



Highdown School and Sixth Form Centre

Inspection Report

Unique Reference Number 110044
Local Authority Reading
Inspection number 288571
Inspection dates 24–25 January 2007
Reporting inspector Mary Hoather

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

Type of school	Comprehensive	School address	Surley Row
School category	Community		Emmer Green
Age range of pupils	11–18		Reading RG4 8LR
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	01189 015800
Number on roll (school)	1199	Fax number	01189 015801
Number on roll (6th form)	172		
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair	Mr Trevor Keable
		Headteacher	Mr Tim Royle
Date of previous school inspection	14 October 2002		

Age group	Inspection dates	Inspection number
11–18	24–25 January 2007	288571

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by a team of five Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Highdown is a large, popular and oversubscribed comprehensive school in Reading. It was awarded specialist status for mathematics and computing in September 2004 and was designated a National Support School in September 2006. The large majority of students are White British and the remainder come from a wide range of ethnic groups. The school is in an area of social advantage with some significant pockets of deprivation. The percentage of students with learning difficulties and disabilities is above average and the school houses a unit for nine students with visual impairment. Almost a tenth of students use English as an additional language. A building programme providing a much needed assembly hall, exhibition and performance spaces is due for completion in the summer of 2007.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

This is a good and improving school with many outstanding features. It is a happy, dynamic place in which students work closely with staff to improve the working environment and raise achievement for all. The school provides a good standard of education. Achievement and standards have improved since the last inspection and are now good overall. The school sets challenging targets for students' attainment and test and examination results are generally improving.

Students really enjoy school as reflected in their good behaviour in lessons and around the site. They, like their parents, appreciate the outstanding range of courses and extra curricular opportunities available. The outstanding care, guidance and support enable students to become confident young adults who are educated to make positive choices about healthy and active lifestyles. The careers information, guidance and advice students receive have national acclaim. This, alongside the high levels of numeracy gained through good attainment in mathematics at 16, prepares students very well in these aspects for their future economic well-being. The student council is a highly effective mechanism for voicing students' views. The recent acquisition of its own accommodation and budget and the involvement of students in all staff appointments, mean students have real impact in shaping the life of the school.

The school has recognised that standards need to be improved and has implemented a range of strategies to raise achievement and embed more consistent approaches in teaching and learning. Although there is still a wide range in the quality of teaching, as noted by some parents, it is good overall. Through regular reviews of each subject and robust performance management systems, the school quickly deals with any unsatisfactory teaching. Good practice is being shared but student data is not yet being used fully to best support specific groups of students to raise achievement.

Leadership and management of the school are outstanding. The senior leadership team and governors know the school's strengths and weaknesses well and are clear about what still needs to be done. Parents, governors, staff and students rightly value the passionate, influential leadership of the headteacher who has been accredited as one of thirty secondary National Leaders in Education. He is strongly supported by a recently restructured senior leadership team which has a clear focus on student achievement. His drive to improve the school has also resulted in a new building, nearing completion, which will afford a much needed assembly hall, exhibition and performance spaces. As a result of systematic staff development, training and more effective line management structures, the senior team has started to embed a consistency of approach across all middle leaders with high expectations of improved student outcomes. The school's capacity to improve is outstanding.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The overall effectiveness of the sixth form is good. Students are extremely positive about their experience. The high degree of confidence they have in the sixth form is a good indicator that its leadership and management are good.

Standards are in line with national averages and given their very wide range of abilities most students do well. Results are generally improving albeit rather uneven across subjects and students. There are some very high results for some students in some subjects but others made less progress than they should have done in 2006. Indications for the future are better, however. More robust systems for tracking students' progress, particularly those at risk of underachievement, are now being put in place and students' expectations of themselves are higher. The support and guidance given have much strength and are appreciated by students.

The curriculum is good. There is a wide range of advanced courses on offer but the school has rightly identified a need for a wider range of vocational options. Students value the good teaching and learning especially the constructive and supportive relationships they have with teachers who are increasingly focused on what students need to do to improve their grades.

