

The Highfield School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117537
Local Authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	339029
Inspection dates	9–10 February 2010
Reporting inspector	Adrian Gray HMI

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Community
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	1086
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	226
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Keith Robertson
Headteacher	Mr Ian Morris
Date of previous school inspection	9 November 2006
School address	Highfield Letchworth Garden City Hertfordshire
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three additional inspectors. The inspectors observed 35 lessons and 6 tutor groups, spending a total of 16 hours in classrooms and 72 hours in the school altogether. They also observed an assembly and met with groups of pupils, a governor, staff and a youth worker, and talked with a parent. They observed the school's work, and looked at the school's policies, assessment records, some forms of planning documentation, the results of the school's own surveys and the minutes of the governing body. They considered questionnaires from 109 parents or carers, 158 pupils and 30 members of the school's staff.

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

- the school's ability to secure the further improvement of the quality of teaching and of pupils' achievement
- the quality of the school's work with minority ethnic pupils and also the strengths of its provision for those with special educational needs and/or disabilities
- actions to reduce the proportion of pupils with persistent absence
- the school's impact on the Every Child Matters outcomes; pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development; the promotion of equalities, and of community cohesion
- the extent to which sixth form provision is leading to good outcomes for all groups of students.

Information about the school

The Highfield School is pleasantly situated on the edge of the first 'garden city'. It has an open and spacious site; some of the buildings are modern but others date from the 1960s. It is a comprehensive school with a popular sixth form. Post-16 courses are run in collaboration with other local schools and a local college, and some younger pupils also go to courses at the college. The school has specialist status for science.

The school is broadly average in size for its type. Pupils come from a variety of backgrounds including some who are from more deprived areas, but in general they are relatively advantaged. About one in five pupils come from minority ethnic backgrounds, with an increasing proportion of Indian heritage. The school has an unusually high proportion of girls, though this varies from year to year.

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?

3

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

2

Main findings

The Highfield School is a satisfactory school that is busily laying the foundations so that it can sustain consistently high quality work in the future. The new leadership team has engaged governors and staff members in a well focussed analysis of the school's current position, which means that they have been able to prioritise the most important areas. They have identified the reasons for the dip in Year 11 pupils' progress in 2008 and secured improvement. The vast majority of pupils enjoy coming to school and enjoy their learning; when challenged by imaginative and thought-provoking teaching, they show real maturity and a high level of social skill. The school also has strengths in its local links and partnerships, some very strong practice within aspects of care, guidance and support, its sixth form and also some distinctive features of its curriculum. Leaders take care to ensure that pupils are safe and know what to do if they are concerned about their friends.

The ability of the school's leadership to address areas of relative weakness and secure improvement can be seen in the progress that has been made in improving attendance, including that of pupils who are persistently absent. There is now also better provision for pupils with special educational needs, and an effective whole-school assessment structure. Most staff feel the school has clear vision and leadership though a small proportion feel the leadership could improve communication and visibility. However, a minority of parents still feel that there are particular improvements to be made. The headteacher, with the governing body, is aware that the school must keep a sharp focus on improvement if it is to continue its journey towards being at least good in all respects. There are still places where provision is less impressive and the best practice is not yet applied in all areas of the school. These pockets include some aspects of teaching, which is weaker where the school's vision for assessment and planning is not applied skilfully so that pupils are not always inspired to learn. Work on the promotion of community cohesion is only partially successful and curricular provision for personal, social and health education, as well as citizenship, needs to be strengthened.

Pupils' progress by the end of Year 11 showed an improvement in 2009 over the disappointing results of the previous year, but the progress made by pupils of lower ability - and their attendance - was not as good as that of the others at that time. However, since the last exam results, progress and attendance show signs of general improvement.

The views of parents reflect the fact that the school is only part of the way through a process of improvement. Some parents wish to see better teaching in all areas and more consistent management of pupils' behaviour.

