

Highfields Science Specialist School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	104386
Local Authority	Wolverhampton
Inspection number	308589
Inspection dates	3–4 October 2007
Reporting inspector	Kevin Sheldrick HMI

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

Type of school	Other secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1213
6th form	236
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Vivien Fitzmorris
Headteacher	Mark Capel
Date of previous school inspection	31 January 2005
School address	Boundary Way Penn Wolverhampton WV4 4NT
Telephone number	01902 556530
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Age group	11–18
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Highfields School is an above-average-size comprehensive that attracts pupils from a large number of primary schools. Sixth form provision is made in collaboration with three other schools. Nearly half the pupils are from White British backgrounds and about a third are of Indian Asian heritage. The rest are from a range of backgrounds. The proportion of pupils with English as an additional language is well above average but few are at the early stages of learning English. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is just below average. Fewer pupils than average have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The school became a specialist science school in 2003. The school had an acting headteacher last year but a new permanent headteacher was appointed from September 2007.

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. Pupils from different ethnic and faith backgrounds are at ease working together in this happy community. Pupils like the adults working in the school because they are approachable and give willingly of their time. These positive relationships between all members of the school community are a key reason why pupils' personal development and well-being are good. Attainment is in line with the national averages and achievement is satisfactory in both the main school and the sixth form. Although the trend in results has fluctuated in recent years, the school achieves above average outcomes in 5A* to C including English and mathematics. This outcome and effective work-related learning results in pupils being well prepared for future progression.

Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Pupils enjoy the increasing opportunities to participate actively in lessons. This enjoyment has contributed significantly to improvements in attendance, which is good. Progress in a minority of lessons is satisfactory because work does not match pupils' individual targets. The Key Stage 3 curriculum does not fully prepare all pupils for the option choices made in Year 9, and a small minority of less academic pupils are only gradually gaining access to the courses that would best meet their needs. The curriculum is satisfactory because the needs of the vast majority of pupils are met, and there are many opportunities for pupils to participate in a wide range of activities.

Pupils are increasingly leading healthy lives and they feel safe because of the effective care, support and guidance the school provides. This provision contributes to the good behaviour in the school and ensures that more-vulnerable pupils and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make satisfactory progress. The school has recognised the need to improve its target-setting and tracking processes so they have a greater influence on all learners.

Leadership and management are satisfactory. Those staff with temporary responsibilities have maintained standards during the twelve-month period of significant uncertainty when the school was without a permanent head. Although satisfactory overall, monitoring and evaluation has not been sufficiently sharp in enabling the accurate identification of all the improvements needed to raise standards. Effective action has been taken to eliminate inadequate practice, and reorganisation has been used to ensure staff concentrate on raising standards. The school has identified key strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning, but more work is needed to ensure the spread of good practice. The school is seeking the views of staff, parents and pupils to support the evaluation process. This consultation process is at an early stage, which explains why pupils and some parents feel that their views are not fully considered.

The school has made satisfactory progress in terms of its specialist status. There have been improvements in the curriculum and enhanced links with a range of partners, but the progress made in improving teaching and learning has been limited. Overall, the school broadly knows what it must do to get better and recent actions have led to an increased focus on outcomes, pointing to a satisfactory capacity to improve.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

Provision in the sixth form is satisfactory, as is students' achievement. Standards are broadly average and almost all students obtained at least one A level pass in 2007. The small number of students following vocational courses achieved satisfactorily. Past fluctuations in science,

and information and communication technology (ICT) results because of staffing problems have now been resolved.

Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Although there is some excellent practice, the pace of work is sometimes a little slow and the quality of questioning and discussion does not always engage students enough in deep analysis and explanation. Where it does, for example, in history, progress is excellent and students achieve very good results. The curriculum is good and is well supported by the consortium of local schools and colleges, giving students a wide choice of academic and vocational subjects.

