

The Hemel Hempstead School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117500
Local Authority	HERTFORDSHIRE LA
Inspection number	312636
Inspection dates	6–7 February 2008
Reporting inspector	David Jones 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	11–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1199
6th form	0
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr A Pennycock
Headteacher	Miss S Samwell
Date of previous school inspection	17 November 2003
School address	Heath Lane Hemel Hempstead HP1 1TX
Telephone number	01442 390100
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Age group	11-19
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Introduction

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

Description of the school

Larger than average, the school plays a leading role in a local sixth form partnership. The number of girls on roll has increased for the last three years. The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups and of those who are learning English as an additional language is half the national average. The local area displays an average range of social and economic characteristics. Attainment on entry is just above average.

The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities or with a statement of special educational need is below average. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is average. The school has been awarded: Artsmark Gold, Sportsmark Gold, the Healthy Schools Award and recently Investors in People status has been renewed.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

The quality of education is good with a number of outstanding features. Leadership and management are effective, having brought about a significant improvement in the last two years; the school's capacity to improve is good.

Overall, self-evaluation is good and senior staff have a realistic view of the school's strengths and weaknesses. The headteacher has restructured the senior leadership team effectively; focussed action at GCSE produced outstanding public examination results in 2007.

Senior leaders were invited to observe teaching with HMI. The views they expressed concurred with the judgements given by inspectors. The pupil's excellent attitudes to learning were seen to be a significant asset to the quality of education provided. Teaching and learning are good. The quality of learning and pupil progress is strongest in Years 10 and 11 where questioning and the use of assessment are more systematic. A senior manager was invited to review departmental marking procedures with HMI. The inconsistencies of style and rate of completion evident supported the view expressed by pupils that the academic guidance they receive varies between subjects.

Standards and achievement are good overall and outstanding in Key Stage 4. The results of the 2007 Key Stage 3 national tests remain above both the local authority and national average although outcomes have slipped in recent years.

Attention has been given to the inconsistencies in performance that are evident in English, mathematics and science at Key Stage 3. The marked improvement in GCSE results in recent years has continued. In 2007, more than half of the Year 11 pupils gained ten higher grade GCSEs that included English and mathematics. Results at advanced level have continued to improve. Standards and achievement in the sixth form are good although variations in subject specific outcomes remain and some students underachieve. Although boys were generally more successful than girls, there was no discernable difference between the progress made by those from different ethnic backgrounds. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities made outstanding progress.

The students' personal development, their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and in particular their behaviour are outstanding. Care, support and guidance are outstanding in the main school where the positive impact can be seen in the GCSE results and good in the sixth form. Attendance is above average. Efforts to secure the students' future economic well-being have been enhanced by good 14-19 curriculum development, the good range of extra-curricular opportunities and outstanding GCSE success.

The students are guided towards healthy lifestyles by effective physical education (PE) provision and access to good quality school meals. Procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The school has a good sixth form, which is increasingly popular. As part of the West Dacorum Partnership for Learning, the school is able to offer well-planned pathways with different entry requirements for students entering in Year 12. Curriculum opportunities are outstanding, with a wide range of traditional AS and A levels being offered, in conjunction with vocational studies

and, from 2008, some of the new advanced diplomas. Where two partners jointly deliver a subject, departments have improved their collaboration in order to raise standards.

Good teaching enables students to extend their independent learning skills, and to make good progress. Very positive professional relationships between staff and students result in adult, purposeful learning environments. One student commented that 'staff earn respect here, rather than demand it'. Student progress is carefully monitored, and support provided when targets are not being met. Students are given good opportunities to explore new areas of interest, and to play an important role in the life of the school, such as organising house events. Effective leadership of the sixth form ensures that high expectations are shared with learners and staff to raise achievement further. Students say that they are supported very well, but further academic guidance is required in order to ensure that students are effectively supported in choosing their options.

What the school should do to improve further

- Address the inconsistencies in achievement between subjects in the sixth form.
- Refine the school's monitoring and evaluation procedures to address the variations in achievement in Key Stage 3.
- Improve the consistency of marking across the school.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Overall, standards are above average and achievement is good. In 2007, the proportion of pupils reaching the expected levels in the Year 9 national tests was above average in English, mathematics and science. The numbers achieving the higher levels 6 and 7 were also above average in mathematics and science; however, the proportion securing the higher level outcomes in English were below average. Achievement at Key Stage 3 has declined overall since 2005.

In 2007, the Year 11 examination results were the best in the school's history with 84% obtaining five higher grade GCSE, a figure well above the national and local average. More than half of the year group obtained 10 higher-grade GCSE passes that included English and mathematics. Seven students achieved 10 or more A/A* passes. The progress made by this year group accelerated significantly in years 10 and 11; overall, pupil progress matched that of those in the most successful 25% of schools nationally. GCSE results have improved significantly in the last two years.

Pupils with special educational needs made greater progress than their peers and the achievement of boys was stronger than that of the girls. GCSE results were significantly above the national average in art and design, business studies, science, dance, design technology, English, geography, mathematics and music.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Personal development and well-being are outstanding. Students are happy, feel safe and enjoy coming to school. The school's supportive and harmonious culture leads to excellent relationships between students and adults. As a result, attitudes to learning are excellent.

Students have a very good understanding of different cultures and beliefs and comment that 'everyone is accepted'. They confirm that there are few incidences of bullying and that school staff take appropriate and effective action to deal with these. Attendance is above the national average and improving.

Students understand the importance of exercise and developing healthy lifestyles. They have influenced the canteen's provision of a healthy diet and secured the lower pricing of fruit. However, students in Year 13 have no formal physical education programme. The school's specialist performing arts status helps to provide an extensive range of extra-curricular activities.

