



Helena Romanes School and Sixth Form Centre

Inspection Report

Better
education
and care

Unique Reference Number 115373
Local Authority ESSEX
Inspection number 290223
Inspection dates 13–14 November 2006
Reporting inspector Denis Pittman

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

Type of school	Comprehensive	School address	Parsonage Downs
School category	Foundation		Dunmow
Age range of pupils	11–18		Essex CM6 2AU
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	01371 872560
Number on roll (school)	1482	Fax number	01371 874632
Number on roll (6th form)	254		
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair	Mrs Janet Dyson
		Headteacher	Mr Simon Knight
Date of previous school inspection	26 March 2001		

Age group	Inspection dates	Inspection number
11–18	13–14 November 2006	290223

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by five Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Helena Romanes School is larger than average. Its sixth form is increasing in size. It is situated in Great Dunmow, a historic town in the Essex countryside. A high proportion of students live in rural communities and are bussed to school. Many live in areas that are socially advantaged. Nearly all students are from White British backgrounds. The school gained specialist status in September 2006 (Humanities - lead subject English) and has been a Training School since 2003.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

The overall effectiveness of the school is satisfactory with some developing strengths. This agrees with the school's evaluation of its performance. In recent years, results at the end of Year 9 and Year 11 have reflected lower standards of achievement than would be expected given the prior attainment profile of students. GCSE results for 2006 have shown a significant improvement; they are now above average. This improvement in performance has been brought about through closer monitoring of students' work and improved teaching. In Year 9, standards are more variable. Whilst results in English and mathematics have improved, performance in science has declined this year. Overall standards are broadly average and achievement is satisfactory. Given the improvements at GCSE level, overall progress through Years 7 to 11 is now satisfactory. Standards in the sixth form are above average at A level but not as strong in AS courses. The school is right to keep academic standards as an area for improvement, especially at Key Stage 3.

Higher attendance and a reduction in exclusions have been achieved by better management of these issues. The rewards and sanctions policy is having a beneficial effect on learning in most lessons, even though its implementation lacks some consistency. Behaviour and attitudes are generally good, being much better than in recent years. The personal development of students is good. They respond well to education on personal safety, anti-bullying and the promotion of healthy lifestyles. Sixth formers make a particularly good contribution to school life and to the wider community.

Teaching and learning are satisfactory, and good or better in some lessons, particularly with the older classes. Students generally enjoy learning and are enthusiastic, especially in physical education and technology. The best lessons reflect detailed planning, good use of data to track progress and strong pace. However, a major objective is to achieve consistency of practice across the school. The curriculum, while satisfactory overall, is especially effective post-16, where it offers students a good match of courses to their needs. The curriculum has insufficient vocational breadth and requires more effective planning of citizenship. Extra-curricular provision is good and well supported, enabling students to gain confidence from active participation. Specialist college status has begun to make an effective contribution to improving literacy standards. Pastoral support is good. Students feel safe in the school. They willingly take responsibilities and contribute in a variety of ways to the life of the school. Staff respond well to the needs of those with learning difficulties and disabilities and the gifted and talented.

The atmosphere in the school is now more calm and controlled. Improvements have been made through good leadership and management. Self-evaluation is good and provides the basis for sustaining change. The headteacher and governors are open and realistic in identifying past under-performance. Areas to improve are correctly identified and forecasts are being met, which has not been the case in the past. Monitoring is systematic and rigorous; it is being implemented well by most staff. There are some instances of uneconomic use of resources.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Provision for students in the sixth form is good. Numbers in Year 12 have increased significantly while results for Year 13 students at A2 level are above average and rising. These developments have come about as a result of good teaching which secures good progress. Standards in AS courses are more variable and not so strong. Generally, students are keen to learn. They are increasingly successful in acquiring independent learning and other study skills. Students are confident and are encouraged by their teachers to engage actively in learning.

Good leadership of the sixth form ensures that students' progress is closely monitored and effectively promoted, as is the quality of teaching. Students are appreciative of the education they receive; they speak highly of the opportunities offered and the improvements within the school.

