



Valley Park Community School

Inspection Report - Amended

Unique Reference Number 131245
Local Authority Kent
Inspection number 282185
Inspection dates 24–25 January 2007
Reporting inspector Patricia Metham HMI

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

Type of school	Secondary	School address	Huntsman Lane
School category	Community		Maidstone
Age range of pupils	11–18		ME14 5DT
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	01622 679421
Number on roll (school)	873	Fax number	01622 661671
Number on roll (6th form)	126		
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair	Judi Taylor
		Headteacher	Vic Ashdown
Date of previous school inspection	10 January 2000		

Age group	Inspection dates	Inspection number
11–18	24–25 January 2007	282185

Amended Report Addendum

Report amended due to administration error

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Valley Park Community School is a secondary modern school within Kent's selective system. Most students are of White British heritage and although the catchment area is mixed, levels of deprivation are low. Entry standards are below the national average. Since 2006, Valley Park School has been in federation with the neighbouring grammar school; each has a head of school. There is a single governing body and executive headteacher with responsibility for strategic development. The school is seeking to become a specialist arts college.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

The school is offering a satisfactory education. Recent progress has been significant. Financial difficulties that stem from decisions taken before 2006 are now being tackled effectively by governors and senior managers. Preparing the bid for specialist arts college status has crystallised management thinking about the school's future. Staff and students have welcomed this as a clear and attractive option.

Although academic standards remain below national and county levels, recent curriculum development, monitoring of teaching, tracking of students' progress and a well-supported behaviour for learning policy have combined to give the school a common sense of purpose, and students' achievement is now satisfactory. The school recognises that there are inconsistencies to be tackled in teaching and learning. There is good practice, particularly where information and communication technology (ICT) stimulates students' interest and progress is tracked carefully. Some lessons, however, lack pace and appropriate challenge. Students are generally keen to do well and achievement at all levels is celebrated through the school's system of credits and rewards.

Well-monitored care, guidance and support in Years 7 to 11 ensure that students' personal development and well-being are good; they behave well, feel safe and enjoy coming to school. In the sixth form, these aspects are less well developed; the sixth form manager does not have time allocated for monitoring students' development and there is currently no full-time careers support. Little is being done to tackle inadequate attendance and retention rates in the sixth form. Nonetheless, students speak positively about the advice and feedback given by subject teachers and tutors and they welcome recent opportunities to take on leadership roles within the school. Links with employers and agencies as well as work-related learning in the curriculum give students a good foundation for future training and employment.

Students and parents have a well-founded affection and respect for the head of school. There were some concerns amongst parental responses, mainly about behaviour, but the following is more representative: "I believe the school is progressing really well. This has been due to the hard work of the headteacher and staff."

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form Grade: 3

The sixth form is satisfactory overall. Improved facilities and more vocational options, especially in the arts, have increased recruitment. It is too soon to assess the full impact of curriculum changes but Kent County Council figures indicate slowly improving standards, and achievement is now satisfactory. Sixth formers tend to be amiably co-operative rather than independent learners. The pace of lessons is not always sufficiently challenging, although some teaching is lively and students respond well. Good use is made of expertise brought in to support the curriculum and to give careers advice; for example, an accountant has contributed to business studies' teaching and an actor is working with performing arts students.

Sixth formers become involved in school events and make a worthwhile contribution as Year 7 mentors. Those newly chosen as prefects and head students take their roles seriously and are keen to make a positive difference.

The school recognises that there are areas needing improvement. Analysis and use of performance data to drive improvement have been poor but one of the senior leadership team is working on this to good effect. Policies and procedures have been drawn up; however, the sixth form manager has no time allocated to ensure adequate induction and continuing support for students adjusting to the mature demands of sixth form learning. Attendance (only 66%) and retention rates (85%) are low. Currently there is no in-school careers adviser but a new appointment has been made with effect from March 2007. Sixth formers feel that they benefited from sound advice in Year 11 and that feedback from their subject teachers is helpful. This was borne out in lesson observations and by students' evident enjoyment of their courses.

