing about Lady Macbeth so that they all made rapid progress.

- Leaders ensure that teachers are able to plan, deliver and evaluate lessons effectively. They have provided training which has equipped teachers with a wide variety of techniques which they use skilfully so that pupils develop a love of learning. As one pupil in an art lesson put it: 'Miss is great. She's really helped me to understand art technically and to love it too.'
- Teachers ask perceptive questions which probe pupils' knowledge. Often, questions highlight the importance of knowing the correct subject-specific vocabulary for terms and processes. This careful attention to detail by teachers ensures that pupils understand their learning in real depth. This is reflected in their articulate oral responses and in their high-quality written and practical work.
- Pupils are resilient learners because teachers have ensured that they develop impressive habits of learning, including listening carefully. This means teachers do not need to repeat instructions and helps learning progress with pace. Pupils use resources to aid their learning skilfully, effectively and without fuss. In a German lesson, one pupil explained that he had made his own decision to look up a spelling mistake and copy it out 10 times, 'to really make sure it sticks in my head'.
- Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and those with low starting points who need help with literacy and numeracy receive effective support from their class teachers. Extra teaching and opportunities to read more frequently outside of lessons are also helping these pupils achieve highly. The most able pupils benefit from master classes which show them how to achieve the highest grades.
- Leaders have improved assessment systems since the last inspection so that assessments now provide better information to help teachers plan precise next steps for pupils. Effective monitoring of pupils' progress allows leaders and teachers to intervene when required to further support individuals who need extra help. As a result, standards across the school are high and improving.
- Pupils know how to make progress because teachers clearly set out the steps they need to take to succeed. Pupils said that they often aim for the hardest level, showing highly positive attitudes to learning. Pupils are clear that teachers always help them to understand how to improve their work further, although some teachers could use the school's new feedback system to more precisely identify pupils' next steps.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Outstanding

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding.
- The school's vision of a culture where, 'we are all inspired to do our best and make outstanding progress both academically and personally' can be clearly seen to have been achieved throughout the school. Pupils particularly value opportunities to be involved in their learning, such as through the 'teaching and learning group' where they discuss how they like to learn best, and get to know pupils from other year groups.

- Pupils have a strong awareness of the social and moral responsibilities of growing up in a global community. In an assembly about poverty, pupils explored how a linked school in India copes with extreme poverty. Their reflections led them to also consider poverty in the local region, resulting in a project to provide food for local food banks.
- Pupils value the high levels of care they receive from all staff. They are clear that there is always an adult that they can talk to if they need help, either academically or emotionally. Pupils know how to keep themselves safe, including online. Parents and pupils agree that bullying is extremely rare, but if it does happen it is dealt with swiftly and effectively by staff.
- Potentially vulnerable pupils are particularly well supported through the forest school and physical well-being courses studied at key stage 4. Pupils spoke incredibly positively about the improvements they have seen to their own self-esteem, resilience and confidence since starting these courses. School information shows that this alternative curriculum is also helping to improve attendance and behaviour for some pupils.
- Effective liaison between leaders and the Alternative Provision Centre ensures that the academic and welfare needs of the very small numbers of pupils who study vocational courses are met and consequently they achieve well.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding. Clear expectations for pupil behaviour, introduced since the previous inspection, are having an impact so that pupils are effortlessly courteous and respectful to each other and to adults, both in and out of the classroom. Conduct is impeccable, including in the dinner hall where pupils have set up a rota to ensure that they sweep up after every meal.
- Pupils are confident learners who value their education. They are happy to talk to each other and to adults about their learning and support each other well. One pupil said of her classmates, 'We have a nice community here. If one of us gets it wrong, we help each other to get it right.'
- Pupils, staff and parents are very positive about behaviour, and disruption to learning is extremely rare. The new 'Green Rooms' inclusion unit is having an impact for those pupils who need additional support to help them manage their own behaviour. Consequently, the proportion of pupils excluded from school has reduced. Pupils report that the school's restorative justice approach to managing behaviour is helping them understand the impact of their behaviour on others and on themselves.
- The attendance of pupils is well above the national average. Where it has been lower for some groups of pupils, such as the disadvantaged, it is now rising because school leaders and pastoral teams monitor attendance patterns more precisely. They intervene effectively to make sure pupils attend more regularly. As one pupil commented, 'If I don't come in, the school's on my back to make me.' The school ensures that pupils are not disadvantaged by low attendance, communicating particularly well with parents and carers who have children facing severe personal challenges.