Sixth form students make a significant contribution to the school and the wider community through such activities as helping in primary feeder schools and raising funds for charity. A detailed tutorial programme promotes good personal development.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve standards in science so that students' achievement at least matches that in English and mathematics.
- Ensure consistency in the quality of teaching and the effective tracking of students' progress in lessons.
- Improve the curriculum through appropriate vocational provision and a more coherent programme for citizenship.
- Ensure that resources are used efficiently in order to raise standards.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

Achievement and standards are satisfactory overall and good in the sixth form. Progress from Years 7 to 11 is satisfactory. Two and a half years ago, the school took actions to increase standards. These have been effective and standards are now above average in Years 10 and 11 and the sixth form. Effective support enables students with learning difficulties and those with demanding personal circumstances to achieve satisfactorily.

Students enter the school with broadly average standards. Standards in English and mathematics at the end of Year 9 have recently increased, although there was a decline in science due to a lack of continuity in staffing. Overall, standards in Year 9 are average and achievement during the first three years is now broadly satisfactory.

Achievement at the end of Year 11 has been unsatisfactory in recent years. However, in 2006, the GCSE results were the best the school has ever achieved. Two-thirds of students obtained 5 or more A* to C grades and nearly all obtained A* to G grades.

Achievement in Years 10 and 11 is now good. Girls performed significantly better than boys. Students gained the best results in history, English language and health and social care.

Well over half of the students continue into the sixth form. Achievement in the sixth form is good. Girls achieve particularly well in the vocational courses. Two-thirds of students obtain A to C grades. Students perform best in psychology, textiles and chemistry.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Students' personal development and well-being are good. Attendance is above average. Most students enjoy school and have positive attitudes to learning. The provision for spiritual, moral, social and cultural development has improved markedly so that it is now good. Regular assemblies and opportunities to reflect on issues in lessons enhance spirituality.

Generally, behaviour is good around the school and in lessons. However, a minority of students are immature, uncooperative and disruptive, especially where teaching is weaker. Students get on very well with staff and each other. The school council provides opportunities for students to make a contribution to the running of the school. Students were able to give examples of procedures that have changed as a result of their suggestions, for example, lunchtime organisation.

Students adopt safe working practices in lessons and are committed to leading healthy life styles. An increasing emphasis on acquiring basic skills in information and communication technology (ICT) and literacy is equipping them well for their future working lives. The school's specialist status provides opportunities for students to play an active role in the community. For example, students help with the production of a newspaper in a local primary school.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

Teaching and learning are satisfactory overall and good in Years 10 and 11. Teachers have supportive relationships with students and plan lessons well. In the more effective lessons, challenging activities help learners make good progress. Some lessons are outstanding, as in a Year 11 science lesson on electrostatics where the teacher led a lively discussion, and asked probing questions. Students generally work productively in groups. In a few unsatisfactory lessons, starter activities were too long, some students

had to wait whilst others caught up, and others had to copy notes rather than think of their own answers.

The school understands the strengths and weaknesses of teaching. It has responded effectively by improving recruitment and supporting weak teaching. Support for new teachers is good. Teachers use resources such as ICT increasingly well. In some lessons, activities do not always motivate students, who tend to lose focus when there is too much direction by the teacher. Staff generally manage behaviour well, but occasionally students are uncooperative and disrupt lessons by calling out. Teachers support students with learning difficulties and disabilities well so they make satisfactory progress. Gifted and talented students are given more challenging tasks in some lessons but this is not consistent practice in all subjects.