Students' personal development is excellent. They become increasingly self-reliant and ready to take their place in the world as a result of involvement in excellent community and additional activities. Almost all students achieve their first place choice for higher education.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that the careful tracking and robust follow up for students at risk of underachievement in the sixth form is firmly embedded year on year.
- Ensure the outstanding practice found in the quality of teaching in some lessons is replicated across the school.
- Ensure all teachers use a wider range of interventions to support specific groups of students better.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

Achievement and standards have improved since the last inspection and are now good overall. The school sets challenging targets for students' attainment and national test and examination results are generally improving.

Students enter the school with standards just in line with national averages and by the end of Year 9 progress is good even though there are variations from year to year. Progress from Year 9 to Year 11 is steadily improving and on course to be better still. It is good overall from Year 7 to 11. The proportion of students achieving five or more

A*-C grades including English and mathematics is rising steadily. It was still in line with national averages in 2006 even though results in science were less good than usual. Achievement in mathematics is often exceptionally high in all key stages and the proportion of very high grades achieved across all subjects is often better than the national average. Students of all abilities make good progress although boys do less well than girls by Year 11.

Students with learning difficulties and disabilities and vulnerable students achieve as well as other students. Students for whom English is an additional language also progress well.

Standards in the sixth form are well in line with national averages overall and given the open access to students from a wide range of abilities, most students do well. Results reflect that wide range, with some students achieving very high grades and others making good progress from low starting points. In 2006 some students did not do as well as they could and the school is addressing this through improved monitoring and intervention strategies.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The personal development and well-being of the students are outstanding. There is a considerable student voice and a very real input by students in key decisions made at school. The school council is involved in the appointment of staff and the allocation of a sizeable budget for improvements within the school. One such improvement, the construction of additional exits to a number of classes, has added to the safe passage of students from lesson to lesson. Opportunities within the curriculum are utilised effectively to promote students' moral, social and cultural development. Their spiritual development benefits from well planned assemblies and reflective responses to community events.

Students feel safe and well cared for and their enjoyment of lessons is evident. Students are polite, considerate and conduct themselves in a safe manner as they make their way about the school. Behaviour in class is generally good and improving with the development of the Inclusion Unit. Attendance is satisfactory.

Supplementary to its outreach work as a specialist school, Highdown makes a considerable contribution to the community through a wide variety of activities. Many initiatives, including the provision of healthier school meals, have led to an excellent adoption of more healthy lifestyles by students and others, like the Sports Leader Awards, have promoted them in the wider community.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Teaching and learning is good both in the main school and in the sixth form. During the inspection the majority of lessons observed were good with several outstanding. The best lessons were characterised by high expectations, clarity of purpose and expected outcomes, and challenging tasks which engaged students of all abilities. In those lessons that were less than good, there were a limited range of activities, lessons lacked pace and teaching did not effectively involve all students. Relationships between students and staff are very good. The school has rigorous procedures for monitoring the quality of teaching and learning and aspects needing development are effectively identified and linked to staff training needs. The focus on assessment for learning and the very effective tracking of students' progress are significant factors in the good progress being made by students. Students are aware of their target grades and how they can meet these, in most subjects. Students with learning difficulties are identified effectively and receive very good support from most teaching staff and teaching assistants. The school is now sharing more effectively its good practice in teaching across all departments, but more remains to be done. All teachers could develop a wider range of intervention strategies to support specific groups of students better.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 2

The school provides an outstanding curriculum. It is regularly reviewed and adapted to meet the needs of all students very well. In Years 7–9 it is broad and balanced and students have the opportunity to study two modern languages. In Years 10 and 11 the range of subjects is exceptional and, as parents agree, five languages including the introduction of Mandarin, which students were heard practising as they went between lessons, 'is inspirational'. There is a very good range of vocational courses and the school works well with other providers to ensure that those who have difficulty accessing the main curriculum are provided with relevant alternatives. Although there is an outstanding range of enrichment activities available for all year groups, including those specifically for extending gifted and talented students, the numbers of students participating are lower than would be expected.

