

Heathlands School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117685
Local Authority	HERTFORDSHIRE
Inspection number	290894
Inspection dates	12–13 March 2007
Reporting inspector	George Derby

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

Type of school	Special
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	3–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	98
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Dr Rona Tutt
Headteacher	Ms Mabel Davis
Date of previous school inspection	7 October 2002
School address	Heathlands Drive St Albans Hertfordshire AL3 5AY
Telephone number	01727 754060
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Heathlands is a day and residential school for deaf pupils. When pupils are admitted to the school, their attainment is below and often well below national expectations. Many arrive with few skills in English because of their hearing impairment. The school's policy is to use spoken language, hearing, and sign to aid learning and communication. This 'Total Communication' approach is central to its work. About 70% of the pupils come from local education authorities other than Hertfordshire and the school is used as a regional resource. Nearly 30% of pupils board weekly at Heath House. This was last inspected in November 2006 by the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI). About 30% of pupils come from a wide variety of minority ethnic groups.

The school is located on three sites with the furthest 7 miles away from the main school: Heathlands School for primary age pupils, Heathlands at Townsend (a Church of England High School) for the majority of secondary age pupils, and Heathlands at St Luke's (a special school for pupils with moderate learning difficulties). Primary age pupils attend mainstream schools for a small amount of the time but all secondary pupils have a significant number of lessons with hearing peers. There are also links with St Alban's Girls' School, a specialist business and enterprise college.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

This is a school that works extremely hard to achieve its best. It is an outstanding school which has gone from strength to strength since its last inspection. It is a school which never stands still! This is because it is extremely well led by a headteacher who constantly strives for improvement and excellence. She is particularly well supported by the governing body and by the significant expertise of the chair of governors. Value for money is excellent. The headteacher's tenacious approach, coupled with an extremely hardworking and excellent senior leadership team, results in a school which is highly effectively led and managed. Pupils' needs are at the heart of all that is done and the high quality provision results in outstanding achievement both personally and academically. Pupils are extremely well prepared for their next stage of education because of the highly effective and wide ranging academic and vocational programmes and careers support. The school knows itself particularly well, although it is too modest in making some of its judgements. It effectively uses the information it has in order to improve, and embraces new initiatives with fervour. At the heart of what is done is the pursuit of high quality through very close monitoring of each individual's progress and the impact of the provision they receive. This is particularly the case for the most vulnerable pupils. Occasionally, there are missed opportunities to monitor groups, for example boys, girls, or those with specific needs such as pupils with cochlear implants, to compare progress. The school is exceptionally well placed to improve further.

Parents are mostly very positive about the school: one stated that her child's 'communication, literacy and maths skills have moved in leaps and bounds... the school cares about every one of its pupils, teamwork and respecting others is a fundamental basic... I am very impressed by the passion the headteacher has'.

Pupils' behaviour is good and occasionally exemplary. The youngest children in the nursery settle astonishingly well because they are managed so well by staff who have very high expectations. Pupils throughout the school thoroughly enjoy their lessons and speak very positively about how successfully they work alongside hearing peers. They are taught extremely well by staff who engender a love of learning. Pupils have a good understanding of how to keep healthy and their knowledge of how to keep safe is exceptional. They make a very significant contribution to their three school communities as well as locally and further afield, through charity work and other community activities.

Staff go the extra mile to safeguard pupils and have comprehensive arrangements for protecting pupils, and high quality care throughout the school and residence.

The school's partnership with other schools to promote learning with hearing peers and to further Heathlands as a centre of excellence is outstanding. The arrangements are often very complex in the partner schools but staff make them work very well. Occasionally, curriculum planning and organisational structures take a great deal of time and effort because links are not always as formal as they could be.

Effectiveness and efficiency of boarding provision

Grade: 1

The extremely good liaison between school and residential staff, and the shared understanding of, and practice in, meeting pupils' needs ensures progress is maximised, particularly in relation to pupil's personal development and independence. Homework, healthy life styles, keeping

safe and core skills such as literacy and money management are extremely well supported through the range of experiences and visits offered in and outside the residence. The organisation of the residence means that younger and older pupils are able to mix and meet at key times. This enables older pupils to act as strong role models, helps younger pupils to settle and supports siblings very well.