Systems to monitor students' progress are good. Teachers use the information well to set targets for students and help them to evaluate their own work. Marking is mostly regular and helpful. Students are aware of the level at which they are working and what they need to do to improve.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

The curriculum is satisfactory overall and has some good features, notably in the sixth form. It caters appropriately for the needs of most students, but there are insufficient vocational courses in Year 10 and 11. The curriculum now meets statutory requirements in ICT and religious education. However, the citizenship programme, although planned satisfactorily, is not delivered well. There is good provision for disaffected students in an 'alternative career planning' course and a basic skills option. The school's location prevents larger scale links with colleges and businesses, despite good links with local organisations. The curriculum is enriched through a wide range of clubs including sports, music, dramatic productions and charity fund-raising activities. There are many visits and trips which are valued by students. Some tutorial sessions are not used well and as such are an ineffective use of curriculum time.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

This aspect of the school's work is good. Students feel well cared for and supported. Most parents are very positive about the school and confirm the high quality of pastoral care. Arrangements for the protection and safety of students meet requirements. Students are confident that any incidents of bullying would be dealt with promptly and effectively. They feel that the school is a safe place. The careers programme is comprehensive, providing helpful advice and support. It is particularly good on providing information on the implications of options choices and progression routes in the sixth form. Students say that they enjoy their work experience. The school has an effective system for collating achievement data. Students regularly discuss, set and review

targets with their subject teachers. However, the targets set within their tutor groups are not always reviewed. Reporting requirements are not met in regard to citizenship.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Leadership and management of the school and sixth form are good. When the headteacher was appointed two and a half years ago the school was going through a difficult period. Under his clear guidance the school has improved considerably. Standards and achievement are now satisfactory overall and good in the sixth form. The school is seeking further improvements by continuing to pursue its objectives to raise standards, improve teaching, improve the learning environment and become a centre of excellence for training and development. Middle managers have been trained effectively. The school's capacity for further improvement is good.

The system for recording and tracking students' performance has improved. As a result, subject leaders are able to monitor work more thoroughly and take effective steps to improve practice. Teachers are observed in lessons regularly. Challenging targets are met in most areas. Learning resources are satisfactory and in some areas good. The computing facilities have improved. Accommodation is adequate but some teaching rooms are too small. The new accommodation for teaching technology is excellent.

Governance is good and the governing body works effectively to support the leadership of the school. The school has been operating with a financial deficit for the past three years. Under the careful guidance of the governors' finance committee the deficit is being reduced. There is some inefficient use of resources relating to uneconomic groups in the sixth form and ineffective use of curriculum time. The school provides satisfactory value for money.

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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	2
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	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3	2
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3	2
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	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2	
The behaviour of learners	2	
The attendance of learners	2	
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	2	
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	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	3	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	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?	2	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	3	
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

15 November 2006

Dear Students

Helena Romanes School and Sixth Form Centre, Parsonage Downs, Dunmow, Essex, CM6 2AU

As you know, your school was recently inspected and this letter is to tell you about the results of that inspection. I would like to thank you on behalf of the inspection team for your help and courtesy. We enjoyed the opportunity to talk to you and to listen to your views about the school. Some of your parents responded to a confidential survey and this was very helpful.

We were pleased to see that the standards you achieve in GCSE examinations have improved a lot, although some subjects are not as good as others. Standards at the end of the sixth form are good and improving. Most of you make satisfactory progress or better; sometimes your progress is affected by a minority of students who lose concentration and misbehave. We could see that you enjoy coming to school as attendance rates are good. We thought that the range of courses you choose from in Year 10 was satisfactory. We think that there should be a greater variety of vocational courses and that aspects of citizenship should be made more interesting. Your teachers offer you good support; you appreciated the care you receive when you most need it.

We believe that the school is now much better organised and controlled, giving you plenty of opportunities to learn and develop. The school is a friendly place and we can see that mostly you get on well with each other and the adults at the school. You told us that you enjoy taking part in sporting activities and other trips or visits.

The main things we have asked the school to do are:

- to help you to improve your test results at the end of Year 9, particularly in science
- to make sure that there isn't too much variation in the quality of teaching, marking and behaviour in lessons
- to provide a broader range of vocational courses
- to make sure that school resources are used well to support your learning and personal development.

Best wishes for the future.

Yours sincerely

Denis Pittman

Lead Inspector