Students know their targets and teachers give clear guidance on how to improve their work. Students appreciate the school's support, but also recognise where there are occasional weaknesses in the system. The quality of support to help students make informed choices for higher education and careers is good.

Students' personal development is good. They show considerable regard for the opinions and welfare of their peers. The relationships between students are excellent. There is a very good understanding of the wide range of cultural and religious backgrounds of students, which students feel is a strength. Opportunities to develop ICT skills are limited. Overall, the leadership of the sixth form is satisfactory

What the school should do to improve further

- Sharpen monitoring and evaluation in order to identify precise priorities that are related to improving learning.
- Improve teaching and learning to ensure all pupils are routinely challenged and supported to meet their targets.
- Consult more effectively with parents and pupils, particularly when developing the curriculum and improving achievement.

A small proportion of schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Standards are in line with national averages and achievement is satisfactory. In 2007, there was a significant rise in the number of pupils obtaining five or more GCSEs grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, to above-average levels. Evidence gathered by inspectors in school indicates average standards overall but with quite wide variations in the progress pupils make in different subjects. The 2007 GCSE results reflect this inconsistency, with pupils exceeding targets in English, Spanish and French but falling short in a number of other subjects. Overall results were close to the national averages, as they have been in the last three years. On entry to the school, pupils' levels of attainment are in line with national averages, therefore achievement in the school is satisfactory.

A similar picture is reflected at Key Stage 3. The unconfirmed results in 2007 were broadly average and evidence seen by inspectors shows that standards are currently satisfactory. Over the past three years, the results in English have been strongest but all have been broadly in line with national averages.

Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make satisfactory progress. Curriculum changes have led to improved progress by lower-attaining pupils so this is now satisfactory. There are no differences in progress related to gender or minority ethnic backgrounds. The school ensures that virtually all pupils gain at least one qualification.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Pupils' personal development and well-being are good, as is their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Pupils enjoy school and have positive attitudes towards their work. Pupils act safely in and around the school. They understand the benefits of a healthy lifestyle and, as a result, many take part in sport outside school time and choose healthy food at break and lunch times.

The school has a harmonious atmosphere in which pupils of all ethnicities relate well to one another and value diversity. Pupils' behaviour is good. Rates of attendance are above average, with very little unauthorised absence.

Pupils have significant opportunities to contribute positively through participation in voluntary activities and fund raising. Opportunities to involve pupils in the running of the school are insufficient, in part because the school council is not effective. Pupils develop important basic and social skills that will be of use to them in their later life.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Pupils strive to succeed and work hard at set tasks. Lessons are clearly structured and pupils know what they will learn. In the best lessons, this relates to pupils' individual targets, but in other lessons, teachers underestimate just how much pupils of different ability can learn. Pupils are generally given appropriate work, including worthwhile homework. Work is consistently marked, although it often lacks guidance on how it might be improved.

There is a good awareness of how pupils learn, but this is not always applied consistently. School managers have not always identified precisely the aspects of teaching which prevent pupils making good progress in learning. When issues are identified, the school offers powerful additional staff training and regularly monitors lessons to ensure improvements in teaching. This has helped eradicate weak teaching and has contributed to the good practice established in some classrooms where pupils make rapid progress. This now serves as a model for teachers to emulate. In subjects where teaching methods are well developed and consistently applied, higher standards and achievement are being realised.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 2

The curriculum and other activities are satisfactory in the main school and good in the sixth form. Pupils can undertake a wide range of extra-curricular activities. The work-related curriculum is a strength, with all pupils experiencing a work placement. Others are arranged to meet the needs of a minority of disaffected pupils who would otherwise be likely not to attend. The multi-ethnic intake is used positively to promote cultural aspects, and assemblies are addressing the spiritual elements of learning. For instance, in an upper school assembly, pupils were asked to think more deeply about their daily life following a consideration of the new wonders of the world. The school effectively promotes students' literacy and numeracy skills.

