

Highdown School and Sixth Form Centre

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	110044
Local Authority	Reading
Inspection number	337427
Inspection dates	20–21 January 2010
Reporting inspector	Clare Gillies

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

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1318
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	302
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Crispin Fairbairn
Headteacher	Tim Royle
Date of previous school inspection	4 January 2007
School address	Surley Row Emmer Green Reading RG4 8LR
Telephone number	0118 9015800
Fax number	0118 9015801
Email address	office@highdown.reading.sch.uk

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Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester M2 7LA

T: 08456 404045
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by five additional inspectors. Just under half the available inspection time was spent looking at learning; parts of 41 lessons were observed and close to 50 teachers were seen in lessons and tutor times. Meetings were held with staff, governors and several groups of students. Inspectors observed the school's work and looked at monitoring, attendance and curriculum documents. They examined students' work and looked at improvement plans, the school improvement partner's notes and minutes of governors' and senior leaders' meetings. The team analysed the 279 parental questionnaires and those completed by staff and students.

An Ofsted administrative error resulted in the omission of one question in the parental questionnaire. Whilst this has not affected the overall outcome of the inspection it does mean that the parental response on the question 'The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example, changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)' is not recorded in the report.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at the following:

- the key factors behind the improved GCSE and A-level results and why GCSE technology results in 2009 were not as high as those in other subjects
- how well teachers support specific groups of students and whether the quality of learning and teaching had improved since the previous inspection
- how well students do in the sixth form and the quality of leadership.

Information about the school

This large school includes a large and popular sixth form. Boys outnumber girls. A slightly higher than average proportion of students are from minority ethnic groups as is the proportion whose first language is not English. An above average proportion of students have statements of special educational needs and/or disabilities, several of whom are linked to the school's visually impaired unit. The school has specialisms in mathematics and computing and is a training school and national support school.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?

1

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

1

Main findings

This is an outstanding school because attainment is high and students' learning and progress are good overall and sometimes excellent in several subjects, including English and mathematics. Students also achieve well in creative subjects, sports, leadership skills and learning to become good citizens; fund raising for charities has a high profile. The successful sixth form has grown by one third since its last inspection and is very popular so governors are determined to find finance to build more study space for its students. The school has won many accolades including being named as a high performing specialist school and a training school. The headteacher is involved in education leadership at a national level, so that best practice can be shared. Staff are proud to work at the school and students, confirmed by parents, enjoy school life. A student wrote, 'Highdown makes school life as good as it could be.' The care and guidance students receive are outstanding.

Results have risen every year since the last inspection so that in 2009 over 60% of students attained five GCSE grades A* to C including English and mathematics. Sixth formers did well at A level ' 50% of the grades awarded were A or B grades. In several subjects, including the school's specialisms of mathematics and computing, a significantly higher than average percentage of students attained GCSE A*/A grades. The school is working to improve leadership and expectations in technology, the one subject that is not producing such good results, especially in coursework. The school shows an excellent capacity to improve. Everyone, from students to support staff, is encouraged to be creative and suggest initiatives as well as meeting higher targets.

Students' involvement in school life is exceptional and many of them hold positions of responsibility and leadership. The democratically elected school council decides how a large sum of money will be spent on refurbishment and improvements. This year it has sensibly determined to purchase equipment for the music department, including updated composition software and new instruments. Groups of staff also decide how to spend money to benefit students' learning.

All students study ethics combined with religious education which, along with some assemblies and trips, contributes to their strong sense of empathy and appreciation of different religions. Students' excellent moral, social and cultural maturity is fostered through personal, social, cultural and citizenship education and by the high expectations of consideration and respect which pervade the school's ethos. Sixth formers and many other students become 'buddies' to younger ones. Nevertheless, mentor (tutor) sessions vary in quality from some excellent ones seen in Years 7 and 8 to some less focused ones in the older years when time is not used effectively to strengthen students' personal development. Leaders also recognise that another aspect of the school's

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provision which requires attention is the measures against which the few students who enter the school with very low standards are assessed; their starting points are not recorded sharply enough at present.

The headteacher leads the school with a passion for improvement and brings a wealth of education experience to the task. Senior and middle leaders monitor teaching regularly to ensure all students achieve as well as possible and they use data intelligently to set targets and to highlight students at risk of underperforming. The school's honest self-evaluation is closely linked with its forward thinking and determination to avoid complacency.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve attainment and progress in technology by ensuring strong leadership of the subject and helping students to produce higher quality coursework.
- Share the very good practice that exists, particularly in Years 7 and 8, so that tutors use mentor time productively and make it a worthwhile experience for all students.
- Ensure that the assessment of very low attainers' attainment on entry is sharper.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

1

Students' desire to achieve their target levels and grades motivates them to concentrate well and work hard in most lessons. Learning and progress are good. They enjoy working together in groups, often productively, and listen carefully when others answer questions. It is not surprising that attendance has improved and students' progress is good as their comments, encapsulating what inspectors observed in lessons, include: 'I learn a lot in lessons', 'We have fun but educational lessons' and 'Lessons and work are interesting and motivating'. Most of the time students behave sensibly, get on well together, and have excellent relationships with teachers. Only occasionally are students boisterous or find it difficult to concentrate.

Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities achieve well at GCSE. Many higher attainers took the three separate sciences in 2009 and did well. Standards continue to rise this year and progress and learning are at least good. Although a higher percentage of girls attained five GCSE grades A* to C including English and mathematics, boys made slightly better progress. Students on free school meals make as good progress as others but the standards they attain are not as high. The school has come up with an imaginative initiative to give them practical equipment, such as laptops, to help their learning. Students from minority ethnic groups do at least as well as others.

Students feel very safe. Bullying is rare and racist incidents occur even less often ' both are taken seriously by the school and students observe that they are dealt with promptly. With high standards in literacy, numeracy and computing, and education about business and enterprise, students are well prepared for higher education and the world of work. They are fully aware of what they should do to lead healthy lives.

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These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	1
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment ¹	1
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	2
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	2
The extent to which pupils feel safe	1
Pupils' behaviour	2
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	1
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attendance ¹	2
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1

How effective is the provision?

Features of teaching which contribute to the good, and sometimes outstanding, learning include:

- making work relevant to students' lives and interests and showing how topics have links with other subjects
- simple, effective ways of planning work for different abilities and specific groups
- treating students as adults and respecting their opinions
- generating a fast pace in lessons with a varied range of activities to keep students interested
- structuring group work so that students learn very well through discussion
- recapping work during lessons and in later lessons so that students remember what they have learned over a long period of time
- helpful feedback on students' work, either verbally or in writing, so that they know how to improve
- excellent preparation for examinations
- skilful use of interactive whiteboards to make learning lively and stimulating

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low.

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- thoughtful preparation for visually impaired students, for example Braille documents, and skilful guidance for them from learning support assistants.

Elements of teaching where good practice exists but not often enough are:

- not involving all students in lessons and/or letting a few students answer most of the questions
- teachers talking too much and over-directing students' learning.
- teachers failing to engross students and to generate a buzz of enjoyment by conveying their own interest in the work.

It is excellent that the school offers several modern foreign languages, including Mandarin and Urdu. Students in Years 10 and 11 are finding the IT diploma course, taught on site, enjoyable and very worthwhile. They have visited several organisations in Reading to appreciate how much technology controls lives. The specialisms permeate other subjects, for example linking up with science and technology to design cars. The curriculum was outstanding three years ago and it has improved further, particularly in provision for gifted and talented students and in the range of school and off-site vocational options. Sex and relationships education is thoughtfully planned to blend moral and social issues with scientific information and guidance to helpful websites.

Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities, looked after children and others who need support in a range of ways are confident that they receive the help they need and can always find a member of staff with time to listen. The numerous links with primary schools ensure that transition arrangements are excellent. The school is proud of having arranged wheelchair access for students in all subjects. Support for those with emotional and behavioural difficulties is well organised and fixed-term exclusions have fallen in recent years. Students who have been at risk of exclusion describe the effectiveness of the strategies to help them stay in school.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	2
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	2
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	1
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

How effective are leadership and management?

As a high performing specialist school, the headteacher, members of the leadership team and several teachers help other schools and learn much from this work. The extremely competent senior leadership team has clearly defined areas of responsibility which members carry out efficiently. Many subject leaders model excellent teaching and leadership skills. The headteacher's keen focus on innovation to generate improvement permeates school life and inspires staff and students to work together to achieve their

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best.

All members of the school community are highly aware of the importance of equality of opportunity and have much confidence in the way that the school puts its principles into practice. Leaders make sure that there is no discrimination. Variation in different groups of students' achievement is small and the curriculum includes courses for students of different abilities. Students who are visually impaired are fully integrated and have access to all areas of the curriculum. Safeguarding procedures have just as high a profile as equality. All staff, including caterers and cleaners, receive training and students learn about safety in assemblies and lessons: 'They bang on about safety' observed one student!

The school is at the forefront of using technology to communicate with parents and has come up with imaginative ways of contacting those who do not regularly keep in touch. Attendance at parents' evenings is high. Information evenings and adult classes, mainly linked to the school's specialisms, have proved popular and strengthened links with parents.