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What the school should do to improve further

- Improve the management of the sixth form and the care and guidance of sixth formers.
- Improve attendance and retention in the sixth form.

- Improve the overall standard of teaching by sharing good practice to ensure that all students are suitably challenged.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Achievement and standards are satisfactory. Year 7 entry standards are below average in mathematics, science and English. Students make satisfactory progress and, at the end of Year 9, standards are close to average. Fewer than average attain higher levels in English and science at the end of Year 9; about half the number gains Level 6 in these subjects as does in mathematics. National test results in 2006 dipped but a new monitoring system indicates that more stable staffing resulted in improvements in students' achievements. Accurate assessments of progress are maintained in English, mathematics, science and ICT. As the school acknowledges, however, such good practice is not consistent across all faculties.

Progress from Year 7 to Year 11 has improved over the past three years, with little significant change in GCSE results between 2005 and 2006. The number of students achieving five A* to C grades including English and mathematics was below the national average. The school's targets for five A* to C grades at GCSE for the current year and for next year are above the national average; these targets are supported by in-school assessments and tracking of progress. Sixth form achievement is now satisfactory but standards are still below average. Across the whole school, achievement does not vary significantly between groups of students, including those with learning difficulties and those looked after by the local authority.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

Personal development and well-being are good in Years 7 to 11 and satisfactory in the sixth form. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good overall. In Years 7 to 11, students develop a good understanding of moral issues in religious education and citizenship lessons and through the tutorial programme. This is reflected in the considerate way in which they behave towards one another and towards adults. They benefit from opportunities for reflection in assemblies, tutor time and other events, some of which are led by visiting groups and speakers. Effective provision ensures that students learn about different cultures represented in Britain and elsewhere, for example, through Focus Days, and understand the implications of living in a multicultural society. In the sixth form, many students respond positively to being given responsibility and actively support the school's ethos; however, too many are casual about attendance and punctuality.

Students enjoy coming to school. Attendance is now satisfactory except in the sixth form, although the level of authorised absence is still a cause for concern, in Year 10

for example. The school is working with parents to reduce the incidence of students being taken out of school during term-time. Students feel safe from bullying and say the school deals quickly and effectively with any incidents. They appreciate the need for a healthy lifestyle, and benefit from the "Well Good" initiative which promotes healthy eating in school. They make a satisfactory contribution to the outside community through charity fund-raising and drama performances in local venues. Some take part in mentoring and "buddy" schemes, but the school recognises it could provide more opportunities for students to take responsibility within the school community.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Teaching and learning are satisfactory overall and were good in over half of the lessons observed. Relationships between staff and students were good in all lessons seen, and were occasionally outstanding. Some teachers' imaginative use of the interactive whiteboard and their advanced questioning skills drew good responses from passive or hesitant students.

In the best lessons, lively pace and varied teaching styles challenge and motivate students. Behaviour is then good. Students generally understand lesson objectives, although these are not always matched to the full range of individual needs.

When the pace is slow, students daydream or gossip. Poor time management then leads to rushed plenary sessions at the lesson end. In most subjects, teachers carefully assess and record students' progress and use the information to set realistic targets for improvement. Marking is usually thoughtful with appreciative comments and points for improvement. Some, however, is inconsistent and ignores untidy presentation and part-finished work. Students with learning difficulties and disabilities receive well-directed support from teaching assistants and benefit from teachers' understanding of their needs; they make similar progress to other groups of students.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

The curriculum for Years 7 to 11 is good, and it is satisfactory in the sixth form. In Years 7 to 9, the school meets national curriculum and other requirements, and provides a broad and balanced experience which enables students to progress smoothly from primary to secondary education. In Years 10 and 11, students have options which they confirm meet their needs and interests: a combination of GCSE subjects; portfolio-based assessments for performing arts, engineering, physical education (PE) and business studies; and a foundation course for those not strong in English and mathematics. The

impact of the most recent curriculum developments is not yet clear but tracking of progress so far suggests that students are responding well. Provision for work-related learning is good. Students benefit considerably from a two-week work placement; the school prepares them well and closely monitors their participation. In the sixth form, a balance between traditionally academic and vocational subjects is still being developed. Plans for specialist arts college status and for access to sixth form courses at the grammar school indicate that there will be further changes.

