

Heathfield Community College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	114587
Local Authority	East Sussex
Inspection number	326042
Inspection date	14 January 2009
Reporting inspector	Patricia Metham 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	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	1474
Sixth form	211
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Ian Kerswill
Headteacher	Alan Powell
Date of previous school inspection	30 November 2005
School address	Cade Street Old Heathfield Heathfield TN21 8RJ
Telephone number	01435 866066
Fax number	01435 867155

Age group	11–18
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an Additional Inspector. The inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues: the overall effectiveness of the sixth form, achievement and standards, teaching and learning, the impact of the school's specialist status for visual and performing arts, and leadership and management.

Evidence was gathered from discussions with governors, leaders and managers, staff and students, scrutiny of the school's documentation and students' work, and parental responses to a questionnaire. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but inspectors found no evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments, as given in its self-evaluation, were not justified, and these have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

Heathfield Community College serves an extensive, semi-rural area. Most students are of White British heritage. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is well below the national average. Since September 2005, the college has been developing specialist provision for students on the autistic spectrum and those with severe speech and language difficulties. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in the college is about average. The college has had specialist status for both visual and performing arts since 2003 and holds the Gold Artsmark. Its work with the community includes adult learning and collaboration on teacher training with the Universities of Brighton and Sussex.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Heathfield Community College provides a good overall quality of education, both in the main school and in the sixth form. It is a centre of excellence for the arts, making a substantial contribution to the development of creative projects in local schools and the wider community. The headteacher rightly sees himself as a catalyst for positive and very cost-effective change. Under his strong leadership the college is using resources and skills associated with its specialist status to extend and enhance its broader curriculum and its approach to teaching and learning. Its capacity to improve is outstanding. Academic standards are rising and more students are choosing to stay into the sixth form. Students feel valued as individuals. All those who left at the end of 2008 moved successfully into further education, training or employment. Parents have confidence in the college. This response was typical: 'I believe my children learn in a safe, happy environment and are encouraged to achieve all their goals.'

Most students enter Year 7 with levels of attainment above those expected for their age. Their results in GCSE or equivalent examinations are well above average, and have been improving steadily over the past three years. This represents good overall achievement. In 2008, 59% gained five or more A* to C grades including English and mathematics against a national average of 48%. The standards attained overall are exceptionally high for a wide ability school, significantly above the national average. The rate of progress for more able students, however, is generally less strong than for others. This can also be seen in the sixth form, where relatively few gain the highest grades at A level although overall pass rates are above average. More rigorous and systematic approaches to the collection and analysis of data are leading to timely and precise identification of underachievement. The clear overview of achievement and standards provided by senior managers is efficiently refined into analysis of year cohorts, specific teaching groups and individual students, with class teachers taking first responsibility for students shown to be flagging, struggling or coasting. Regular moderation of work against National Curriculum levels indicates that these initiatives are making a positive difference. The college has a well-developed commitment to supporting those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and these students make the greatest progress. One parent spoke for many whose children benefit from such support: 'The learning support unit provides a much needed haven, help and understanding for children with high functioning autism in a mainstream school.'

Since the previous inspection, the headteacher and senior leadership team have led a thorough review of teaching, taking approaches developed successfully in arts subjects such as art and design, dance and music as models of good practice. Teaching and learning are good overall. Most lessons observed were characterised by confident subject knowledge, a positive rapport between students and staff, brisk pace and well managed opportunities for teamwork, enquiry, practical problem-solving and debate. All lesson plans provide graded levels of expectation to match students' spread of ability but teachers do not consistently translate these into practical strategies to ensure that all students, including the most able, are fully challenged. Priorities for staff training and development are clear and well directed, shaped by increasingly systematic tracking of progress and attainment in all departments, by feedback from students and by examples of successful practice in other schools and colleges. Difficulties of recruitment and retention of staff have impinged on teaching and learning in some areas. Students in Years 7 to 11, for example, find it unsettling to have more than one teacher for a subject. A lack of continuity in leadership has inhibited progress in English over recent years but the head of department appointed in September 2008 has put in place new schemes of work, a programme

of staff training and systems to identify and tackle underachievement. There is evidence that this is having a positive impact.

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. Students enjoy life at the college and are keen to achieve qualifications and skills that will equip them for later life. Attendance rates are high. Students fully understand the importance of a healthy lifestyle and most make sensible choices. Sports clubs and activities such as dance and drama are popular. Behaviour in lessons and around the school is excellent. Students value the college's culture of respect for the individual. It encourages those with difficulties and/or disabilities that can be challenging, especially in group situations, to participate in all aspects of the college's life. Students feel safe. The student voice is well respected and influential. Students take advantage of opportunities to make a positive contribution to the college, as mentors, prefects and council members. They also play an active role in the local community, for example, working with primary school children. Students develop knowledge, skills and attitudes that provide an excellent basis for their further education or training and employment.

