

Highworth Grammar School for Girls

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	118804
Local Authority	Kent
Inspection number	326897
Inspection date	25 March 2009
Reporting inspector	Christine Jones HMI

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

Type of school	Grammar (selective)
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Girls
Number on roll	
School (total)	1167
Sixth form	314
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Peter Aves
Headteacher	Paul Danielsen
Date of previous school inspection	22 March 2006
School address	Quantock Drive Ashford TN24 8UD
Telephone number	01233 624910
Fax number	01233 612028

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. During a one-day visit, the inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following:

- Whether the achievement of students is outstanding throughout the school and across all subjects.
- Whether Every Child Matters (ECM) outcomes are as strong as the provision suggest.
- Whether the right actions are being taken by the leadership team to ensure continuing success.

Evidence was gathered from nationally published assessment data and the school's own assessment records, curriculum and planning documents, observation of the school at work, interviews with staff, governors and pupils, and scrutiny of the parents' questionnaires. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but the 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

Highworth Grammar School for Girls is a large selective school that draws students from the area around Ashford. Few students come from minority ethnic groups or speak English as an additional language. Boys are admitted to the sixth form. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is low. Only a very small number of students are eligible for free school meals. The school is a specialist music school.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

'My daughter has thoroughly enjoyed her time at Highworth and it has given her the best all-round education to prepare her for life.' The comment from this parent encapsulates the outstanding quality of education provided by this school. Students flourish in a climate which encourages outstanding personal and academic skills, under the guidance of a leadership team and staff whose appetite for further improvement is undiminished. The school educates some impressively confident and assured young people. The ethos of 'decide what you want and chase it' motivates the students to think deeply about their futures and to take a clear pride in their school.

Achievement is outstanding and standards are consistently very high, both in the main school and in the sixth form. Students enter the school with very high starting points and all groups of students make excellent progress throughout. Nearly all students gain five or more higher GCSE grades that include English and mathematics. The proportion of students gaining the highest A* and A grades is also very high and well above national expectations. Three separate sciences, graphics, religious education (RE) and physical education (PE) are particularly successful. The school's robust checks on students' progress towards challenging targets indicate that current students are also achieving exceptionally well. The students' achievements in this high performing school go beyond examination results because of the constant stimuli to ensure that students progress to the very best of their ability. The school has made a singular success of its status as a specialist music college, and this permeates life in school as well as links with the local community.

Students have a strong sense of family and community which they feel is unique – many say they do not want to leave. As one said, 'Everybody wants to participate because we feel so positive about being here.' This is reflected in their excellent spiritual, moral, cultural and social development and exemplary behaviour. All students are fully integrated into the community and there is consistent respect for each member and their beliefs. The school community and family are supported strongly by the student-inspired mixed-age tutor groups. These are appreciated by both parents and students as they encourage students to care for and support each other. The few students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities receive excellent support that is much appreciated by the parents. The school provides a safe and orderly environment within which individuals can flourish. As a result, students greatly enjoy school, are proud in its praise and mostly attend very regularly. A very small number of students do not come to school as regularly as they might despite the school's strenuous efforts to encourage their attendance. This is due to parents taking students on holiday during term time or to long-term illness.

Students are fully aware of the benefits of a healthy lifestyle and appreciate the need to balance physical and mental activities. They respond well to the school's expectations on accepting responsibility and the Student Voice group is very well established. This represents all groups in the school and a forum is created where students can air their views and make positive recommendations. Eight older students are full elected members of the governing body and as such contribute to all aspects of school life, including the management systems. Students make a strong contribution to the wider community, for example through their charity fundraising and links with local primary schools. The school's specialist music status is particularly influential here as many of the primary schools ask for assistance in developing music activities, ranging from working with the jazz orchestra to involvement in the national Sing-up campaign.

Students prepare well for their future economic success through their enthusiasm for learning and through their willingness to take part in work-related learning and careers education and guidance. Students said that they would like more time for individual careers advice, especially those not intending to go to university. This issue is being addressed urgently by the school.

Excellent and often inspiring teaching ensures that students make exceptional progress. As one student said: 'Teachers always want to get the best out of us – they are very supportive.' High expectations are the norm, and students respond with determination and pride in what they do. They ask as well as answer questions and demonstrate sophisticated critical and analytical skills in their work. Judicious use of praise encourages students to become confident and articulate learners. While expectations are high, teachers keep a watchful eye on any students not keeping up with the brisk pace and challenge in the lessons. Teaching is confident and authoritative, and purposeful learning is based on a partnership between teacher and student. Many teachers make very good use of assessment to inform students about the quality and standard of their work and how to improve. However, not all teachers consistently give this advice and feedback; consequently, in some lessons, students are not clear about what they need to do to improve their work.

