

Varndean School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	114579
Local Authority	Brighton And Hove
Inspection number	338407
Inspection dates	14–15 October 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	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1317
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Ray Gold
Headteacher	Mr William Deighan
Date of previous school inspection	5 April 2007
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four additional inspectors. The inspectors visited 31 lessons and a selection of the activities run during the 'enrichment' session, and held meetings with governors, staff and groups of students. They observed the school's work and looked at students' attainment over the past four years, at schemes of work, school policies, the school improvement plan, reports from advisers working with the school and 164 responses to the questionnaire sent to parents.

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

- Attainment and progress, especially in English and mathematics and of boys in Years 7 to 9.
- The management and impact of the school's technology, applied learning and music specialisms.
- The effectiveness of curricular development.
- The impact of leadership and middle management on school improvement.

Information about the school

Varndean gained specialist status for technology in 1998, for music in 2006 and for applied learning in 2007. In 2008, the school was awarded the Gold Artsmark. It has a smaller than average but increasing proportion of students from minority ethnic groups and a larger than average proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, mainly associated with behavioural, social and emotional issues. The school's curriculum is extended through links with a local college and with the city's two universities. It has also established links with a secondary school in East London. The headteacher took up his post in January 2009.

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?

2

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

2

Main findings

Varndean is a welcoming, busy, cheerful school that provides a good education for its students and makes a very positive contribution to the local community. Teachers, support staff and students are keen to point out how their school has improved since the new headteacher took up his appointment. He combines idealism, compassion and pragmatism and is well supported by a strong senior leadership team and an effective governing body. A group of students from Years 7 to 9 described his impact on the life of the school as 'drastic but good'. The introduction of a more formal uniform after brisk but comprehensive consultation, extended opportunities for students to take on leadership roles, and more rigorous expectations about behaviour and attendance have all contributed to a culture of mutual respect and purposefulness that is driving improvement and promoting equality of opportunity very effectively.

There has been an upward trend over recent years in both attainment and progress, with overall attainment significantly higher than national averages and progress significantly better for most groups. The school recognised the need to improve progress and attainment for less-able boys and for students needing help to deal with the disciplines and expectations established in the school as a whole. Close monitoring, targeted support and the development of more curricular options are having a positive impact, most conspicuously in English.

As many parents and students acknowledged, teaching that is generally good and often outstanding has underpinned progress and attainment. A rigorous analysis of students' results and progress ensures that teachers have the information they need to shape their planning. The best teaching observed combined well-informed enthusiasm, confident professional skills, firm but unfrontational behaviour management and effective use of questions and feedback to clarify and consolidate students' learning. In the few less effective lessons seen, teachers did not consistently match levels, pace and variety of activity to students' particular strengths and learning styles. Expectations were not always high enough to challenge the most able or to draw the less able and the less well motivated out of their comfort zones. Opportunities for students to develop as independent learners were missed. Inspectors found examples of excellent practice but the marking of written work was uneven in quality, not consistently balancing praise with guidance.

The curriculum serves students' needs and aspirations well. It focuses on developing skills that can be transferred from subject to subject. A strand running throughout the school is the highly effective management of the specialisms in technology, applied learning and music.

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Strong and careful management ensures that pastoral care and academic guidance complement each other effectively. The school's inclusion team works constructively with external agencies when appropriate. Whilst there are occasional instances of bullying, these are promptly and effectively dealt with. Students feel safe. They willingly take on responsibility and make an outstanding contribution to the school and its neighbourhood. Most students are keen to do well and attendance rates are improving, but punctuality remains a challenge. Good standards of literacy and numeracy and confident use of information and communication technology (ICT) combine with the 'enrichment' programme to prepare students well for further education, training or employment.

The governors, headteacher and senior leadership team have set out a clear and challenging agenda. Their 'planning for progress' has meant focusing on what happens in the classroom, including behaviour, and enhancing the staff's professional skills through training, sharing of good practice and systematic monitoring. There is evidence that this approach is driving improvement. All decisions, including budgeting and expenditure, are judged by their likely impact on students' learning and well-being, and students themselves contribute to the decision-making.