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What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the use of assessment by teachers in planning learning in all lessons and securing progress for all pupils by:
 - ensuring that planning accurately and consistently addresses the needs of all groups of learners in each class
 - developing the ability of teachers to check pupils' understanding and progress, so that they can adjust their teaching to meet the needs of the whole class
 - improving teachers' planned use of teaching assistants.
- Stimulate pupils' participation in the learning process by:
 - developing greater challenge for the more able by the use of deeper questioning techniques
 - better sequencing of tasks in lessons
 - introducing more active learning including decision-making, problem-solving and discussion.
- Further develop the provision for promoting community cohesion so that the whole curriculum makes a contribution to understanding of the faith, cultural and socio-economic groups of Britain today, as well as further developing links overseas.
- Develop the school's provision for personal, social and health education and citizenship so that it makes an effective contribution to the development of all pupils.
- About 40% of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory may receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

3

Pupils' attainment at the end of Year 11 is in line with national figures or slightly above, but the proportion gaining five good passes with English and mathematics was below the school's target. Over the last three years pupils' progress to five higher grades including English and mathematics has been less than expected nationally; it has improved recently although in mathematics progress remains variable. The proportion gaining two or more science GCSE passes was below the national figure in both 2008 and 2009, since when the school has made changes to its curriculum pattern. The school expects attainment to rise in 2010, especially in English and science, but inspectors found that improved standards were more secure in English than elsewhere. The school carefully measures ongoing levels of attainment across the school and this is helping to support a drive to improve outcomes for all groups of learners, including the small numbers of minority ethnic pupils such as those of Indian heritage. The good progress of the small number of Year 11 pupils on free school meals was especially notable in 2009 and the small number of pupils of Indian ethnicity attained standards above that of their peers nationally.

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The school's analysis of pupils' attainment and progress in Key Stage 3 shows that these rose in English but were static or slightly falling in mathematics and science last year, with the result that the school did not meet its own targets. Inspectors' observations showed that learning and progress are still variable in mathematics and science, as well as other subjects, as the school is aware. Learning is best when teachers have considered how to engage the enthusiasm of young people through interesting resources and imaginative activities; when this happens, pupils enjoy their work and learning is invariably good. However, there are a number of classes where too little is expected of them and they become passive participants in the process.

Attainment and progress of pupils with special educational needs has not been consistent over the last three years but the school has responded energetically to this. The school is making good progress in developing its strategies to boost the learning of these pupils, although these are not always applied well by individual teachers.

This is a school where pupils are happy to come to school and where they feel safe. Parents and pupils have mixed views about behaviour and a minority of them say they would like behaviour to be better handled by the school, but a similar minority were very optimistic; 'There has been a big improvement in classroom behaviour,' one wrote. In classes, pupils were seen to be attentive and conscientious with only a few instances of younger pupils being off task or excitable in corridors when it snowed. A fire drill was well handled by all, despite the biting cold wind. Pupils support the drive for more healthy eating and many take enthusiastic advantage of the extra-curricular sport offered. Pupils' involvement with the community is good with, for example, pupils studying French sharing their skills with primary schools.

The development of workplace skills is supported by good attention to basic skills in some lessons and some strong enterprise links. Although the attendance of many pupils is good, the level of persistent absence is above the normal level for schools of this type. However this situation is improving due to the carefully targeted support that is being offered to these pupils. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is enhanced by opportunities to share their views and to take on challenges. However their cultural development is the least advanced in this area, and they would benefit from greater exposure to alternative cultures. Some teachers used pupils' great interest in the Haiti disaster to develop their sense of moral questions and science teaching also contributes work on moral dilemmas.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

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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Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	3
Taking into account: Pupils' attainment ¹	3
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	3
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	3
The extent to which pupils feel safe	2
Pupils' behaviour	3
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	2
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?

