



The Highfield School

Inspection Report

Unique Reference Number 117537
Local Authority HERTFORDSHIRE
Inspection number 290866
Inspection dates 29–30 November 2006
Reporting inspector Lindsay Hebditch HMI

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

Type of school	Secondary	School address	Highfield
School category	Community		Letchworth
Age range of pupils	11–18		Hertfordshire SG6 3QA
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	01462 620500
Number on roll (school)	877	Fax number	01462 620501
Number on roll (6th form)	153		
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair	Mr Jim Wilcock
		Headteacher	Mrs Jane Winterbone
Date of previous school inspection	12 November 2001		

Age group	Inspection dates	Inspection number
11–18	29–30 November 2006	290866

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three additional inspectors.

Description of the school

The Highfield School is a medium sized comprehensive school which draws its students from Letchworth, although mostly not from the immediate vicinity of the school. The number of students attending the school has increased by one third during the last three years, largely because of the closure of a Letchworth secondary school, which at the time was in special measures. Students entering the school are of average ability overall, but the proportion of students with learning difficulties is slightly above average and is increasing. The proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is below average. The school achieved specialist status in science in 2004. Sixth form provision is made through a consortium of three schools. The majority of students join the sixth form on completion of their GCSE courses.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

The Highfield School is a good and improving school which is held in high regard by students, parents and staff. It is a safe, happy school that cares well for all of its students. Students enjoy coming to school. Behaviour around the school and in lessons is good. The school has recovered from a period of instability which followed the transfer of students from a local school which was closing and during which standards declined. Students' progress has improved markedly. Achievement and standards are now good overall, although the school has identified that further work is required to improve the consistency of test results in Key Stage 3. The number of students who achieve five or more GCSE passes at grades A*-C is well above average.

Leadership and management is good overall. Governance is excellent. The headteacher provides strong and effective leadership and is well supported by her senior leadership team. Governors share the headteacher's clear vision of what needs to be done to take the school forward. Quality improvement arrangements are good. Management actions have resulted in clearer target setting and robust monitoring of the progress of all aspects of the school's performance. The school's Specialist Science College status has helped to raise standards in mathematics, science and information and communication technology (ICT), and all of its required performance targets have been met. Teaching is good but the school recognises that to raise standards still further teachers need to identify clearly what students are expected to learn in the lesson, regardless of their ability. Resources to support teaching and learning are satisfactory, but some students are concerned that they do not have sufficient access to computers. The curriculum has been improved and is good. It now provides students with a greater range of choice, including some vocational options in Key Stage 4 which help students to develop skills to support their progression into future employment. However, there are few opportunities for students to develop and extend these options in the sixth form. Students receive good care, support and guidance and welcome the opportunity to influence school life through the school council. They are particularly pleased with the school's efforts to encourage healthy lifestyles, through providing healthy meals and a good range of organised sports activities. Pupils' personal development is good. The school is accurate in its own evaluation of the quality of provision and has outstanding capacity to make further improvements. It provides good value for money.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Sixth form provision is good. Students enjoy their learning and achieve well. They make good progress and reach standards at GCE AS and A-level which are above the national average. Most students achieve higher grades than expected, based on their starting points as a result of good teaching. Pastoral care is strong. Students are well supported by their tutors in how to manage their work and find that the targets they are set help them to make progress. They are well informed about choices available to them when they leave school and the majority progress into higher education. The

sixth form consortium arrangements provide students with a satisfactory choice of advanced level subjects but there are relatively few opportunities for students who wish to follow vocational courses. The leadership and management of the sixth form are good.

What the school should do to improve further

- Help students to achieve the same high levels in all subjects at Key Stage 3, especially English, mathematics and science.
- Ensure that lessons identify and address the learning needs of all students.
- Provide clear progression routes for students aged 14 to 19 in vocational education.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Achievement and standards are good overall, although the standards reached by students who transferred following the closure of a neighbouring school are lower than those of the students who joined the school at the beginning of Year 7. Students enter the school with broadly average attainment. Progress in Key Stage 3 is satisfactory overall, but the school has correctly identified that it needs to provide greater consistency in test results in core subjects. The school's data for 2006 show that overall attainment in Key Stage 4 has improved significantly and standards are now good. The percentage of students achieving at least five GCSE grades A*– C has increased to well above the national average. The majority of students achieved better grades than those predicted from their prior attainment. Standards in mathematics, which were a weakness at the last inspection have also improved to above the national average. Students with learning difficulties and disabilities and those of minority ethnic heritage make similar progress to other students. Sixth form students make good progress. Consequently they reach standards which are above the national average on GCE AS and A level courses. Most parents and students are pleased with standards in the school and in the sixth form.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The personal development and well-being of students are good. Students enjoy coming to school and develop good personal qualities. They are courteous, considerate and caring of others. Students of all ages show loyalty to and enthusiasm for their school. They have positive attitudes to learning and behave well in lessons and around the school. They develop competence in skills that help them to study and to prepare them for their future lives. Most act maturely and are able to work productively, both independently and in groups. Bullying is rare and students say they are confident that

reported incidents are managed well. The school has introduced measures to improve attendance, which is now broadly in line with national average.