The experience of most students joining the school is very positive thanks to painstaking liaison with primary schools and well-coordinated care for newcomers. Year 7 students were emphatic; for example, one said, 'I haven't long been at Varndean and I'm already learning new things, meeting new friends and having a great time.' Varndean is an extremely cohesive community. Students' appreciation of equalities and diversity in their own locality and their awareness of what it means to live in multicultural Britain have been most effectively developed through the curriculum, through the school's specialisms and through active links with schools set in very different situations, both in England and overseas.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that all teaching is consistently good or better through:
 - lesson planning and classroom management that actively support pupils' varying aptitudes and styles of learning
 - marking of work that routinely balances encouragement with specific guidance on how to improve.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils**2**

Evidence gathered from observing lessons during the inspection showed that most groups progress at a similar good rate in lessons. Over recent years, less-able boys in the younger years and a relatively small proportion of the students with particular needs have progressed less well than others, but both these groups were seen now to be making steadier progress, helped by targeted interventions and more flexible curricular options. Overall, higher than average attainment and strong progress show that the

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school has successfully supported learning. Girls have generally outperformed boys in Years 7 to 9; however, the gender gap is minimal for those achieving five or more A* to C GCSE grades including English and mathematics. Improvements in English have been driven by strong leadership, the contribution of advanced skills teachers, close attention to boys' learning, and an innovative curriculum. This has not so far been matched in mathematics.

Behaviour seen in lessons and around the school was generally good. The rate of fixed-term exclusions has dropped; prompt intervention and continuing support keep students in school and on track. Instances of racial tension or bullying are rare. They are carefully logged and prompt action taken. Students display an excellent understanding of health issues and participation in sports and in activities such as dance is very strong. Those who have school lunches appreciate the healthy choices offered. Students respond extremely well to the many opportunities to take on responsibility and contribute to decision-making. The student council is well respected, with Year 7 students confident that their views are treated as seriously as others. Students have an important role as associate governors, reporting on aspects of school life and suggesting improvements. They also work very successfully with local primary schools on projects linked to Varndean's specialist subjects and organise fund-raising for charity. Their competence in literacy, numeracy and ICT and the skills they develop through work-related learning and 'enrichment' activities provide a good basis for life after school. Students' moral, social and cultural development is good, promoted by the school's ethos, teaching and curriculum. Their spiritual development is appropriately supported through assemblies and subject topics.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	2
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment ¹	2
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	2
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

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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The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2
Taking into account: Pupils' attendance ¹	3
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2

How effective is the provision?

Two-thirds of the lessons observed were good or better. Here teachers ensured that planning reflected the range of ability and interests in each class. They made what was to be learnt very clear and presented a sequence of increasingly challenging activities that kept students engaged throughout the 100 minutes. Inspectors saw excellent examples of teachers using open questions to prompt independent thinking and to establish students' levels of understanding. No lessons were less than satisfactory. In a few, however, teachers did not make it clear to students how they could improve. The quality of marking was variable. The most effective pinpointed what had been done well and what could be done better. Elsewhere, expectations appeared low and work that was limited in scope and poorly presented went unchallenged.

The curriculum successfully meets the needs and aspirations of most students. Links with local schools and a college have given access to the new Diploma programme but take-up is low. The school has a broad range of vocational courses run in-house that contribute to breadth of choice in Key Stage 4. Students who attend a local special school can now follow a wider range of courses to a higher level and their teachers have benefited from the continuing professional development that the partnership has encouraged. In Years 7 to 9, those who find the secondary school curriculum particularly daunting benefit from working as a small group with continuity of teaching. They have a carefully phased integration into the mainstream so that in Year 9 they are ready to choose appropriate pathways towards a range of qualifications. Well-judged guidance ensures that Years 10 and 11 students are confidently pursuing courses that match their interests and will equip them well for their future. A wide range of cultural activities in art, music, drama and dance encourages participation from many students and enables them to achieve high standards.

A Year 7 student captured the feelings of many as follows: 'It's an amazing school, Varndean! You get lots of comfort!' In addition to the good care offered by teachers and non-teaching student managers, students greatly value the 'comfort' and counsel offered in the Student Services Centre. Another said: 'It's somewhere you can go and find someone to talk to.' Care is taken to ensure that the needs of vulnerable students are well understood and that support is efficiently coordinated. Incidents are thoughtfully dealt with and prompt action taken to resolve tensions. The 'enrichment' programme features a combination of creative, sporting and intellectual activities, in which all participate, and gives students opportunities to develop independence and the skills to work with others in a range of contexts and tasks. The good personal development programme also makes a strong contribution.