There is a good range of sporting, cultural and subject-linked activities. Their effectiveness is being monitored to encourage participation.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

Care, guidance and support are good in Years 7 to 11, where there is an effective system for target setting and monitoring academic progress. They are satisfactory in the sixth form, in spite of the current lack of in-school careers guidance and a tutorial programme which has yet to have a positive impact on attendance and staying-on rates. Although early identification of individual needs is not consistently good, support for students with learning difficulties or disabilities has improved, with inclusion issues well represented on the senior leadership team. The 'Behaviour for Learning' policy, developed through consultation with staff, has established clear expectations for behaviour with a new scheme of rewards and sanctions.

After an initial upsurge in fixed-term exclusions, students report that behaviour and attitudes have improved considerably and exclusion rates are falling. The non-teaching student support managers provide good personal care and guidance, working effectively with external organisations to provide specialised help and advice when necessary. Students in Years 9 to 11 benefit from good information and guidance about career opportunities and further study. This provides an effective basis for sixth form choices.

Procedures for safeguarding students are in place and child protection training has been given to staff.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Leadership and management are satisfactory overall; however, more time and focus is needed for management of the sixth form. The school now runs smoothly, although good practice is not consistent across middle management. Strongly supported by governors and the executive headteacher, the head of school is developing the capacity of his relatively inexperienced senior leadership team to raise expectations, monitor performance and cultivate good practice. This has changed the school's ethos. Year 9 students observed that "teachers are stricter and you can work."

Opportunities have been found to extend the range of expertise and challenge offered to students and staff both through the federation and through schemes such as a Leading Edge partnership. A Gold Artsmark award endorsed the management's decision to invest time and resources in developing the arts as a centre of excellence. This has enthusiastic support from students; one commented, "It's good – there's something for everyone."

Under the incisive leadership of its chairman, the governing body is making a well-focused contribution to the school's development. Its impact is clear, for example, in the more realistic and closely monitored three-year financial plan now in place. There is well-defined accountability at all levels, supported by regularly updated data.

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Inspection judgements

<i>Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate</i>	School Overall	16-19
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Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	3	3
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	3
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	3
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3	3
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	3	

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2	3
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2	
The behaviour of learners	2	
The attendance of learners	3	
How well learners enjoy their education	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	3	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	3	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	3	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	3
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	3

¹ Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average to below average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	3	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3	
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets	3	
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	3	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	2	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2	
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No	
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No	

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

I would like to thank you very much for the friendliness and openness you showed my colleagues and me when we inspected your school recently. We enjoyed talking with many of you and are grateful for the way in which you shared your thoughts with us. In return, I would like to tell you about the inspection findings. Yours is an improving school that is now satisfactory. As some of you know from personal experience, important changes have been taking place over the past two years to extend the range of subjects you can study, to help you achieve higher standards, to improve behaviour and to upgrade facilities. I know that many of you are pleased that more time and resources are being put into drama, dance, music and art. As one of you said, "There's something for everybody!" It has been good to hear you speak appreciatively of the ways in which your headmaster and the staff have made it easier for you to learn efficiently and to know that you are generally happy to come to school. We have suggested that your progress will be speeded up if the pace and the approach in all lessons are really challenging so that you do the very best you can.

For those who are sixth formers, the extended curriculum and better facilities have proved attractive but it is important that time and opportunities are not lost through poor attendance or by dropping out of courses. We have asked the sixth form managers to help you tackle these problems. We have also recommended that you are given more guidance in developing study skills and preparing for life beyond school.