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. Students are sensitive towards the feelings of others and older students willingly offer their time to help younger ones, for example in acting as 'Bully Buddies.' Students understand the importance of staying safe and of a healthy lifestyle and take part in a wide range of sporting activities. Students feel that their views are valued and acted upon. For example, the school council has successfully implemented strategies to deal with excessive litter around the school. Sixth formers take on appropriate responsibilities such as registering students who arrive late, mentoring younger pupils, participating in paired reading to assist those with difficulties and helping with school events.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Teaching and learning are good overall and an increasing number of lessons are outstanding. This agrees with the school's self-evaluation. The school's concerted action to improve teaching is benefiting students' considerably. A particularly good feature is the care which teachers take in breaking lessons down into smaller parts so that they can provide a wide variety of interesting activities. This engages the students and leads to good behaviour in lessons. Students respond enthusiastically to activities such as role play and become deeply involved in discussion and practical activities. The most effective teachers challenge and extend students' understanding through skilful and probing questioning, and show how much they value the students' responses.

Teaching is particularly strong where activities and questioning are modified carefully so that all students are challenged to achieve their potential. However, this practice is inconsistent across the school and teachers are not always clear about what outcomes should be expected from different students. Many teachers make effective use of new technology to make lessons interesting for students but students have insufficient opportunities to use their ICT skills. Students understand what they need to do to improve their work and are taking greater responsibility for their own learning. They are increasingly involved in assessing their own progress and that of their peers.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

The school's curriculum is good. The curriculum meets all statutory requirements and mostly provides a comprehensive choice of optional subjects. However, consortium arrangements are not adding significantly to the choices being made by students at

Key Stage 4 and there are few opportunities to study vocational courses in the sixth form.

The personal development programme successfully encourages students to adopt a healthy lifestyle, stay safe and become informed young citizens. Workplace and enterprise skills are promoted well and the school's specialist status is enhancing learning through activities such as the highly successful science festival. Students of all ages appreciate the range of extra-curricular and other enrichment activities and talk enthusiastically about the opportunities that are provided for them, for example in choreographing dance productions.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The care and support of students are good. Provision for the support of vulnerable, underachieving and other identified groups of students is outstanding. This has resulted in overall improvements in their attendance, attitudes and attainment. Students justifiably say they feel very well looked after, safe, valued and respected. Systems for health and safety are well established and child protection procedures are rigorous. The weekly provision of two hours of good quality physical education ensures all students take adequate exercise. The canteen provides healthy food and the school is working towards the standard, 'Achieving Health'. Additional teaching assistants have been effectively deployed to boost the achievement of students with special learning needs. Whereas their achievement was less than satisfactory, it is now good. All students are confident of getting the help they need when problems arise and readily consult their teachers, sixth form mentors or the school counsellor for advice. Links with outside agencies are strong. Careers guidance is good. Students value their opportunities for work experience and the help they receive from the Connexions service.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Leadership and management are good. After the last inspection, the school went through a period of instability caused mainly by the influx of students from another school which closed, and standards declined. However, as a result of the strong and effective leadership provided by the headteacher and senior staff, the standards achieved by all groups of students have improved significantly and are now good. The school has exceeded its achievement targets. The school has a strong and positive ethos which encourages all students to succeed. Gifted and talented students perform well and so do those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Performance monitoring is good. Appropriate targets are set for individual students and departments and most are met. The performance of teachers is monitored carefully

and as a result the quality of teaching has improved. Teachers are given effective training and support when they need it and share good practice well. Departments undertake regular self-evaluation which is reviewed in detail by governors and senior staff. New measures to improve behaviour are proving successful, although behaviour remains a concern for a minority of parents. Accommodation is satisfactory overall and good in some areas. Plans to improve the inadequate accommodation for physical education have been approved. Resources for learning are satisfactory but students complain about inadequate access to computers. Financial management is rigorous. The school offers good value for money.

Governance is outstanding. Governors know the school well and share the headteacher's vision of how further improvements could be made. They provide a good level of challenge to the headteacher and senior managers when it is appropriate and monitor the work of the school very thoroughly.

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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?	2	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	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	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2	2
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	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	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	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?	2	2
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	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	2	
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

1 December 2006

Dear Students

The Highfield School, Highfield, Letchworth, Hertfordshire, SG6 3QA

I'd like to tell you what our inspectors thought of your school when we visited. We met and talked to quite a few of you during our two days at the school. We watched some of your lessons and looked at the quality of your work. We were also pleased that so many of your parents wrote to us to tell us what they thought about the school.

We think that The Highfield School is a good school that is improving all the time. We think that it is a safe and happy school which cares exceptionally well for all of you. We were pleased to see very good behaviour around the school and in lessons. We saw some very interesting lessons and thought like you that teachers really help you to do your best. This is reflected in the good examination results you achieve. We were pleased to see how much the GCSE results had improved this year. The sixth form makes good provision and, like the rest of the school, pass rates are going from strength to strength.

We identified three things that the school could do to help it improve further.

These were:

- Help you to achieve the same high levels in all subjects at Key Stage 3, especially English, mathematics and science.
- Ensure that the learning needs of all students are met even more effectively in all lessons.
- Provide more opportunities to follow vocational courses in the sixth form to build on what is offered in Key Stage 4.

Keep up the good work, and thanks for your help.

Lindsay Hebditch Her Majesty's Inspector