

Varndean School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	114579
Local Authority	Brighton and Hove
Inspection number	289980
Inspection dates	25–26 April 2007
Reporting inspector	Patricia Robson HMI

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

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1216
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Sangeeta Mehra
Headteacher	Andy Schofield
Date of previous school inspection	26 October 2001
School address	Balfour Road Brighton BN1 6NP
Telephone number	01273 561281
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Age group	11–16
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Introduction

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

Description of the school

Varndean School is a larger-than-average school. Nearly 90% of students are of White British heritage and few are at an early stage of learning English. Most students arrive with broadly average prior attainment. The proportion of students with learning difficulties or disabilities is slightly above average. The proportion with statements of special educational needs and the number of students eligible for free school meals are both below the national average. The school holds specialist status in technology and music and has recently become a vocational specialist centre. It has been a Leading Edge school since 2003. After supporting a neighbouring school in challenging circumstances for some years, Varndean School took in a number of their reallocated students when the school finally closed.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Varndean is a good school which provides good value for money. It is a vibrant learning community, eager to embrace innovation and change to reach its goals. One parent described the school's ethos as 'truly inclusive and comprehensive and we applaud them for it.' Leadership and management are good and the headteacher and senior team have resolved staffing issues and improved the quality of teaching to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student intake. The school's best features are the quality of the teacher-student relationships, a broad, flexible curriculum and impressive extra-curricular provision. In addition, the well-managed specialist provision for technology and music is having a very positive effect.

All students, including those with learning difficulties and disabilities, achieve well, although there is a pattern of faster progress in Years 10 and 11 than lower down the school. The students in Years 7 to 9 thrive in many subjects and reach above-average standards in them, although they do not always do so in the national tests for English, mathematics and science. The school has recently increased the rate of progress students in all years make in English, mathematics and science by strengthening the teaching teams and improving systems for tracking progress. In Years 10 and 11, the students regularly achieve higher-than-average standards, particularly on vocational courses.

Teaching is good and there are examples of outstanding practice to be found in several departments. All staff have received training in how to maximise learning throughout the school's distinctive 100-minute lessons, and the quality of teaching has improved as a result. There remains some inconsistency in how well teachers meet the planning demands the long lessons place on them. For example, not all maintain a brisk pace throughout or choose activities that meet the needs of all students within mixed-ability groups. Teachers and student co-ordinators are committed to establishing productive and respectful relationships with their students. As one parent remarked, 'They really do seem to like teenagers!' Such relationships take time to build but the rewards are clearly evident in the generally good behaviour and attitudes shown by students in Years 10 and 11. The school's system of rewards and sanctions, however, is not always applied consistently by teachers and this is a concern to some students and parents.

The caring and inclusive atmosphere underpins students' good personal development. The majority behave safely and enjoy school and the proportion progressing to further education is above national average. Attendance is satisfactory but punctuality at the start of lessons is not good enough. Academic and pastoral monitoring is well co-ordinated to maximise the benefit to students and the school works well with outside agencies. The care, guidance and support students receive is good and arrangements for health and safety and child protection are all secure. The curriculum and other activities offered to students are good and the range of extra-curricular activities is particularly impressive.

Good use is made of resources, human and otherwise, though there is frustration about the poor maintenance of the school site, which is out of the direct control of the school.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure all lessons are sharply focused on meeting the full range of students' needs and that the pace of learning is swift and engaging.
- Improve the consistency with which teachers manage behaviour in and out of lessons.

- Support all students in attending lessons punctually.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Achievement and standards are good overall. All groups of students, including those with learning difficulties and disabilities, achieve equally well. However, in the 2006 Year 9 national tests there was a mixed picture, with slight rises in the proportion of students gaining the expected level in mathematics and science, set against a fall in English. The school's targets were missed and the majority of students had achieved too little since joining the school, although more-able students made satisfactory progress in English. Since then, the rate of progress has increased, standards are now average and the students are on target to achieve higher levels in this year's tests.

GCSE standards fell in 2006 from the very high level seen in 2005 but remain above average, representing good progress for those students. While the proportion of students with at least five GCSE passes at A* to C remained significantly above the national average, the proportion gaining both English and mathematics as two of their GCSEs fell. Standards are now rising again in English, science and mathematics and variation in achievement between other subjects has also been reduced. Effective actions by the school mean that progress towards challenging targets, including specialist school targets, is currently good.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Students' good personal development and well-being contribute greatly to their achievement. Enjoyment is reflected in the high participation rates in extra-curricular and enrichment activities, especially in the performing arts. Students say they feel safe, well supported and confident to talk to staff if they have any personal concerns. Bullying is dealt with effectively. Students recognise the importance of healthy, safe lifestyles and take advantage of all health-related activities. The school council is consulted on school improvement and students enjoy being learning mentors and prefects. Students contribute extremely well both to the school, for example, as associate governors, and to the wider community through fundraising, performances in the local area and work with neighbouring primary schools. Links with schools in Africa greatly enhance students' understanding of diversity. Students' behaviour is usually good and it noticeably improves as they move up through the school, but a small number find it difficult to manage their own behaviour. Links with local primary schools and with parents have improved and this Year 7 cohort has settled in quickly. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. The personal, social and health education programme is valued by students and provides them with an understanding of issues and skills relevant to their future lives.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teaching and learning are good, as shown by the good progress students make. Lessons observed ranged from outstanding to satisfactory and none were inadequate. Most teachers use data effectively to inform their planning and incorporate a variety of teaching methods and activities to stimulate learning, including skilled use of interactive whiteboards. Teachers know their

students well and engage easily in questioning and dialogue to assess and develop understanding.