The school has some excellent teachers who model good practice through their effective use of planning to meet the learning needs of all the pupils, and who also deliver well-paced lessons with a variety of interesting and stimulating learning activities. As a result, pupils become true partners in learning, showing themselves capable of engaging with the subject material and developing their own opinions and ideas. In the best lessons, such as in religious education (RE), pupils are stimulated by effective management of discussion, showing the ability to think carefully for themselves about sensitive issues and to treat each other's opinions with respect. However, there is still too much variation in the quality of teaching both across the school and also within subject areas. In the weaker lessons, teachers' planning does not always set clear expectations for different types of learners and teachers do not keep themselves informed as to how well the learning is developing. They make too little use of oral questioning, so that understanding is not properly explored or developed, and in some lessons the sequence of tasks set lacks coherence or a focus on the needs of the different groups of learners. Teaching assistants work hard, but teachers do not always think carefully about how to plan for their most effective use.

The curriculum meets all requirements, provides some opportunities for early exam entries and now makes good use of the school's specialism. The school is developing more flexible choices at 14+ and its links with other providers to widen the opportunities. Some of the extra-curricular opportunities are especially welcomed by the pupils. The approach to citizenship and personal, social and health education is rather fragmented at present, leading to inconsistent progress, but the school has sound plans

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to re-organise this from September 2010, building on areas of known strength.

The quality of care, guidance and support is mainly a strength of the school, particularly because of the considerable efforts that have been put into providing pupils and parents or carers with better information about academic progress. The school has introduced a robust system for monitoring and assessing pupils' progress across all years and classes, but the accuracy of teachers' assessments is variable so that eventual results may be below expectations. Nonetheless, this is an improving aspect of the school's work because pupils are now better informed about their progress than they say they were in the past. Support at key times, such as transitions between schools, is good, but better use could be made of the short tutor periods. More vulnerable pupils are well supported with personalised and aspirational learning programmes whilst systems for monitoring attendance are much improved. However, some teachers do not approach planning and marking with sufficient focus on the needs of the individual pupil.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	3
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	3
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?

There have been substantial changes to the school's senior leadership in the last eighteen months, including a new headteacher and two new deputy headteachers. Leaders have embarked on a range of initiatives generally targeted at improving the school's performance in key areas; these have included the pastoral system, data tracking and assessment, monitoring processes and aspects of the curriculum. They have a clear sense of what good teaching looks like and are working at embedding this across all areas of the school. Staff who responded to the survey said that leaders have a good understanding of what the school is now trying to achieve and feel that they are a part of it. The growing strength of leadership is reflected in the fact that almost all staff feel proud to be a member of the school.

The new approaches are appropriate and have the potential to secure further improvement, providing that are consistently understood and applied by all staff. They have led to a realistic re-appraisal of the quality of teaching informed by more systematic monitoring and analysis, with greater challenge to staff through the improved school-level assessment and monitoring strategy.

The governing body has played a part in the school's recent improvement and has high aspirations for the school. However, it has not given sufficiently close attention to some aspects of the school's work over recent years and an evaluation of the impact of its

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equalities plan is overdue. Governors also need to closely monitor the level of exclusion of pupils with special educational needs and sharpen their focus on all aspects of the duty to promote community cohesion. Despite this, the school is visibly a harmonious community where pupils from different cultures mix readily in the classrooms and at break-times; the school carefully logs the few racist incidents. Some efforts have been made to widen the cultural experience of the pupils so that they are aware of the variety of British life today and a survey of faith and ethnicity has been carried out, but opportunities to deepen understanding of the cultures present in the school are not always taken. Even in a very well-motivated RE class, pupils were unaware of the range of religious faiths that exist within the school.

The school has a systematic way of seeking the views of parents, carers and pupils although a small minority of parents expressed some dissatisfaction with how well the school had responded to their concerns. The school has some good partnerships with other education providers in the area, including with associated primary schools, and also has a tradition of links with local employers.

The school's provision to ensure the safeguarding of pupils is good because arrangements for the safe recruitment of staff are thorough and the school has made sure that pupils know what to do if they have concerns about a friend's welfare. The school has shown that it is capable of acting in partnership with other agencies when there is a need to support individual young people.

