

Hillcrest School A Specialist Maths and Computing College and Sixth Form Centre

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	103482
Local Authority	Birmingham
Inspection number	323838
Inspection dates	19–20 January 2009
Reporting inspector	Gwendoline Coates 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)	695
Sixth form	98
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	David McCann
Headteacher	Lynda Roan
Date of previous school inspection	11 January 2006
School address	Stonehouse Lane Birmingham B32 3AE
Telephone number	01214 643172
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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 three Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Hillcrest School and Sixth Form Centre is a smaller than average girls' school, with a few boys in the sixth form. Over two thirds of students are from minority ethnic groups, the largest group being Black Caribbean. For approximately a quarter of students, English is an additional language. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is well above the national average. Just under one third of students are eligible for free school meals, well above the national average. The school gained specialist school status in mathematics and computing in 2005 and International School status in 2008.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Hillcrest is an outstanding, oversubscribed school that has an excellent reputation and attracts students from a wide area of Birmingham.

The outstanding leadership and management of the school ensure a clear and unwavering focus on improving outcomes for its students. Significant improvement has been made since the last inspection and the school has excellent capacity to make further improvements. The drive for improvement has brought about some very innovative and highly effective developments. These include an excellent online virtual learning environment (VLE) that can be accessed by parents as well as by students and staff, and a language village in which primary school pupils practise their foreign language skills with students from Hillcrest.

Hillcrest's partnerships with other organisations are wide-ranging and highly effective in promoting students' well-being. Hillcrest is also the lead school for Bartley Green Extended Schools cluster and is a member of the Oaks Collegiate group of schools. Partnerships have been strengthened by the school's specialist status as a mathematics and computing college. This has been used very effectively to improve the school's information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure and encourage the use of computer facilities by the community. It has also had a significant impact on the quality of provision for students and on their outcomes.

Hillcrest is a community of many cultures and promotes community cohesion very effectively. It has very good international links with other schools and communities in countries ranging from Ireland to Australia.

The school takes very close account of the views of its stakeholders and gains regular information on the views of students and parents to inform its evaluation process. For example, one parent spoke for many when saying, 'My daughter enjoys every day spent at Hillcrest and has constant all-round support in all aspects of her education and extra-curricular activities.'

Outstanding care, guidance and support and an excellent curriculum, together with good teaching, enable students to make exceptional progress between Years 7 and 11 when averaging the gains they make across all their subjects. Hillcrest was placed in the top 5% of all schools nationally in 2008 for the progress made by students on this measure. Despite this, students' attainment in English and mathematics remains significantly below average. Following a thorough review, appropriate strategies are in place to bring about improvement. This includes the increasing focus on the strategic development of subject areas, which is leading to further improvements in the quality of teaching and learning. However, the school recognises that an area for continuing development is to embed effective and probing questioning in all lessons in order to further develop students' independent learning skills.

Students' personal development is outstanding. They thoroughly enjoy their education, feel very well cared for and supported, and have excellent relations with staff and with each other. They make outstanding contributions to their school community through a well-established programme of charity and other events organised by the school council. Students have a clear understanding of the link between their educational achievement and their future economic well-being and are confident, thoughtful, articulate and enthusiastic.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Students' achievement in the sixth form is good. They attain broadly average results from a starting point that is below average for those students entering the sixth form. Their progress has improved since the last inspection as a result of an improved tracking system and the much improved, broader and more coherent curriculum provided through the Oaks Collegiate. However, the Collegiate is still developing its curriculum and its organisation, in anticipation of the introduction of 14 to 19 specialist diplomas. Specialist mathematics and computing status has had an impact on the curriculum in the sixth form, ensures that students have very good ICT skills and encourages all students to gain a qualification in mathematics before they leave. Retention from Year 12 to 13 is very good and reflects the excellent guidance and support students receive. As well as the very effective induction process, sixth formers receive excellent support in the form of revision sessions, the development of study skills and online tutorial packages. The school recognises what it needs to do to improve the sixth form and this has led to highly effective planning for the future.