Outstanding pastoral and academic care and guidance provide a strong framework for students' excellent personal development in this inclusive community. Heads of year, working with tutors in key stage teams, ensure that each student feels valued and well supported. Safeguarding procedures are thorough, with staff and governors kept up to date with best practice and statutory requirements. When appropriate, external agencies very effectively complement the college's provision.

Students of all abilities benefit from an outstanding curriculum that engages their interest and meets all statutory requirements. Through partnership with other schools and colleges, students have access to a broad range of vocational courses to complement their Heathfield options. Personalised programmes of study meet the needs and aspirations of those not well suited to the mainstream curriculum. The college's visual and performing arts specialism gives the curriculum a distinctive and successful focus, providing opportunities for creative and cross-curricular work. Students are encouraged to study a modern European language, with three on offer. Accelerated courses allow the most able to take a number of GCSEs in Year 10. The college has responded very positively to the ending of national tests for Year 9, with plans to give students wider choices and greater flexibility over the time taken to complete GCSE courses. The mainstream curriculum is complemented by an impressive range of clubs and activities, including trips to America, Spain, France and Germany, and to theatres, galleries, law courts and sites of historic interest in Britain.

Through the curriculum and this breadth of enrichment activities, the college very effectively promotes students' understanding of and support for community cohesion. In history, geography and personal, social and health education, students consider Britain's development as a multicultural society and what this means for different ethnic and social groups. Links with a school in Uganda and one in France, and active involvement in arts projects that draw on diverse cultures, expand students' awareness of international identities and concerns. Students make an important contribution to local life through projects with other schools, work with the elderly and participation in community events.

Leadership and management are outstanding, with a clear vision for the college's continuing development, which staff, students and parents vigorously support. The headteacher and his senior team are purposefully tackling those areas that need targeted action to make the college outstanding. Great care is taken to ensure equality of opportunity for students through access to the whole curriculum, with support when needed, and for staff through high quality training

and delegation of responsibilities. Learning from good practice within and beyond the college, senior and middle managers have developed a practical and sharply focused policy for teaching and learning. They are embedding a programme of rigorous monitoring and appropriate coaching. Expectations are high and morale is buoyant. The impact on teaching and learning can be seen in the steadily improving achievement and standards of most students. Progress by the most able has not been as consistently strong as that made by other students, which senior leaders have marked as a development priority. Governors are well informed and, under strong leadership, act as effective critical friends to the college.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The sixth form is a steadily developing strength of the college, offering a good quality of education. High rates of recruitment and retention indicate that courses are well adapted to students' abilities and aspirations and that care, guidance and support are timely and extremely effective. Progression to further education, training or employment is exceptionally good. The excellent leadership team has been evaluating and revising approaches to teaching and learning. Persuasively presented policies are now in place, combining high expectations with practical guidance on how best to engage students' interest and develop confident skills of enquiry, independent learning and effective communication. Regular monitoring, followed when necessary by coaching or targeted support, is embedding good practice. Students make good progress and standards are rising. Increasing the proportion of the highest grades remains a key target. Students willingly and conscientiously take on responsibilities, such as mentoring younger students in the college or working with local children on arts projects. Many agreed with the student who observed, 'The sixth form's a totally different environment, more like a community. What you put in matches what you get out.'

What the school should do to improve further

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- Implement a range of strategies and monitor their impact to ensure that the most able students are consistently challenged and extended.

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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?	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	1	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/or disabilities make progress	1	

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?	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	1	
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	1	
The attendance of learners	1	
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	1	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of 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	1

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1	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 leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1	1
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	

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

15 January 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Heathfield Community College, Old Heathfield, TN21 8RJ

Thank you for the cheerful courtesy and helpfulness with which you responded to us when we visited the college recently to see how well it is doing. Your readiness to answer our questions and to show us your work made our task much easier and very enjoyable. I am glad to have this opportunity to tell you what we found.

We agree with you that the college provides you with a good quality of education that equips you well for later life. We also agree that your teachers and support staff treat you as valued individuals and give you outstanding care, support and guidance. It was encouraging to hear that you enjoy school and feel safe there. It is a tribute to you and your staff that the college is such an inclusive and supportive community. Your many successes grow out of the confident subject knowledge and commitment of your staff, combined with your readiness to learn. As you were quick to point out, the college benefits enormously from its specialist status in the visual and performance arts. Many of you choose to study arts subjects, very successfully, and most of you take advantage of opportunities to take part in productions or use your technical skills to support others. The fact that many of you choose to stay on into the sixth form and successfully complete courses there indicates that it provides a good education through an excellent range of options and good teaching.

To build on the college's considerable strengths, we have asked your headteacher to ensure that those of you who are most able academically are consistently given challenges that ensure you fulfil your potential. You already do well.

I look forward to seeing the college go from strength to strength.

With best wishes.

Yours faithfully

Patricia Metham

Her Majesty's Inspector