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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	2
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	2

How effective are leadership and management?

Strong leadership, with a focus on improving teaching and learning, has led to the setting of ambitious targets for the school, informed by rigorous analysis of students' progress and attainment. Although this has clearly had a positive impact overall, as the record of attainment and progress indicates, these targets are not yet consistently translated into high expectations for individual students. The governing body has a broad but well-defined strategic vision for the school: to be inclusive and innovative. All key policies are in place and a thorough induction programme and further training keep governors well informed. A more interactive connection with teaching departments is being developed. Procedures to ensure that pupils are kept safe and secure, including those relating to child protection, are exceptionally thorough and well embedded. There is now a disciplined approach to the school's finances. This enables the school to set priorities confidently and strong progress has been made in ensuring good value for money.

The school makes excellent use of extensive partnerships, including those with local schools, the city's two universities and a college. Through enterprising management, the school's three specialist areas make a highly effective contribution to the development of these links. Leadership and management take positive steps to ensure that opportunities are equally accessible to all and that help is given to those who might have difficulties in making the most of them. Including all sectors of the school community in planning and review has successfully reinforced a culture of mutual respect. Students value the school's growing diversity and, through the school's various partnerships, build up an exceptionally well-grounded sense of their local community. Active links with a school near Canary Wharf are also giving them a vivid and constructive awareness of what the term 'multicultural Britain' means. Links with schools in Africa and themes explored through the curriculum add a global dimension.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	2
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	2

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

Views of parents and carers

While a few expressed concerns about behaviour, assessment and school-home communication, responses to the parental questionnaire were overwhelmingly positive. The following comment was typical: 'I particularly like Varndean's ethos of celebrating everyone's success and support their vision of a truly inclusive school.' Inspectors found that the school did not always respond sufficiently promptly and fully to parents' questions or concerns and that there were occasional grounds for concern about assessment. However, they judged that, overall, students' experience of school was positive and productive.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Varndean 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 13 statements about the school.

The inspection team received 164 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 1317 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	69	41	86	52	6	4	2	1
The school keeps my child safe	52	32	106	65	3	2	1	1
The school informs me about my child's progress	58	35	88	54	10	6	1	1
My child is making enough progress at this school	54	33	96	59	9	6	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	46	28	107	65	4	2	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	37	23	98	60	25	15	1	1
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	18	11	114	70	17	10	4	2
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)	40	24	98	59	9	6	0	0
The school meets my child's particular needs	46	28	98	60	13	8	3	2
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	53	20	92	56	18	11	3	2
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	28	17	101	67	12	7	4	2
The school is led and managed effectively	36	22	107	65	2	1	2	1
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	59	36	98	60	2	1	4	2

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

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	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.



16 October 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Varndean School, Brighton, BN1 6NP

We greatly appreciated your cheerful readiness to answer our questions and show us your work when we visited your school. I welcome this opportunity to let you know about the judgements we reached.

Varndean is a good school. You are being taught well, and you are willing learners. Amongst your school's particular strengths are the care and support you are given and the opportunities you have to contribute to important decision-making through the student council and your representatives on the governing body. We could see that you have an excellent understanding of the importance of keeping healthy and were pleased to find that you feel safe in school. We agree that your headteacher has had a very positive impact on all aspects of your school, which has been possible because of the support he has been given by the governors, by staff and by you and your families. You spoke of the respect with which you are treated and we agree that this is the key to your school's very strong culture of mutual support and acceptance of differences. We were impressed by the way in which your school's three specialist subjects have improved aspects of your learning and led to links with local schools and groups which bring benefits to all.

To support your school's continuing improvement, we have asked your headteacher to make sure that:

- all teaching is as good as the best, with all teachers expecting high standards from you and teaching in a way that helps each of you fulfil your potential, whatever your style of learning
 - marking of work balances encouragement with guidance on how to improve.
- You can help by doing your best not to miss days at school and being punctual to lessons.

With best wishes

Patricia Metham

Her Majesty's Inspector

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