Outcomes for pupils

Outstanding

- Pupils achieve exceptionally well across a wide range of subjects in all key stages. Pupils enter the school with attainment that is above the national average. At the end of Year 11 levels of attainment are well above national averages, particularly for those with low and middle-attaining starting points. In several subjects, a high proportion of pupils attain an A* or A grade.
- The most able pupils achieve highly and make more progress than similar pupils nationally. Teachers support these pupils well through a 'stretch and challenge' programme which involves setting challenging work in class and targeted mentoring sessions to help pupils understand what they need to do to achieve the highest grades.
- Pupils make exceptional rates of progress in many subjects, particularly in English, mathematics, science and humanities. Consequently, pupils who left Year 11 in 2016 achieved Progress 8 scores which were significantly above the national average. Pupils previously achieved less well in languages, but leaders' careful attention and focus in this area is now ensuring that current pupils are achieving highly.
- The progress of current pupils in the vast majority of subjects and all year groups is consistently impressive. Lessons observed, work samples reviewed and the school's own performance information seen during the inspection confirmed that pupils are on track to meet their challenging targets. Information collected by the school helps leaders identify any pupils in danger of falling behind and ensure that these pupils are given extra help and support to achieve. Consequently, pupils consistently achieve very well.
- Pupils who are disadvantaged and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities achieve well and make more progress than pupils nationally. This is achieved through a focus on ensuring that the quality of teaching for all pupils is of the highest quality, as well as through leaders' work to monitor and intervene to support any pupil who needs additional help.
- Pupils gain high levels of literacy. They read widely for pleasure, have highly developed oracy abilities, and write skilfully and at length. Those who enter the school with low literacy levels in Year 7 are helped to catch up through skilful teaching, particularly in English, and through extra support from the librarian. These pupils make exceptional progress by the time they leave the school.
- Pupils are supported well in making choices about their future pathways through excellent provision for careers information, advice and guidance. Extremely high and increasing proportions of pupils continue on to appropriate destinations for the next stage of education, employment or training. The vast majority of pupils go on to study A levels, with the school also acting effectively to support pupils who want to continue on to employment and training when they leave school.

School details

Unique reference number	126087
Local authority	West Sussex
Inspection number	10003141

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1,046
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Diana Hunt
Headteacher	Mark Wignall
Telephone number	01273 845892
Website	downlands.w-sussex.sch.uk
Email address	head@downlands.w-sussex.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	19–20 January 2012

Information about this school

- Downlands Community School is a larger than average secondary school.
- The headteacher who was in post at the time of the previous inspection retired in July 2016. Governors appointed a new headteacher from September 2016, who was previously a senior leader at Downlands for a number of years.
- The vast majority of pupils are from White British backgrounds. The proportions of pupils from minority ethnic groups and of those learning English as an additional language are well below the national average.
- The proportion of pupils for whom the school receives the pupil premium funding is well below the national average.

- The proportion of pupils who have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan is below the national average. The proportion of pupils who have support for special educational needs and/or disabilities is above the national average.
- The school uses the Alternative Provision Centre in Burgess Hill to help any pupils who need an alternative to mainstream provision.
- The school meets requirements on the publication of specified information on its website.
- The school consistently exceeds the government floor standards, which set out the minimum expectation for pupils' attainment and progress.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed teaching and learning in 30 lessons across a range of year groups and subjects. Many lessons were jointly observed with senior leaders.
- Inspectors held meetings with senior leaders, other staff, governors, a representative from the local authority, and pupils. Inspectors took account of 46 responses to the confidential questionnaires received from staff. They also telephoned leaders of the alternative provision.
- Inspectors evaluated key documents, including the school’s strategic planning documents, external reviews, minutes of meetings, reports of attendance and behaviour, and records related to pupils’ safety and academic progress.
- Inspectors looked at a range of pupils’ work, and observed pupils’ behaviour in lessons, around the school and during breaktime.
- Inspectors considered the views of parents, taking into account the 94 responses to the online Ofsted parent questionnaire, Parent View. Inspectors also considered the 85 free text responses. Response to the online questionnaire completed by 51 pupils was also taken into account.

Inspection team

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