Students in the sixth form have a good range of 'A' and 'AS' subjects but the school recognises the need to extend the vocational courses and is working with others to provide these.

All students benefit from a personal, social and health education programme that has an appropriate focus on safe and healthy living and most aspects of citizenship. The wider community provides many contexts for students' learning. Charity work,

computing master classes and the 'Maths Week' for local primary schools are good examples. Preparation for future economic well-being is very good. All students participate in work experience and have opportunities to develop their enterprise skills beyond the classroom.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 2

This is an inclusive school which provides an outstanding level of care and guidance. Child protection procedures are very secure and regularly reviewed. Health and safety practices are robust and risk assessments are carefully conducted.

Excellent links with feeder schools helps the school compile detailed information about most students entering in Year 7. The careful monitoring of students' academic progress and personal development means that learners in need of support, including those who are visually and hearing impaired, are identified early and helpful interventions implemented. All students are fully informed about their progress and provided with good advice on how to improve. Clear policies on bullying and good access to counseling mean that students feel safe and secure. A behaviour support centre (Inclusion Unit) cares for students who are at risk of exclusion and has led to a significant reduction in the number of exclusions. Students are given clear advice when making option choices and have good access to careers guidance.

The school works well with parents and external agencies to ensure learners make good progress.

The care and guidance for students in the sixth form is good. Students are given clear guidance on curriculum choices and further education pathways. A good mentoring system is in place which ensures that students are well informed about their progress.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 2

Leadership and management are outstanding overall and good in the sixth form. The headteacher's outstanding and influential leadership is recognised, not only nationally, but by governors, staff and students. His passionate and infectious commitment has galvanised the whole school community which speaks proudly about its much improved school.

The head is well supported by a newly structured senior team whose responsibilities are focused on student achievement. As middle leaders confirm, they are now working 'collectively and collaboratively', through a wide range of staff groups, to share good practice both within school and with their many external educational partners to improve teaching and learning.

The broadening of the Key Stage 4 curriculum; the robust performance management and successful recruitment and training of staff, particularly middle leaders, have had marked impact on the ethos and popularity of the school and student achievement since the last inspection. Creative staff deployment; rigorous and accurate self evaluation and the recently revised line management structures have led to higher levels of accountability and skill of all teams, who are now working much more cohesively. Student performance is monitored well overall and the school sets itself challenging targets. Better planning for the needs of identified groups of students and appropriate strategies to support their specific needs, could be refined further, however.

Governors challenge and support school staff well and have worked with the local authority to secure a new building to include a much needed assembly hall, performance and exhibition spaces.

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?	2	2
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	1	1
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1	1
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	3
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	2	

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1	
The behaviour of learners	2	
The attendance of learners	3	
How well learners enjoy their education	1	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1	
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?	2	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1	2

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?	1	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	1	
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets	2	
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	2	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1	
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

On behalf of the inspectors who visited your school recently, I would like to thank you for making us very welcome and helping us with the inspection.

We were very impressed by many aspects of your school. Most of you and many of your parents told us how much you enjoy school and how good you think your school is. We have taken these views into account in arriving at our judgements. We are delighted to tell you that you are rightly very proud of your school, as it provides a good education for you and has many outstanding features.

The main strengths are:

- the good progress you all make in the main school particularly in mathematics
- the good way your progress is being monitored and how you are helped to set targets to improve
- your generally good behaviour around school and in lessons
- the way you contribute to the running of the school
- the good quality of teaching overall and the commitment of all the staff to help you do better
- the outstanding range of courses and opportunities you have
- the way you work with others outside of your own school
- the very good relationships between you and the staff
- the outstanding guidance and support you get in the main school
- the outstanding leadership and management of your headteacher and the way senior staff and your subject leaders are working with him to continue to improve your school.

We have asked the school to do three things that would help you to achieve higher standards:

- to raise the quality of lessons to match the very best
- to pay more attention to specific groups of you who may need more challenge and support from time to time
- to monitor all sixth formers' progress more fully.

With best wishes for the completion of your new building,

Mary Hoather AI