What the school should do to improve further

- Maintain a clear focus on improving attainment in English and mathematics.
- Embed effective and probing questioning in all lessons in order to support and develop students' independent learning skills.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Given students' slightly below average attainment on entry to the school in Year 7 and their exceptionally high overall attainment at GCSE or equivalent at the end of Year 11, students' achievement from Year 7 to Year 11 is outstanding in terms of their average progress across all subjects. Results in the Business and Technology Education Council ICT and health and social care examinations have been particularly impressive, and those in religious education continue to be good. Since the last inspection, standards in science have shown significant improvement throughout the school. However, whilst the overall performance of students is improving, the proportion of students gaining five or more GCSE A* to C grades that include both English and mathematics has been variable over the last three years and does not show the same level of improvement. However, performance so far this year indicates an overall improvement in English and mathematics results. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and those for whom English is an additional language, achieve equally well, with many of the latter group gaining excellent grades in GCSEs in their first language.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Students show a thoughtful and responsible approach to spiritual and moral issues. They cooperate very well within the school community, show respect for their teachers and each other, and distinguish clearly between right and wrong. Poor attendance has been a problem for the school in the past, but a well-planned strategy to improve this has been very effective. Students have very positive attitudes to learning and their behaviour in class is exemplary.

Students see the school as a place where they can achieve well, and really enjoy learning and feel safe and secure. They say that bullying is rare, and if it does occur, it is dealt with quickly

and effectively. Students who experience behavioural and/or social difficulties are extremely well cared for because of exceptionally well-planned individual support, and are helped to develop confidence in their ability to learn and to succeed. A strong awareness of the importance of healthy lifestyles motivates students to participate extensively in the school's extra-curricular physical and sporting activities. Students enjoy the diversity and cultural mix of the school, and show a very strong sense of responsibility for helping each other; for example, Year 7 students act as virtual mentors on the school's VLE for Year 6 pupils in local primary schools. Students are well prepared for the next stages of their lives. They make outstanding progress in ICT, contributing very effectively to their workplace skills, although their literacy and numeracy skills are not yet at the same level.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

The quality of teaching is constantly improving. A thorough review of the reasons for students' low attainment in English and mathematics has led to the introduction of well-thought-out strategies to improve performance in these areas. Teachers and support staff form good relationships with students, who are confident and keen to learn. Teachers and students have high expectations of behaviour. Students value the explicitness of the behaviour management system and the consistency of its application, and approach their classes with maturity and enthusiasm.

The most effective teaching is where lessons take good account of the range of abilities in class and provide activities that are stimulating and well matched to students' needs. For example, in an outstanding science lesson where students were given the opportunity to build protective crumple zones to protect raw eggs, they really enjoyed the task and very effectively supported each other when learning about momentum in their groups. The planning, organisation and resourcing of lessons are strengths. Lessons have good pace and teachers provide an interesting and varied range of learning opportunities for students. However, the consistent use of probing questioning to prompt deeper thinking from students is an area for development. Where probing questioning is used, students make outstanding progress. For example, in a food technology lesson, the teacher skillfully developed the students' understanding about different types of cultural foods through very effective questioning.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

Hillcrest is an inclusive school providing an outstanding range of opportunities for all its students. A very well-developed vocational curriculum along with comprehensive provision in more traditional areas ensures the school meets the needs and aptitudes of all. Provision for more able students is very good, with the option of early examination entry and additional qualification opportunities. Support for vulnerable students ensures that they have access to the curriculum and achieve very well. There is outstanding and accessible provision in ICT, with the 'Dotcom' area providing state-of-the-art computing provision. The investment in laptop computers has improved the amount of ICT used across all subjects and enables all students to have access to a computer and the VLE while at home. Foreign language provision is innovative and very broad and nearly all students study at least one modern foreign language. All students for

whom English is an additional language are encouraged and supported in gaining certification in their first language, including Arabic, Bengali, Urdu, Mandarin and Dutch.