The outstanding curriculum meets the needs of students very well. In Years 7 to 9, the mainstream curriculum is enriched by a range of modern foreign languages as well as by opportunities in music, drama and dance. Wednesday afternoon enrichment activities are very popular and give students opportunities to try something new as well as encouraging older students to lead activities and work with younger ones. Older students have a wide range of GCSE courses available to them. This has been extended recently to include GCSE courses in dance and media studies, with GCSE business studies growing in popularity. Older students are actively encouraged to extend their horizons beyond that of the taught curriculum and to share in the exceptional range of wider opportunities.

The excellent vision and commitment of the headteacher, very well supported by the senior leadership team and by middle managers, has been at the heart of the school's further development since the last inspection. Leadership and management at all levels are outstanding. The headteacher leads with authority, insight and integrity as well as good humour. His determination to get the very best from his staff and students means that the school continuously seeks higher standards. Supportive but robust governance has also contributed very well to the school's progress and clear sense of direction for the future. Careful planning for community cohesion ensures students have an excellent understanding of the UK and global communities while teaching them to value diversity. Honest and accurate self-evaluation is used by the school to continually examine its own performance and seek improvement. This extends to all in the school community, including the students who make a valued contribution to the school management systems. Targets are challenging but staff have the confidence to believe they can reach them. The school looks forward with confidence. Notwithstanding its high standards, the school is committed to further improvement and renewal. It has an outstanding capacity to achieve its ambitions.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 1

In this exceptionally well led sixth form, standards are very high and students make outstanding progress, meeting their challenging academic targets. Particularly successful subjects include art, biology, design and technology – including food, graphics and textiles – psychology, sociology, Spanish and RE. The strong emphasis on regular checks on students' work and

monitoring performance, along with the high level of personal care, contributes very effectively to post-16 success. The sixth form is oversubscribed and students new to the school are inducted well. All groups of students achieve very well, including those for whom English is an additional language. An increasing majority of Year 11 students move on to the sixth form, remain to complete their courses and continue to higher education, with most gaining their first choice of university. Students enjoy the broad and flexible curriculum, especially the wider opportunities to develop their personal attributes and skills, particularly management skills. Students are encouraged to take on specific responsibilities through the prefect system and Student Voice group. They understand and appreciate that their ideas and opinions are valued; for example, Year 12 students were instrumental in proposing the change to the pastoral grouping system. This resulted in a major restructuring of the school organisation and has been very successful in ensuring that all students are well known and cared for in their smaller mixed-age groups, mentored by sixth form students. Inspirational teaching from the well-qualified teachers provides the foundation for students' excellent progress. Questions are used very skilfully to probe, support and challenge. Students are articulate and confident learners and their analytical, discursive and creative skills develop very well. They relish the opportunities for challenging discussions, enjoy the atmosphere of mutual respect and develop exceptional independent learning skills.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that all students benefit from regular and worthwhile feedback on their work.

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

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	1	1
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	1	
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**

26 March 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Highworth Grammar School for Girls, Ashford TN24 8UD

After our visit to Highworth, we would like to share our findings with you and thank you for your exceptionally friendly welcome and for taking time to talk to us. You tell us that the school is 'great' and we agree with you. Highworth is an outstanding school in all respects. We are very pleased that you enjoy it so much, attend regularly, and make the most of the wide opportunities available to you. You are not only very appreciative of the excellent teaching, but are also really keen on the enrichment activities, especially those linked to your school's music specialism.

The school looks after you exceptionally well. You tell us that you feel safe and that there is always someone to turn to when you need help, particularly in your new style mixed-age tutor groups. You speak highly of your teachers' readiness to assist you. Many of you make a difference to your peers through the 'Student Voice' group and your willingness to take on different responsibilities in the school. Because of the hard work of your excellent headteacher, of the governors, and of your many very committed teachers, you are achieving exceptionally well. This opens the door to a wide range of further educational and training opportunities both at Year 11 and at the end of the sixth form.

Because you co-operate so well with what your school is trying to do for you, we are convinced that you will continue to support your teachers' efforts and go from strength to strength in developing your personal skills as well as your academic prowess. We have asked your teachers to do one thing to help in this, and that is to give you more regular and worthwhile feedback on what you need to do to improve the quality of your work in all your subjects.

Everyone wants Highworth to keep on improving. We think if you keep working and learning together, you will do just that.

With very best wishes for the future

Yours faithfully

Christine Jones

Her Majesty's Inspector