Pupils are safeguarded in this accommodation. They are given considerable opportunities to choose activities, and to take responsibility for themselves and for their relationships with others. The school's recent CSCI inspection shows that it exceeds minimum standards in many areas.

What the school should do to improve further

- To strengthen the school's monitoring further make better use of data to check on, and compare, the progress of different groups.
- Establish more formal arrangements to promote further the high quality of links between establishments.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Pupils make impressive gains over their time in the school. This is because of the high quality teaching and planning which means they make progress in small but highly successful steps. They generally meet or exceed their challenging targets.

In Key Stage 4 standards and achievement have improved markedly since the last inspection. In the GCSE examinations undertaken by Heathlands pupils in Year 11 at the Townsend site in 2006, 43% of pupils achieved the higher grades (A*-C). This percentage has risen year on year and pupils now gain an average of 8.4 passes. Pupils do particularly well in practical subjects, such as food technology, drama and technology; in art they often attain grade A or B. English results have also been strong and have improved, although not all are able to undertake GCSE. A similar improvement has been made in the pupils' achievements at St Luke's. Although the curriculum is geared around vocational opportunities and awards, pupils attained passes in GCSE art, science and mathematics as well as in Entry Level in a wide range of subjects.

The pupils' achievement over the secondary stage of their education, when compared with national figures shows remarkable progress, putting the school in the top 5% of schools nationally. This is also the picture over the primary years. The value the school adds to pupils' achievements has been extremely high over a number of years. Occasionally, pupils exceed the nationally expected levels, such as in the Key Stage 3 tests in 2006 when two pupils attained Level 6 in science. Children achieve particularly well in the Foundation Stage because staff have such detailed understanding of their needs, particularly in communication and personal development, and are very skilled in meeting these.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

The pupils really enjoy school life and their attendance, as a result, is excellent. They say their teachers make lessons fun but also that they 'work hard' because they 'know that they are getting better' at things. They make significant strides in their personal development, growing in self-confidence and independence because of the careful ways in which the school challenges them to take responsibility for their own learning and behaviour.

The high expectations of staff, the strong personal, social, health and citizenship programme, the very good role models surrounding them and the strong emphasis on including all pupils mean that pupils' personal and social skills and their moral development improve very well indeed. They are keen to take on responsibilities, for example, as representatives of the three school councils, and to show how they have made a difference. As a result, their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. Behaviour is almost always good and sometimes exceptional. The few pupils who have particular behavioural and emotional needs are excellently supported by staff towards their behaviour plan targets.

Commitment to pupils' well-being is at the heart of everything the school does. Pupils and staff all get on very well together. They feel extremely safe, and increasingly understand the importance of making healthy choices. The school's 'dialogue for learning' initiative is particularly empowering, as even the youngest children influence what happens to themselves and the school and their environment.

The excellent progress that they make in their confidence and their attitudes to learning leaves them well set up for future learning.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 1

Teaching is outstanding. This is because of the senior leadership team's insistence on high quality teaching and the rigorous way teachers are monitored and given very good advice on how to do even better. Teachers know their pupils' needs thoroughly and planning is meticulous. Detailed and rigorous assessment is central to successful teaching. The very strong evaluation of lessons and pupils' progress means that staff keep a close eye on the learning and adjust their lessons accordingly. The support provided by assistants and communicators is excellent. The teamwork in lessons on all three sites is a strength of the school.

Staff make lessons exciting and pupils really like them. Good use of information and communication technology (ICT) motivates and stimulates pupils. The main keys to the success of lessons are the consistently high level of challenge and the determination that pupils will work very productively and do even better.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

A very broad range of academic subjects and vocational opportunities are provided in Key Stage 4 and the school benefits considerably from its links with Townsend and St Luke's. Disapplication from a modern foreign language and music at Key Stage 3 has enabled the school to provide additional English lessons. However, occasional, timetabling arrangements and restrictions with accommodation at St Luke's mean that organising a good balance of activities can prove difficult. College links for pupils at St Luke's also broadens their opportunities. A strong emphasis on personalised learning results in activities which encompass these very well, especially in supporting pupils' communication skills. Significant improvement has been made in the provision for ICT. This is used well to support the curriculum and pupils' progress. Heathlands' pupils at Townsend have an option to study ICT as an examination subject, although this year none have chosen to do so. However, they do not always study it consistently in lessons in other subjects.

