

Highbury Fields School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	100455
Local Authority	Islington
Inspection number	307393
Inspection dates	18–19 March 2009
Reporting inspector	Christopher Russell 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	11–18
Gender of pupils	Girls
Number on roll	
School (total)	774
Sixth form	84
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr James Lynas
Headteacher	Ms Julia Hodson (Acting)
Date of previous school inspection	27 September 2004
School address	Highbury Hill London N5 1AR
Telephone number	020 7288 1888
Fax number	020 7288 2121

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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

Highbury Fields is smaller than the average secondary school. The school is a specialist science college and is also designated as a Leading Edge school. It works closely with two other schools to form the Islington Sixth Form Consortium. The school's deputy headteacher is currently the acting headteacher. The previous headteacher retired in August 2009 and a new headteacher joins at the start of the summer term.

The large majority of students are from minority ethnic backgrounds and around a third speak English as an additional language. The percentage of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is above the national average.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Highbury Fields is a good school. Although this is a time of transition in senior leadership, this is not a school that is standing still. The acting headteacher is providing clear direction and effective leadership. A range of valuable developments have been undertaken in the past few months, many of which are already leading to further improvements in provision and outcomes. The school is in a strong position to continue its improvement. Senior leaders' evaluation of the school's strengths and weaknesses is honest, thorough and extremely sharp. They have a clear understanding of what they need to do next and their actions are well planned and rigorous.

Students are well taught. The large majority of lessons are good and some are outstanding. Lessons are typically well structured and move at a swift pace. Teachers' subject knowledge is extensive and key subject concepts and understanding are rigorously taught. As a result of this effective teaching, students achieve well. However, opportunities for students to work more independently or in groups for more extended periods are limited in many lessons. The achievement of students in Year 11 last year was good, although not as high as in the previous two years. Leaders took this dip in performance very seriously. They analysed the reasons for it carefully and undertook a range of actions, including making a number of changes to the curriculum. Students' progress is now accelerating again and a wide range of evidence indicates that examination results will rise significantly this year. However, leaders recognise that, despite these changes, the curriculum is still relatively narrow and does not meet the needs and interests of some students as closely as it might. Planning is well underway for further, more extensive changes to the curriculum next year. This planning is thorough and very well considered.

Students are also well cared for. The school provides a wide range of support for their wider development and well-being. The school is a diverse community and students from different backgrounds get on very well together. Students enjoy school and have good attitudes to learning. Their attendance improved last year and is now above the national average. The punctuality of a number of students is poor and this has been an area of focus for the school. While some students still arrive late to school (and sometimes to lessons), there have been clear improvements. The school sets challenging academic targets and students' progress is tracked carefully. Where necessary, a range of additional support is provided.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

The sixth form is well led and managed. The effectiveness of the sixth form is currently satisfactory, although there is a strong trend of recent development and good capacity for further improvement.

Sixth form students make satisfactory progress, although their achievement is improving as a result of effective actions to improve provision, both in school and across the consortium. The curriculum is satisfactory and developing well, as leaders widen the range of vocational and applied courses available to students. Specialist status makes a strong contribution here, as a large and increasing number of students study science subjects. The quality of teaching and learning is also satisfactory and improving, although opportunities for students to learn more independently in lessons are currently rather limited.

Sixth form students receive good care, guidance and support. Effective tracking of their progress allows the early identification of those at risk of underachievement. Students appreciate their very positive relationships with staff and the extensive support that they receive. The school helps students to develop well as young people, although the absence rate in the sixth form is high.

What the school should do to improve further

- Develop the curriculum to ensure that it meets the needs of students more closely.
- Ensure students have more extensive opportunities to work independently and collaboratively with other students, both within and beyond lessons.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

While there is considerable variation between year groups, students typically enter the school with standards that are slightly below average. They make good progress and attain average standards by the end of Year 11. GCSE examination results fell significantly in 2008. However, these students had, on average, much lower starting points when they joined the school than students taking examinations in 2007, and almost half had learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Taking this into account, the progress that they made as they moved through the school was good. Students consistently make strong progress in English and outstanding progress in mathematics. The proportion of students achieving five or more higher grades including English and mathematics in 2008 was significantly above average, considering these students' levels when they entered the school.

Post-16 examination results increased in 2008 and these students achieved more than those who took examinations in 2007. The school's inclusive approach means that students typically enter the sixth form with below-average standards. They make satisfactory progress during their time in the sixth form and leave with standards that remain below national averages.

Students from all groups, including students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and those with English as an additional language, all make similar progress.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

The school does much to help students prepare for their future lives. Students' prospects are improved by their very good progress in English and mathematics. The development of workplace skills is generally strong, although hampered by the currently rather limited range of vocational and applied curriculum options. Students also make a strong contribution to the school and wider community. There is a broad range of opportunities, some associated with the school's specialist status, for example the highly successful sustainable development project. The school consults its students carefully and the pupil parliament was successfully relaunched this year. Many students organise events and raise money for charities. Students' uptake of exercise is only satisfactory, because of the limited opportunities available. Students do not always make healthy choices at lunchtimes, although they understand what comprises a healthy diet.