Effective teaching and high expectations result in good behaviour in most lessons. However, some students in the lower years become distracted if lessons lack pace or if their learning needs are not sufficiently well met in mixed-ability sets. Progress then slows, behaviour deteriorates and the teacher has to focus on restoring discipline. The management of unacceptable behaviour is not always consistent and some students perceive this as unfair.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The school's curricular provision is good, with some outstanding features, notably the extra-curricular opportunities which reflect the interests of the students and the wishes of their parents. Students in Years 7 to 9 are timetabled for other subjects such as performing arts and humanities in equal measure to English, mathematics and science. Lower-attaining students receive extra support to develop their numeracy and literacy. Early GCSE entry is available in French for more-able students, as is an AS-level course in philosophy. There is a wide range of courses on offer in Years 10 and 11 and students follow planned progression routes that lead to a range of qualifications. Individual wishes are respected and the successful vocational GCSE courses are open to all. Impressive collaboration with local colleges further widens students' choice and the school is also planning to be part of a new 14 to 19 skills centre. The breadth of opportunities the school provides makes a good contribution to students' enjoyment of learning in Years 10 and 11 and, therefore, their overall achievement. In Years 7 to 9 this is not so evident.

A particular strength of the provision is the high quality and extensive range of extra-curricular activities, which are appreciated by students and parents alike. Participation is high because the school's inclusive ethos means students of all levels of aptitude are welcomed. The school has a strong reputation for its performing arts work. The benefits of the music specialist status are evident in the exciting range of performance opportunities available to students and the impact such experiences have on their developing independence and self-confidence.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

All students, including those with learning difficulties and disabilities, receive good care and support and have access to appropriate outside agencies, if required. The school has a robust system for identifying and targeting underachievement and is working hard to ensure tracking information is used consistently across the school. Many, though not all, teachers mark work in a way that enables students to improve their work but homework projects lasting several weeks reduce the frequency of this valuable feedback. The academic mentoring programme, where parents are invited to discuss their child's progress, helps teachers, students and parents to work together towards improving achievement. Older students value both the guidance and the work-related experiences they receive to prepare them for their future lives. The student services centre, along with the pastoral co-ordinators, plays a key role in monitoring and supporting all aspects of students' welfare.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The quality of leadership and management is good. The headteacher's clear vision for the school has been embraced by the governors and staff. It has taken time and determination to assemble the capable, like-minded leadership group that now seeks to make the vision a reality. Successful strategies to improve the education and care of students since the last inspection demonstrate that the school has analysed its strengths and weaknesses accurately and taken effective measures. It has good capacity to improve further.

The whole school is involved in self-evaluation at all levels and good use is made of the views of students and parents in planning future developments. External consultants are also used to evaluate past actions, so the leadership team has a largely accurate view of strengths and weaknesses. The accuracy of judgements by middle leaders is improving. For example, the training and support they receive from the senior leaders has enabled them to establish a clearer view of the quality of teaching in their teams. The loyal teaching and support staff appreciate the leadership's commitment to their professional development.

Governance is good. Governors understand and support the journey the school has taken in recent years and provide appropriate challenge to the headteacher. They welcome the perspective provided by the students who serve as associate governors. The school is safe but there are areas awaiting repair or redecoration and this does not add to students' enjoyment of school. Governors and senior leaders are working hard to improve this situation, but the maintenance of the school site is out of their direct control.

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Annex A

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall
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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
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2
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?	2
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	2
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
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	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.

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2
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	2
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	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

Dear Students,

Inspection of Varndean School, Brighton, East Sussex BN1 6NP

Thank you for welcoming us to your school. We enjoyed watching you learn and were pleased to have the chance to speak to some of you. Thanks to the Year 8 students who brought us the delicious pumpkin bread they had made, to have with our lunch!

We are writing to tell you what we found out when we inspected your school. Varndean is a good school and you are being well taught by staff who care that everyone does well. Past pupils have achieved good GCSE results and the inspectors feel that, with continued hard work, you will too. Those of you in Year 9 appear to be on course to do well in the upcoming national tests. Good luck!

Inspectors noticed how well most of you get along with each other and with your teachers, particularly students in Years 10 and 11. That is good because it makes lessons more enjoyable and the friendly and respectful atmosphere helps you to learn. Your parents and carers told us that you are happy to come to school, feel safe and are being well cared for, and we agree. You are fortunate to have many exciting courses and after-school activities available to you. We could hear the brilliant Samba Band from our room.

Your school is being well managed and Mr Schofield and his staff are keen to find new ways to improve it. We are confident that you can make even better progress than you do now, so we have asked the school to:

- Make sure all lessons are planned so that each of you can learn easily and there are plenty of interesting things to do.
- Make sure all teachers deal consistently and fairly with those few students who do not behave well.
- Encourage everyone to get to lessons on time and not arrive after the bell.

You can help with this final suggestion, of course, and generally by being ready to learn when the lesson starts.

Thank you for your contribution to this inspection and all good wishes for the future.

Patricia Robson Her Majesty's Inspector