In Key Stages 1 and 2 the curriculum is broad and balanced. Music is taught in blocks and is enhanced by visits and visitors. Children in the Foundation Stage have a curriculum which meets their needs very carefully. A very good and appropriate emphasis is placed on their communication, language and literacy as well as their personal and social development.

A considerable number of additional activities at lunchtime and after school enhance the curriculum significantly.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

This is an extremely caring school, highly committed to meeting each child's needs and preparing them for their future life. It knows its pupils very well and analyses their performance carefully, challenging itself and the child very well to do even better. Its 'dialogue for learning' and other initiatives mean that everyone including pupils, understands what they must now do to improve, and celebrates each small step of progress towards this. This results in a very high quality of personal and academic support and guidance, including support for those pupils within the residence. Excellent teamwork between speech and language therapists and teachers enables pupils to make enormous strides in their self expression and understanding of language. The school is determined in seeking out support to meet any additional medical or learning needs that pupils may have, although the availability of this may be limited or accessing it time consuming. Currently because of a vacancy, there is only limited external audiology support available, but the school is doing whatever it can to minimise the impact of this.

The school protects its pupils from harm and has excellent systems in place to do this. It has responded positively to the new safeguarding requirements and is vigilant in evaluating risks. It has very good arrangements with its partner schools to ensure that the welfare of its pupils is paramount.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

This school continues to develop and strive for further excellence because of the high quality of its leadership team which is supported by staff at all levels. All are determined that every child within the school should achieve their potential in every part of their life. The headteacher has an extremely clear vision and high aspirations for all of the school's work and determined to extend inclusive opportunities for pupils and to provide them with the skills and knowledge that will set them up for lifelong learning and a good quality of life. The strong commitment to inclusion and partnership with other schools support this vision and pupils recognise how this gives them access to wider experiences and opportunities.

This school reflects extremely thoughtfully on its work. Careful analysis of how well pupils achieve, alongside extremely good monitoring of teaching and learning supports continued high quality provision and leads the school to challenge itself even more. The school is involved in many partnership and regional initiatives to enhance school development and provision further. It considers and collects the views of its stakeholders, including parents, very well and acts upon these whenever it is possible.

Governance is outstanding. Governors are very rigorous in the way they monitor the school's work. They receive excellent information from the headteacher and leadership team. The

relatively new chair is utilising her expertise very well to analyse critically and support the school.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaints about school inspection', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Annex A

Inspection judgements

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

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	1
The standards ¹ reached by learners	4
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	1
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	1

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1
The behaviour of learners	2
The attendance of learners	1
How well learners enjoy their education	1
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	1

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	1
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?	1

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?	1
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	1
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	1
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
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

14 March 2007

Dear Pupils

Heathlands School, Heathlands Drive, St Albans, Hertfordshire, AL3 5AY

Thank you for meeting us during the inspection and sharing your views on the school's work. You clearly benefit significantly from the school's teaching and support and it is good to know that you enjoy working alongside hearing pupils.

Yours is an outstanding school. Mrs Davis works exceedingly hard to make it the place it is and the excellent links with specialists and other schools means that you get a really good education. She always wants the school to do better and your teachers want you to do your best and try as hard as you can. You rise to this and do very well in your tests and exams. You do the school proud.

Teaching is excellent and teamwork among staff is a significant strength, which is why things go very smoothly in the school. Teachers have high standards for your work and behaviour. Communication support staff and other assistants make a significant contribution to your learning.

Those who live at Heath House also get excellent care. All pupils are prepared particularly well for the future, especially for leaving school and going to college.

We have asked the school to do just two things to make it even better. The school is meticulous in the way it keeps track of your progress as individuals but we have suggested that it could examine the progress of different groups, such as boys and girls and those who have cochlear implants. Furthermore, the school works very closely with its partner secondary schools but we think that the organisation of lessons, subjects and facilities would be aided by having more regular formal meetings.

George Derby

Lead Inspector