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
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	3
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	2
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	2
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	3
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	3

Sixth form

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The school has a thriving sixth form of its own but also works in partnership with other local schools and a college. The outcomes for all groups of students are broadly in line with national expectations but pass and completion rates are high. Students are enthusiastic and respond well to interesting teaching, especially when it draws on the good subject knowledge of the teacher. They contribute well to the life of the school. They feel well-informed by assessments although progress is uneven in some respects and uptake for vocational courses is relatively low; a number of students change courses, suggesting they did not always make appropriate choices or lacked sufficient guidance. The leadership of the sixth form is well informed about its strengths and weaknesses and is making improvements to the provision in order to raise the level of attainment.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	2
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	3
The quality of provision in the sixth form	2
Leadership and management of the sixth form	2

Views of parents and carers

The views of parents and carers are quite varied, reflecting the recent rapid changes that the school has experienced, but only about 1 in 10 of parents or carers responded to the questionnaire. A very large majority of those who responded are pleased about the information they receive on their child's progress and almost all agree that their child enjoys school. A number wrote appreciatively of the improvements in the school and the range of extra-curricular provision.

Parents and carers identified some issues where they would like to see greater improvement, including responding to the needs of the individual child and - linked to this - each individual child making sufficient progress. Some feel that communication could be better, for example ensuring that phone calls always receive a response. A few also feel that troublesome individuals are not always dealt with firmly enough and a few others are not convinced about the practice of early GCSE entry.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at The Highfield School 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 109 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 1086 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	40	37	60	55	4	4	4	4
The school keeps my child safe	36	33	68	62	4	4	1	1
The school informs me about my child's progress	44	40	61	56	3	3	1	1
My child is making enough progress at this school	37	34	49	45	18	17	2	2
The teaching is good at this school	20	18	73	67	10	9	3	3
The school helps me to support my child's learning	23	21	64	59	19	17	2	2
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	18	17	70	65	16	15	0	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)	28	26	58	54	10	9	1	1
The school meets my child's particular needs	23	21	61	56	20	19	2	2
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	22	20	61	56	14	13	8	7
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	22	20	65	60	16	15	1	1
The school is led and managed effectively	25	23	65	60	10	9	4	4
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	32	29	62	57	9	8	2	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.



11 February 2010

Dear Pupils

Inspection of The Highfield School, Letchworth Garden City, SG6 3QA

Thank you for talking to my colleagues and me and for the welcome you gave us when we visited your school for the recent inspection. The inspectors spoke with you in lessons, around the school and in groups, looked at your work, read the results of questionnaires filled in by you and your parents and carers, and spoke with some of your teachers.

We looked at the 150 questionnaires you returned. Your answers told us that you feel the school gives you very good information about your progress, and your parents also agreed with this. You said that adults help you to improve and that the headteacher, Mr Morris, and his senior colleagues do a good job in running the school. About a quarter of you think that behaviour could be improved and about one in ten of you say that you don't really enjoy school.

We took your views into account, looked at what the parents or carers had to say, and then observed the school at work. Here is a summary of the main findings, which I hope will be of interest to you:

Highfield is a satisfactory school and it is improving. In particular, we think the school is developing a good system for assessing your progress and keeping you informed about how you are doing.

We think that the school offers a good curriculum overall and we noted your comments that you like a lot of the things that the school offers outside normal lesson time.

We think that the school leaders have a clear idea about what still needs to be done and some good ideas about how to make things happen.

Although much of your teaching is good, we think some lessons could be improved if the teachers planned the work in more detail so that everyone has an appropriate level of challenge according to their ability. We also noticed that you enjoy challenging and imaginative activities, and suggested that all teachers should consider how to get all of you more involved in the learning.

We were impressed by how well pupils from all sorts of different backgrounds get on together at school, but we think the school should do more to help you understand the

different types of people you will meet across the rest of Britain; the school is planning to make some changes to do this, including changing how it teaches you citizenship.

Yours sincerely

Adrian Gray

Her Majesty's Inspector

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