Students confirm that they feel safe in school and that there is very little bullying. They behave well in lessons and around the school. While low-level misbehaviour does sometimes interrupt the flow of lessons, this is rare.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Relationships are positive and productive, and students enjoy their lessons. In the very large majority of lessons, aims and objectives are sharply focused and shared using language that the students can understand. This leaves them very clear about what they need to do to be successful. Teachers ask challenging and well-targeted questions which move the lessons along well and help to deepen students' understanding and extend their thinking. A few lessons are less effective, but are nonetheless satisfactory. These lessons typically move too slowly, do not challenge all students, or lack opportunities for students to develop their key skills, particularly in speaking and listening.

Teachers generally make good use of information about students' targets and current achievement when they plan their lessons. This helps to ensure that students of different abilities are challenged and interested by their work. The quality of marking is variable. While some provides helpful and sharply focused guidance to students about how to improve their work, this is not consistently the case. As a result, while students know their current levels of performance and what to do to improve in a broad sense, feedback is not always detailed or precise enough to help them to improve their work.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

The curriculum is developing well. A number of changes were made to the Key Stage 4 curriculum following slightly disappointing examination results in 2008. For example, BTEC health and social care was introduced for Year 11 students. There is already evidence to demonstrate that these changes are supporting improvements in achievement. The range of options is, however, still rather limited, although the school is planning to build on these developments to offer a greater variety of pathways for students of all abilities from September 2009. Some minor changes have been made to the Year 7 curriculum in the light of the new changes to the Key Stage 3 National Curriculum and further developments are planned for September.

Students are well supported in the development of their basic literacy and numeracy skills. Curriculum time for physical education (PE) is increasing but is still low. Senior leaders recognise this weakness, although it is difficult for them to resolve it, as the spaces available for sport and physical education are very limited. The school's specialist status makes a useful contribution to the curriculum and has supported the introduction of a number of new courses. A range of enrichment activities complements the curriculum. However, the range of available opportunities after school is quite narrow and students' take up is relatively low.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Wide-ranging and effective systems are in place to care for and support students. Procedures for safeguarding and for health and safety are comprehensive and meet current requirements. Vulnerable students and others who require particular help are very well supported. The school provides a range of assistance, for example from learning mentors, and works very closely with a number of outside agencies. Students receive high-quality guidance at important transition points, for example when they join the school and at the end of Year 11.

Processes for tracking and monitoring students' progress are effective and have improved recently. Systems are in place to set challenging targets, and to collect data about students' current achievement at more regular intervals. While the changes are still quite new, they are already helping the school to identify underachieving students and classes, and target additional support more quickly.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Leaders have a particularly good understanding of the quality of teaching and learning in the school. Robust action has been taken to eliminate any inadequate teaching and to improve the overall quality of lessons. High-quality training opportunities have been provided for teachers and support staff. Governors support the school, are ambitious for improvement and provide effective challenge. Their understanding of the data about students' achievement is particularly strong. The school's middle leadership structure has recently been restructured to provide a sharper focus on the leadership of curriculum subjects. This change was carefully planned and followed wide consultation with staff. While still quite new, these changes are already supporting a sharper focus on subject planning. Leaders have made good use of the school's specialist status to support the school's improvements.

The school makes a good contribution to community cohesion. For example, leaders recently analysed that students from some ethnic groups were not making quite as much progress as other students. They worked directly with parents from these communities to form closer links and identify any barriers to achievement. This work is already leading to improvements.

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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	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	3
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well being?	2	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2

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/or disabilities make progress	2	

¹Grade 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.

Personal development and well-being

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

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 leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	2	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	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	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No	
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No	

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

01 April 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Highbury Fields School, London, N5 1AR

Thank you for your help and for taking the time to talk to us during the recent inspection. I am writing to you to tell you about our main findings. Highbury Fields is a good school with a satisfactory and improving sixth form.

You are well cared for and relationships between staff and students are very good. This helps you to develop well as young people. You are well taught and this helps you to achieve well and get good examination results. GCSE results dipped in 2008 and students did not achieve as much as they did in 2006 and 2007, although their achievement was still good. The school has looked very carefully at this dip and has made some helpful changes.

However, we did find that many lessons had limited opportunities for you to work more independently and with groups of other students. We have asked the school to work on this area. We also found that the curriculum, although it is improving well, does not always meet your needs and interests as closely as it might. We have asked the school to continue developing the curriculum to ensure that it matches your needs and interests as closely as possible, enabling you to make even greater progress.

The school's leaders are doing a very good job. Although this is a period of transition with an acting headteacher in post, the school is clearly continuing to develop and improve.

Yours faithfully

Chris Russell

Her Majesty's Inspector