

Inspection of Varndean School

Balfour Road, Brighton, East Sussex BN1 6NP

Inspection dates: 5 and 6 October 2022

Overall effectiveness **Good**

| | |
|---------------------------|--------------------|
| The quality of education | Good |
| Behaviour and attitudes | Outstanding |
| Personal development | Outstanding |
| Leadership and management | Outstanding |
| Previous inspection grade | Good |

What is it like to attend this school?

Varndean School is on a mission to achieve its goal of 'world-class' education. Inspirational leaders are rapidly transforming the school. They constantly look for ways to make it better and improve the areas that could be even stronger. As a result, pupils achieve extremely well in most subjects.

Pastoral care is exceptionally strong. In this very large school, pupils feel known and individually cared for. Parents are grateful for this and overwhelmingly supportive of the school. One summed this up by saying that the school helped his daughter to 'find her passions and be the best she could be'.

Pupils are impressive and incredibly proud of their school. They are fully involved in the multitude of clubs and extra-curricular activities. Behaviour is excellent. Pupil leaders gain useful skills by taking on extra responsibilities. They are very well prepared for their next steps in life. Diversity and difference are celebrated. Pupils and staff do not tolerate any bullying – it is anathema to them.

School leaders expertly support pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. They model successful strategies with other schools in their community. They prioritise support for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) so that those pupils do increasingly well.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

School leaders are passionate and ambitious about what pupils will learn. Highly experienced, knowledgeable governors share and shape this mission. Leaders streamline the demands they make of staff. They drive through improvements that have the greatest impact. Staff training is exceptionally strong and well focused. Staff recognise and value this, fostering the excellent relationships they have with leaders. Staff at all levels successfully model the behaviours they want the pupils to follow.

The vast majority of subject leaders design excellent curriculums. Teachers use these expertly to lay secure foundations for future learning. For example, in science, pupils learn about the nature of the atom in key stage 3 so that they can understand isotopes in key stage 4. Very rarely, some subject planning is less coherent. In those cases, pupils do not gain enough knowledge at the right time to make sense of what comes later. Senior leaders are aware of this and are taking effective action to address it.

Staff know their pupils extremely well. Pupils with SEND are identified at a very early stage to make sure they have enough support in school. Teachers adapt their lessons extremely well to engage pupils' interest. This is particularly successful with disadvantaged pupils. Important vocabulary is taught specifically and at the right time to ensure pupils understand their work. Teachers prioritise fluency to help

pupils express themselves well in their writing. Well-established programmes successfully promote pupils' reading, including reading for pleasure.

Teachers are real experts in their subjects. Their precise and helpful questioning stretches and extends pupils' knowledge. Consequently, the standard of pupils' work is very high. In most subjects, and most of the time, pupils get excellent feedback that consolidates their understanding.

Pupils' behaviour and attitudes are excellent. They show unwaveringly strong respect for others. Pupils take huge pride in their work and in their school. Pastoral systems provide exceptional support. Parents particularly value the work of the small schools and support given in the 'school base'. Pupils with SEND can access 'The Space', which helps them recharge and refocus.

Pupils take part in a plethora of additional clubs, visits and extra-curricular activities. These are very well-attended. Leaders make sure they include pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as those with SEND. Activities cover a huge variety, from an active feminist club to participating in the school musical.

Pupil leaders are prominent in school life. There is very strong teaching of modern British values. Pupils are extremely well prepared for adult life. The school is a safe place to be different. Leaders ensure that healthy lifestyles are promoted. There is excellent advice on careers and pupils' next steps, which meets or exceeds all relevant government guidance.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders ensure that the well-being of pupils is pre-eminent. Staff at all levels carry out their safeguarding responsibilities diligently. Thorough training equips them to recognise any risks to the pupils in their care. If pupils need extra support, leaders seek out the most appropriate help. This might be from outside agencies or charities.

The school takes all necessary precautions when appointing new staff. Leaders do everything they can to prepare pupils for the risks of life in the outside world. Online safety is covered thoroughly. Pupils are taught a strong, age-appropriate understanding of consent.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Although the curriculum is very well organised, there are some isolated examples where subject planning has been less coherent in the past. In these cases, pupils do not build up their knowledge as well as they do elsewhere. Although leaders have taken actions to remedy this, that process is not yet completed. Leaders

should continue their work to ensure that all subject curriculum planning is as consistently strong as the best.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, '[disadvantaged pupils](#)' refers to those pupils who attract government pupil premium funding: pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years and pupils in care or who left care through adoption or another formal route.

School details

| | |
|--|--|
| Unique reference number | 114579 |
| Local authority | Brighton and Hove |
| Inspection number | 10249536 |
| Type of school | Secondary comprehensive |
| School category | Community |
| Age range of pupils | 11 to 16 |
| Gender of pupils | Mixed |
| Number of pupils on the school roll | 1498 |
| Appropriate authority | Local authority |
| Chair of governing body | Ian Rodgers |
| Headteacher | Shelley Baker |
| Website | www.varndean.co.uk |
| Date of previous inspection | 5 July 2017, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 |

Information about this school

- The current headteacher took up her post in 2021.
- The school uses six registered providers of alternative provision for a small number of pupils on a part-time or temporary basis.
- The school uses one unregistered provider of alternative provision.
- The school meets the requirements of the Baker Clause, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 8 to 13 with information about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.

Information about this inspection

The inspectors carried out this graded inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.

- Inspectors met with the headteacher and members of her leadership team. The lead inspector also met with governors and representatives of the local authority.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: English, mathematics, science, geography, art and modern foreign languages. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with subject leaders, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work. Inspectors also spoke to leaders about the curriculum in some other subjects.
- One inspector made an on-site visit to the unregistered provider of alternative provision. He also spoke by telephone to the registered providers of alternative provision.
- The inspection team observed behaviour before and after the school day, between lessons and during breaktime and lunchtime. Inspectors visited assemblies, tutor times and some after-school clubs.
- Inspectors scrutinised the school's register of employment checks and gathered evidence to understand the school's safeguarding arrangements.
- Inspectors also considered the views of the large number of parents, pupils and staff who completed Ofsted's surveys during this inspection.

Inspection team

| | |
|----------------------------------|------------------|
| Keith Pailthorpe, lead inspector | Ofsted Inspector |
| Ginny Rhodes | Ofsted Inspector |
| Neil Strowger | Ofsted Inspector |
| Julia Mortimore | Ofsted Inspector |
| Andy Platt | Ofsted Inspector |

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at <http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/>.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

© Crown copyright 2022