Governors skilfully balance their strategic leadership with holding the school to account. They make an exceptional contribution to the school, being fully involved with all aspects and central to its work on community cohesion. Students and staff work in local primary schools and arrange community events such as a party for disabled pupils. The senior leadership team is sensitive to the needs of the local community but recognises that it could evaluate what it offers more thoroughly to consider further initiatives. The school has very strong global links, supporting a school overseas and has contacts with China, India and the United States.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	1
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	1
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	1
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	1
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	1
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	2
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	1

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Sixth form

Sixth form students make outstanding progress from their different starting points and practically all of them complete their courses. With 100% pass rates in most A-level and vocational courses in 2009, only one student did not proceed into work or higher education. Attainment in the very popular specialist subjects is high and the curriculum, during the day and after school, offers an excellent mix of different levels and types of courses which match students' ambitions and abilities. The quality of learning and teaching is outstanding with many examples of stimulating discussions and activities.

Students are responsible and hard-working and develop excellent independent learning skills. Most are excellent role models for younger ones and they mature into thoughtful young adults. They enjoy their studies and take an active role in the school and wider community. Leadership of the sixth form has improved in recent years so that management is efficient, assessment is well organised, and data are used rigorously to track progress and deal with underachievement rapidly. Students' personal development and well-being have a high profile.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	1
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	1
The quality of provision in the sixth form	1
Leadership and management of the sixth form	1

Views of parents and carers

Parents' and carers' replies to the questionnaire were overwhelmingly positive. Almost the same number wrote positive or negative observations or a mixture of the two but only a couple of comments were repeated more than a few times. These were dislike of the report cards and various concerns about the food in the canteen and about where children eat their packed lunches. It is true that the report cards are simple but they state students' attainment and progress clearly. The school prides itself on giving parents detailed information about students at parents' evenings. The canteen provides a good selection of healthy food and the school is adamant that students can eat packed lunches indoors, which had been a concern of parents.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Highdown School and Sixth Form Centre to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 12 statements about the school.

The inspection team received 279 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 1,318 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	83	30	183	66	11	4	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	57	20	209	75	10	4	0	0
The school informs me about my child's progress	81	29	176	63	19	7	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	76	27	174	62	22	8	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	69	25	188	67	10	4	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	51	18	193	69	24	9	3	1
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	42	15	188	67	34	12	1	0
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
The school meets my child's particular needs	53	19	194	70	20	7	2	1
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	52	19	188	67	24	9	0	0
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	36	13	187	67	18	6	1	0
The school is led and managed effectively	99	35	169	61	6	2	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	107	38	161	58	9	3	0	0

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools inspected between September 2007 and July 2008

	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
Type of school	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	39	58	3	0
Primary schools	13	50	33	4
Secondary schools	17	40	34	9
Sixth forms	18	43	37	2
Special schools	26	54	18	2
Pupil referral units	7	55	30	7
All schools	15	49	32	5

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above were reported in The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2007/08.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100. Secondary school figures include those that have sixth forms, and sixth form figures include only the data specifically for sixth form inspection judgements.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement. ■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils. ■ The quality of teaching. ■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupil's needs, including where relevant, through partnerships. ■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



23 January 2010

Dear Students

Inspection of Highdown School and Sixth Form Centre, Reading RG4 8LR

Thank you for being so welcoming when we visited your school. We much enjoyed talking to many of you and wish we had had more time to meet all of you. Yours is an outstanding school, partly because you are taught well and you achieve high standards in examination results but also because the school provides you with excellent support and care and many exciting activities beyond the basic curriculum.

What is particularly noticeable is that you and the staff are equally happy to be there and that you appreciate all the good things that happen. You certainly benefit from the school's specialism in mathematics and computing and a large number of you study these subjects in the sixth form. It was excellent to hear how well you feel the school tackles the very rare incidents of bullying and to discover that many of you support others as buddies, are generous raising funds for charities and give up time to help in the local community.

We were most impressed with the number of you who take on responsibilities and that your headteacher trusts you, through the student leadership team, to decide how a large budget should be spent on school improvements. This reflects his confidence in your maturity and good sense and that he values your opinions. You are privileged to have a headteacher who leads the school with such passion for innovation and improvement and to work with so many enthusiastic and hard working teachers and staff. Remember that if you just occasionally find it hard to concentrate in class!

Even outstanding schools have things that could be better. We have asked your school to:

- improve standards and progress in technology
- make all tutor sessions as worthwhile as the very best
- ensure that the measures used by teachers to check the skills that you have when you join the school are always as highly accurate as possible.

We hope that your future lives will be successful and happy.

Yours sincerely

Clare Gillies

Lead Inspector

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