A very wide range of enrichment and extra-curricular activities complement the formal curriculum. These include additional learning support sessions for revision, coursework and general study skills and support for economic well-being, including enterprise provision and work-experience placement. In addition, large numbers of students enjoy a variety of sporting and curriculum-related clubs and all students have the opportunity to learn a musical instrument without cost. There is very impressive provision to promote awareness of community cohesion and the school makes outstanding use of the cultural mix of students in the school to this end, for example, in its Black history and cultural celebrations that involve Bollywood dancing, multicultural fashion shows, gospel choirs and piano recitals.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Highly effective target-setting systems are in place to help monitor students' performance and ensure that any difficulties and underachievement are quickly recognised and dealt with. Students know their targets and what to do to improve. Induction procedures for Year 7 students and for the sixth form are excellent. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are exceptionally well supported. Health and safety, risk assessment and child protection procedures are clearly in place. The 'Getting It Right' behaviour and attendance policy is outstanding in the way that it motivates and rewards students. Information, advice and guidance are outstanding at each key stage. The school constantly challenges stereotypes, whether gender or racial. For example, to inform Year 9 option choices, a series of visiting speakers gave presentations about untypical career choices for women, including firewomen and female builders.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

The headteacher provides Hillcrest School with outstanding leadership. She sets a clear direction for the school in its promotion of students' well-being and its aim to 'raise expectations and achievement for all'. With the support of her senior leadership team and her well-qualified and stable group of staff, she has created a common sense of purpose that is totally focused on helping the school to meet this aim.

Monitoring of performance is highly effective. The process of lesson observations ensures that strengths in teaching are shared and areas for improvement are identified and supported. The school's self-evaluation process indicates that it knows its strengths and those areas that are in need of further development exceptionally well. The highly effective cycle of self-evaluation is informed by individual departmental evaluations and input from all stakeholders. Subject departments are very well supported and guided in their own self-evaluations. In the best examples, these are rigorous and analytical in the way they identify strengths and priorities for improvement. The school sets itself realistic but very challenging targets.

Equality of opportunity is outstanding, for example, in terms of the progress made by all groups of learners, and in students' access to the curriculum, to extra-curricular activities and to resources such as laptops and musical instrument tuition. Community cohesion is a real strength of the school, reflecting its aim 'to promote an outward and confident community'.

The governing body is proactive and very well focused on the strategic development of the school. Its prudent financial management ensures excellent value for money. All statutory requirements regarding safeguarding are in place and processes are robust.

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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?	1	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?	1	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1	1

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	2
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.

²IE - denotes that insufficient evidence was available to inspectors for a judgement to be made.

Personal development and well-being

How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1	IE ²
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	1	
The extent to which 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	1	
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	IE ²
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1	IE ²

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1	2
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 leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	1	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	1	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	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	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

21 January 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Hillcrest School, Birmingham, B32 3AE

We really enjoyed meeting you and observing your lessons when we inspected your school on 19 and 20 January. You, your parents and the staff of the school are rightly proud of Hillcrest, which we judged to be an outstanding school.

You make exceptional progress taking all your subjects together, but your attainment in English and mathematics is not as good as in other subjects. For this reason we judged achievement and standards to be good. We judged your personal development to be outstanding. We found you to be confident, thoughtful and reflective, with an excellent understanding of how to lead healthy lives and to keep safe. You enjoy your education a great deal and contribute exceedingly well to the school community. Preparation for your economic well-being is good and you understand how this is linked to your academic achievement.

We judged the quality of teaching and learning to be good. The formal curriculum and the range of extra-curricular activities you are provided with are outstanding and meet your needs exceptionally well. The care, guidance and support you receive are exceptional. The outstanding leadership provided by your headteacher and her senior leadership team ensure that Hillcrest provides you with an excellent education.

Even excellent schools can improve further. We have therefore provided the headteacher with two areas that we feel will make your already outstanding school even better. These are:

- to maintain a clear focus on improving your attainment in English and mathematics
- to ensure that the quality of questioning in all your lessons is probing so that you are challenged to think hard and to develop your independent learning skills.

You can help by continuing to attend school regularly, behave maturely and work hard.

With best wishes for your future achievements Yours sincerely

Gwen Coates

Her Majesty's Inspector