Some pupils undertake vocational options and expansion of this provision is planned. Vocational studies is an effective course for the less academic, but there are insufficient places to meet the needs of all pupils who would benefit from this provision. The Key Stage 3 curriculum does not fully prepare all pupils for making appropriate option choices because it does not develop sufficient awareness of Key Stage 4, particularly vocational courses.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Good care, guidance and support underpin pupils' good personal development, and the school puts strong emphasis on caring for all its pupils. Pupils say there is always someone they can go to for help and support. Rigorous procedures ensure that pupils feel safe, and child protection arrangements meet current requirements. The behaviour management strategy, including isolation, has virtually eliminated exclusions and further reduced incidents of low-level disruption that affect learning. The school makes good use of links with external agencies to provide effective expertise and support for pupils. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities receive adequate support. There is effective induction of new pupils and good guidance for pupils on their move to the next stage of their education.

The improvements in monitoring pupils' academic progress are beginning to have a positive impact on attainment. They enable staff to identify underachievement and make some interventions but they are not being used consistently to evaluate learning as part of the school's monitoring system. A lack of routine referencing to individual targets results in some pupils being unsure of their targets. In Year 11, there is good support for pupils who need extra help with their GCSE work.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

Grade for sixth form: 3

Senior staff have given a clear lead to colleagues during a year without a permanent headteacher. This situation inevitably limited the scope of governors and senior staff to plan for change. Now, under the leadership of the new headteacher and a re-structured leadership team, there is a vigorous drive to speed up improvements. Governors take their responsibilities seriously

and hold the school to good account. They have shown their commitment to taking tough decisions and are well placed to support the school's future development.

The school's procedures for self-evaluation are satisfactory. The school monitors its work regularly and has good systems for collecting data. These processes enable the school to assess its strengths and weaknesses satisfactorily and have led to some positive developments.

Weaknesses identified in the last inspection have largely been tackled successfully. Improvements to curriculum and teaching and learning in modern foreign languages, for example, have resulted in pupils making good progress. In contrast, raising achievement in other areas at Key Stage 4 has been slow.

The quality of response to the self-evaluation process varies and is dependent on the skills and experience of subject leaders. The school has recently taken action to focus all leaders on standards but the impact of this has yet to be fully realised. In evaluating teaching, the school has relied too heavily on lesson observations and not given sufficient weighting to evaluating learning through a broader range of evidence, including pupils' views. This largely explains the inaccuracies in the school's self-evaluation and why actions have not been taken consistently to enable all pupils to achieve as well as they can.

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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?	3	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	3	3

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3	3
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 extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
How well 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	3	
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	3
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.

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	3	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	3	
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	

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

5 October 2007

Dear Pupils/Students

Inspection of Highfields Specialist Science School, Wolverhampton, West Midlands WV4 4NT

Thank you for your help during the recent inspection. I would particularly like to thank those pupils we interviewed for their very frank responses to our questions. The areas for improvement we have suggested strongly reflect the views you expressed during the inspection.

We found your school to be satisfactory in that it has a balance of strengths and weaknesses. An important strength is the atmosphere around the school. You all get on very well together as part of a harmonious community. Your personal development and well-being are strong features which help you grow up into caring young people. You are well cared for and there is good range of support should this be needed. Teaching and learning are satisfactory because you experience a range of lessons, from those that are very good and enjoyable through to a minority that you dislike because you are not actively involved. Satisfactory learning explains why the school's results are close to national averages.

You told us that you wanted to contribute more to your school to make it even better. We agree that you and your parents should be influencing decisions more and we have made this an area for improvement. We have also asked the school to ensure you experience more good lessons and are routinely challenged and supported to meet your targets. In addition, we want leaders and managers to identify precise priorities for improvement, especially those related to enhancing learning.

You can help improve your school by contributing the very good ideas you have through the improved consultation procedures the school is planning.

We wish you well for the future.

Yours sincerely

Kevin Sheldrick Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex B



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Her Majesty's Inspector