Peer mentoring, the school council, the house system and various charitable activities help students develop an understanding of social concern and responsible citizenship and they willingly take on responsibility. Year 7 students greatly appreciate the introduction of sixth form 'student buddies'.

Students develop good work-related skills through the work experience placements and a good range of curriculum enhancement opportunities. The overwhelming majority of students move on to higher education.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Teaching and learning are good. The students' excellent attitudes to learning were a positive factor in the extensive sample of lessons observed and the school's significant focus on the quality of learning has clearly helped to raise standards at GCSE. However, there is some inconsistency and variability in performance across the school and within departments. While there are many examples of good and outstanding practice in Years 10 and 11, there have not been comparable developments in the main school at KS3.

The best teaching is very challenging. In these circumstances teachers plan their activities well, employ skilful questioning to engage the students fully in their learning and make every effort to facilitate the independence of students in the learning process. The progress of students in these circumstances was very effectively supported by the teachers' thorough use of assessment and careful analysis of learning. A focus on Key Stage 4 examination courses has enhanced learning in these areas and this has resulted in students making much better progress especially in English and mathematics at GCSE.

Not all teachers make it clear to students what they expect from them in terms of learning, nor provide them with marking that offers constructive feedback on how to improve their work. Where teaching was less effective, the match of task to the students' learning need was inconsistent. One consequence of this is the gradual decline in achievement at Key Stage 3. The progress made by those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities as well as those who are gifted and talented are carefully monitored and well resourced with very good results.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The curriculum in Years 7 to 9 is broad and balanced. The performing arts specialist provision is a real strength, with dance, music, drama and art all compulsory. This creative aspect is enriching other curriculum areas, and the experience of learners. A growing range of vocational courses at Key Stage 4 has improved the relevance and appropriateness of the curriculum. Pupils are guided onto one of three pathways; courses have been introduced to meet the needs of the full range of learners, including BTEC courses, a vocational GCSE, and specialist qualifications in information and communication technology. Some pupils are also able to access work related courses at the local college. This outstanding provision has been a significant factor in the examination successes of students aged 16 and the increased numbers of students seeking a place in the sixth form. Those pupils with the aptitude and enthusiasm for extra study are able to access extra specialist arts courses after school. Citizenship is well organized and a superb discussion on crime in a local context was witnessed by one inspector. Extra-curricular provision is a strength of the school.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 2

Care, guidance and support are outstanding in the main school and good in the sixth form. The school is aware of this difference and it is mainly due to the variations in academic guidance that has resulted in some sixth form students taking advanced level courses that did not match their capabilities.

The welcoming atmosphere that promotes their self-esteem, confidence and good relationships contributes positively to their personal development. Child protection arrangements, systems for safeguarding students and risk assessments meet national requirements.

All students are well known, monitored and supported in pastoral and academic matters. Students receive at least good quality advice and guidance at key transition points as they move through the school. This compliments the very good monitoring procedures giving focused support in a range of settings to assist students in raising their levels of achievement. Vulnerable students and those with a range of different educational needs are very well supported and their progress is often better than other students.

Students' views influence how the school is organised. The students provided a range of examples where the school council's suggestions have been acted upon for example, charitable fund raising, canteen menus and refurbishment of areas of the school.

The students are appreciative of the school, its facilities and the care they receive and note they have 'good teachers, who are friendly, helpful and fair'. The students develop self-confidence and a mature appreciation of the wide range of opportunities offered by the school. Parental responses to the inspection questionnaire were overwhelmingly positive about the school and the care their children receive.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The leadership and management of the school are good. The significant improvement in GCSE results has been the result of the headteacher's well-focussed and pertinent decision to focus on examination outcomes. Quality assurance procedures are robust and the use of assessment information to inform management decisions has improved rapidly. The school development plan is very clear, reflecting agreed priorities; a strong senior management team has been assembled by the headteacher since her appointment.

The performing arts specialist school status has resulted in significant curriculum enhancement and rising standards; the school is seeking a second specialism. Middle management is good overall with some departments and sections of the school more dynamic than others. The leadership and management of the provision for the small numbers of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are outstanding.

Senior managers direct improvement and promote the well-being of learners through high quality care, guidance and support. The governance of the school is good with a strong focus on the role of the critical friend. Resource management is good and the school runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis. The school provides good value for money overall and this particularly so at Key Stage 4, where the school's major focus has been in the last two years.

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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	2
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	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	1	

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
How well learners enjoy their education	1	
The attendance of learners	2	
The behaviour of learners	1	
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?	1	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1	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?	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 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	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

8 January 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of The Hemel Hempstead School, Hemel Hempstead, HP1 1TX

As you will remember, an inspection team visited your school early in February this year. It is a pleasure to write to you and say how impressed we were with you and the range of opportunities your school provides.

We felt that the quality of teaching and learning was good and your attitude to learning was outstanding. Many of you work very hard and those of you who have joined Year 12 achieved outstanding GCSE results. Well done!

The care, guidance and support you receive and your personal development is outstanding. When combined with the excellent curriculum opportunities available and the positive way you view your education, even greater academic success is possible.

In discussion with the headteacher and the governing body, I have asked that the inconsistencies in achievement at Key Stage 3 and between subjects in the sixth form be addressed, and that the school improves the consistency of marking. The headteacher will tell you how you can be involved in this process.

Thank you for contributing to the inspection; we spoke with many of you in class, around the school and as part of key interviews. I was pleased to receive the letters and telephone calls from your parents. Although I was unable to speak to all of them, I have tried to answer their questions in the report, so please give them my thanks.

David Jones Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI)