

Highdown School and Sixth Form Centre

Surley Row, Emmer Green, Reading, RG4 8LR

Inspection dates

30 April–1 May 2015

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Requires improvement	3
	This inspection:	Good	2
Leadership and management		Good	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Good	2
Quality of teaching		Good	2
Achievement of pupils		Good	2
Sixth form provision		Requires improvement	3

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school.

- The headteacher provides outstanding leadership for this rapidly improving school. She is very ably supported by senior leaders who work together well as a team to drive forward improvements in the quality of teaching and in the standards achieved by students.
- Governors support school leaders effectively and ensure that the work of the school leads to sustained improvements in students' achievement.
- School leaders have unwavering high expectations for students' progress and behaviour. The determination to secure good outcomes for students is shared across the school.
- Regular tracking of students' progress is used to identify quickly where they need additional help or support. This is helping to sustain improvements in students' achievement.
- The very strong relationships between students and their teachers mean that students behave well and have high aspirations for their futures.
- The quality of teaching has improved and is now good. Very effective use has been made of training to enable teachers to develop their skills. Leaders have taken firm and decisive action to eliminate any teaching that is inadequate.
- The highly inclusive nature of the school makes it a harmonious place in which to work and learn. Students are very welcoming of difference. All students, regardless of ethnicity, faith, additional need or sexual orientation, are fully integrated into the life of the school.
- The school's unit for visually impaired students provides extremely high quality care and support, which results in students' developing the resilience necessary for independent living.
- Students benefit from high quality careers advice and guidance which helps them to prepare well for their future education, training or employment.
- The school is a safe and inviting place to work and learn; students feel safe.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Achievement in the sixth form is not yet as high as it could be.
- The progress of disadvantaged students in mathematics is not as rapid as it is in English.
- Teachers' marking and feedback do not always provide precise guidance to students about how to improve their work. Not all teachers provide opportunities for students to reflect on the advice given.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed learning in 32 lessons, many of which were jointly observed with members of the school's leadership team. Inspectors also conducted a number of shorter visits to lessons to observe students' attitudes towards learning and the support provided by teaching assistants.
- Inspectors looked at the quality of work in students' books when visiting classrooms and in a separate scrutiny of students' work.
- Inspectors observed students' behaviour at break and lunch time and when moving around the site between lessons.
- Inspectors held meetings with senior and middle leaders, teachers, governors and groups of students from each year group.
- Inspectors reviewed documentation relating to other aspects of the school's work including the school's self-evaluation, improvement plans, safeguarding, records of students' progress, attendance and behaviour, a sample of minutes of meetings of the governing body and information about the way in which the quality of teaching is checked and monitored.
- Inspectors considered the 120 responses to the online questionnaire for parents, Parent View, as well as communications received from parents during the inspection.
- Inspectors also considered the 100 responses to the staff questionnaire.

Inspection team

Caroline Dearden, Lead inspector	Additional Inspector
Allan Barfoot	Additional Inspector
Noureddin Khassal	Additional Inspector
Philippa Nunn	Additional Inspector
Gill Lamb	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The school is larger than the average-sized secondary school. It has a sixth form.
- The headteacher took up post at the time of the previous inspection in 2013. Nearly all members of the senior leadership team have been appointed within the last two years.
- Approximately half the teachers have been appointed since the last inspection.
- The proportion of students supported by the pupil premium is below the national average. The pupil premium is additional funding for students who are known to be eligible for free school meals or who are looked after by the local authority.
- The proportion of students who are disabled or who have special educational needs is similar to the national average.
- The school funds and manages a specially resourced provision for students with visual impairment. These students are taught in mainstream classes, supported by specialist teaching assistants.
- A small number of students attend alternative education off-site at Hero's Farm, Aspire and Path Hill.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for students' attainment and progress in English and mathematics.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Further improve achievement, and most notably in the sixth form, by ensuring that all teachers:
 - provide precise guidance to students about how to improve their work
 - make sure that all students reflect on and use the advice provided to deepen their understanding
 - plan engaging activities that consistently challenge students to do their best and which therefore accelerate students' progress, especially in mathematics for those who are disadvantaged.

Inspection judgements

The leadership and management are good

- The headteacher provides outstanding and determined leadership for this rapidly improving school. She has a very clear vision for the school to provide high quality education for all students. She has taken highly effective action to ensure that all aspects of the school's work impact strongly on accelerating students' progress.
- The headteacher is very ably supported by her senior team. They work collegiately as a team to drive forward improvements in the quality of teaching and in the standards achieved by students.
- The leadership of teaching is very strong. Leaders make thorough checks on the quality of teaching; they make good use of information about students' progress to hold teachers to account for the achievement of the students they teach. Difficult decisions have been made, where necessary, to tackle teaching that was inadequate. The quality of teaching is at least good and improving rapidly.
- Senior and middle leaders carefully match support and training to each teacher's needs and this includes preparation for promotion as well as support where teaching is not yet of a high enough standard. The wide range of training opportunities is therefore used very effectively to enable teachers to develop their skills. Teachers are very positive about the quality of the training and support they receive.
- Subject middle leaders have a very clear understanding of the impact of their subject on the overall outcomes for the school. They are rapidly developing in confidence and now have the skills required to implement support or training where teaching requires further development or where students are identified as underachieving.
- Pastoral middle leaders provide high quality support and guidance. They regularly check the records of students' behaviour, attendance and progress. This is impacting strongly on improving achievement and underpins students' willingness to attend school and engage in learning.
- Leaders at all levels ensure that students are safe when attending school; almost all parents agree that this is the case.
- The school's curriculum is broad and balanced. It is carefully reviewed each year to ensure that the range of subjects on offer meets the needs of students. This means that students have good attitudes towards learning and are interested in the subjects they study. Almost all move on to sustained education, employment or training when they leave the school.
- Well-thought-out strategies for the development of students' literacy mean that reading across the curriculum to enhance learning is well established. Students read with confidence and many read for pleasure outside school.
- Opportunities for the promotion of students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development are incorporated in all aspects of the school's work. This underpins the highly inclusive nature of the school. Students are welcoming of difference and this ensures that discrimination is not tolerated and that equality of opportunity is promoted very well. All students, regardless of ethnicity, faith, additional need or sexual orientation, are fully integrated into all aspects of school life.
- The school's personal development programme and the topical themes for assemblies help to prepare students well for life in modern Britain. They have good understanding of radicalisation and extremism and the rule of democracy.
- The pupil premium funding is now carefully targeted to ensure that those needing additional help are supported well. This includes provision of additional teaching in mathematics and English, and support to attend regularly and often, as well as specialist off-site education for those who find it challenging to engage in learning at school. The gaps between the achievement of those who are disadvantaged and their classmates are closing rapidly, most notably in English.
- Leaders carefully monitor the attendance, behaviour and progress of the small number of students who attend alternative provision. These students enjoy their learning and have positive attitudes about their futures.
- The school's specialist provision for students with visual impairment provides very high quality support for students to develop their resilience and the skills required for independent living. These students are very successfully supported by specialist teaching assistants to gain access to the full curriculum, including participation in team sports in physical education lessons.
- Students benefit from very high quality careers advice and guidance which start when students begin to consider their options for Key Stage 4. Independent careers advice provides students with the information they need to make appropriate post-16 and post-18 choices. Retention into the sixth form is improving

and increased numbers of students secure places at universities, including those that are highly selective.

- The local authority has provided good support for the headteacher to focus the drive for rapid and sustained improvements.
- Leaders have made very good use of external reviews of many aspects of the school's work; this includes reviews of subjects, provision for students with special educational needs, and the sixth form. They have used the outcomes of these reviews to implement effective development plans which have impacted strongly on improving the quality of teaching and standards of achievement.

■ The governance of the school:

- Following the previous inspection, the governing body undertook an external review of its work. Although the structure of committees was found to be appropriate, several new governors, including the chair and those with financial and educational backgrounds, were recruited. Governors now have the skills and professional expertise to hold school leaders to account robustly and determinedly. They scrutinise the reports submitted by leaders and ensure that the evidence provided is substantiated by accurate and reliable information about students' progress.
- Governors rigorously oversee the school's performance management procedures for staff. They have a very good understanding of the link between the quality of teaching and students' achievement and of the highly effective action taken to improve the quality of teaching. Governors have supported the headteacher well when difficult staffing decisions have been necessary. They carefully evaluate recommendations for pay progression and this ensures that pay awards are only approved when the quality of teaching is good enough.
- Governors have undertaken a range of training and this helps them to evaluate the performance of the school. They monitor the impact of the pupil premium funding and know that the gaps between the achievement of disadvantaged students and their classmates are closing rapidly.
- Governors' arrangements for the safeguarding of students meet statutory arrangements and are effective. Their diligent oversight of the school's expenditure ensures that financial resources are used to recruit well-qualified staff and to make sure that the school site is a safe and inviting place in which to work and learn.

The behaviour and safety of pupils

are good

Behaviour

- The behaviour of students is good. They are polite and courteous to each other and to adults. Students are punctual to lessons despite the considerable distance between different parts of the school site. They treat their school with respect, as shown by the clean and tidy state of classrooms at the end of lessons and in the absence of graffiti.
- Low-level disruptive behaviour is very rare. Students have good attitudes towards learning, only becoming distracted when teaching does not match their needs sufficiently well.
- Students have strong relationships with their teachers. They know that their teachers care about them and want them to do their best. They respond quickly to instructions and arrive to lessons with the equipment they need in order to learn.
- Students are well presented and are proud to be members of the school community. They integrate exceptionally well with those of different ethnicities and faiths. Sexual orientation is not a barrier to friendship. At break and lunch times, students socialise in mixed groups and display strong empathy for those who have physical or learning disabilities.
- Fixed term exclusions are low. School information shows that fixed term exclusion is used only for serious breaches of the school's behaviour code.
- Attendance is improving and is now high.
- The school's monitoring of students attending off-site alternative education is robust and regular. These students attend and behave at least as well as other students in the school.

Safety

- The school's work to keep students safe and secure is good. The school site is safe and secure, despite the open nature of parts of the grounds. Students do not feel that any areas of the school site are 'out of bounds'. A number of members of staff have been trained in first aid; thorough risk assessments for trips and visits are in place.

- Students feel safe and well looked after; almost all parents and staff agree with this view.
- Leaders and governors have been trained in 'safer recruitment' and this ensures the suitability of staff recruited to the school. All staff take part in regular up-to-date training in child protection. Key staff have received training to identify signs of child sexual exploitation, female genital mutilation and enforced marriage.
- Students are taught how to keep themselves safe in a range of situations through the personal development programme, information and communication technology lessons, assemblies and tutor periods. Specialist or topical themes such as drug awareness or sexual health are also taught through 'drop down days' when students are taken off timetable for the day. Some students spoken to would like these events to be enriched by speakers who have personal experience of the theme being studied, for example those recovering from substance misuse.
- Students have good understanding of how to keep themselves safe when using the internet or social networks. They know what potential grooming would look like and the actions they would need to take if approached.
- Students say that bullying is very rare and when it does occur, it is as a result of friendship breakdown or anxiety caused through the pressure of examinations. Students are confident that they can speak to members of staff if they have any worries or concerns and that any issues are quickly resolved.
- The school's records of behaviour show that incidents of racism are extremely rare. The use of derogatory language is also very rare and usually results when students have an incomplete understanding of the meaning of the words they have used.

The quality of teaching

is good

- Teaching has greatly improved since the previous inspection. It is now at least good across the school and students make good progress in a broad range of subjects.
- Teachers know their students well. Very effective use is made of student groupings to encourage students to talk together about what they are learning. Teachers use information about students' progress to identify where students are underachieving. Additional help or support is then quickly provided to help these students to catch up.
- Teachers have strong subject knowledge which they use well to plan activities to engage and interest students in what they are learning. However, occasionally these activities are not sufficiently well matched to students' needs and this causes students to lose motivation.
- Teachers often ask probing and carefully crafted questions of students during lessons which help them to think about their learning and to deepen their understanding. However, very occasionally students do not think carefully enough about their responses and this can slow progress or limit the links students make between different aspects of their learning.
- In mathematics, some teaching enables students to develop mastery of key principles and rules. This was especially evident in a Year 9 lesson where the teacher used the element of competition very effectively to insist that students explain the steps used to arrive at the answer. These students were highly enthusiastic about their learning and were making rapid gains in their understanding. However, mastery of mathematics is not yet evident in all year groups and this slows progress, especially for those who are disadvantaged.
- Leaders set aspirational targets for students' achievement and this ensures that all teachers have high expectations of students. Achievement continues to improve strongly.
- Teachers' marking and feedback are not of consistently high quality to accelerate the progress of all students. Where feedback is very precise and highly personalised, students use the advice provided to improve their work and deepen their understanding. However, at times it is not sufficiently well structured to enable students to understand their mistakes. This can lead to repeated errors, especially in the use and spelling of subject-specific terminology. Not all teachers provide opportunities for students to reflect on or respond to the advice given. When they do respond, not all teachers acknowledge the additional work submitted by students.
- The teaching of literacy, reading and mathematics is well established across the school. Inspectors observed students using their numeracy skills to solve problems in a range of subjects, including geography, science and physical education.
- Teaching assistants provide skilful and carefully planned support during lessons for those students who need additional support, including those with visual impairment. This ensures that these students are able to gain access to the full curriculum and participate in mainstream lessons.

The achievement of pupils is good

- In most year groups, students join the school with levels of attainment that are above average; they make good progress. In 2014, the proportion who gained five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C including English and mathematics was above the national average.
- In 2014, the proportion of students making at least the expected progress in English and mathematics was above the national average.
- In 2014, disadvantaged students made less progress in English and mathematics compared to others in the school. The gap was approximately one grade lower in English and one and a half grades lower in mathematics. Compared to students nationally, the gap was one third of a grade in English and half a grade in mathematics.
- Leaders have now more precisely allocated the pupil premium funding to meet the needs of individual students. The range of additional help includes support for learning in English and mathematics, alternative provision where students find it difficult to engage with school, improving attendance and removing barriers to learning caused by lack of specialist equipment. Information provided by the school shows that the progress of disadvantaged students is accelerating rapidly. Gaps between their achievement and that of their classmates are closed in English and narrowing in mathematics.
- The Year 7 catch-up fund has been used to employ specialist primary school teachers who provide effective additional help and support for students joining the school in Year 7 with low levels of literacy and numeracy. Within two terms, the majority of these students work confidently at a higher level.
- Students who find reading difficult have been very well supported to increase their confidence and to read at home. These students are now keen to help others who find reading difficult.
- Disabled students and those who have special educational needs make good progress from their starting points because of the carefully planned and personalised support they receive. The help that students with visual impairment receive from specialist teaching assistants in lessons is particularly effective. Specialist equipment also helps visually impaired students to work independently and as part of a group during lessons.
- In 2014, the most able students made the progress expected of them and almost all attained good GCSE grades in a range of subjects including English and mathematics. Information provided by the school indicates that the achievement of the most able students is increasing steadily.
- Students are routinely entered early for the GCSE examination in English. This strategy has been effective in developing students' confidence when taking their examinations. Outcomes from early entry show that students' progress and achievement are not hindered by this approach. The proportion attaining grades A* to C was above the national figure in 2014. It is also above the national figure for the current Year 11 cohort who sat the examination in November 2014. Students who want to improve their grades continue to study English and are given the opportunity to re-sit the examination.
- The school carefully tracks and monitors the progress of students following alternative provision. These students make good progress from their starting points and develop into confident learners who want to stay in education post-16.

The sixth form provision requires improvement

- Leadership of the sixth form is good and strengthening. Students' progress is regularly tracked and monitored and teachers are held accountable for the standards attained by students. Effective support and challenge have improved the quality of teaching in the sixth form and consequently achievement is improving. However, it is not yet good. The proportion of Year 11 students moving on to the sixth form is increasing.
- Students are able to choose from a wide range of academic subjects which are well matched to their individual interests and aspirations. They receive high quality careers advice and guidance. The numbers applying for and securing places at university, including those that are highly selective, are increasing. Almost all students, including those who are disadvantaged, move on to sustained education or training post-18.
- Sixth form students are safe and secure. They enjoy being members of the school and the sixth form is as inclusive as the rest of the school. Students' attendance is high and attitudes towards learning are good. Students have high aspirations for their futures. They are polite and courteous towards adults and each other; they often work effectively as positive role models for younger students.

- Teachers' subject knowledge is strong. Most plan activities that stimulate students' interest and therefore deepen their understanding. Marking is regular and teachers make good use of past examination questions to demonstrate correct and detailed responses. Students know that the school marking policy is designed to provide feedback about 'what went well' and what would be 'even better if'. However, they would like marking to be more explicit and provide details of the grade that would be awarded if the work were assessed as part of an examination. They feel this would help them to prepare more effectively for assessments and accelerate their progress.
- Students enter the sixth form with starting points that are slightly below average. In 2014, attainment was below average in some subjects. Information provided by the school shows that although progress is improving, achievement is not yet as high as it could be. However, the gaps between the progress and achievement of disadvantaged students and others are very small.
- Effective support for those students retaking GCSE English or mathematics is well developed and pass rates at grades A* to C are now very high.

What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>

School details

Unique reference number	136307
Local authority	Reading
Inspection number	462377

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Academy converter
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	1279
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	240
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	John Taylor
Headteacher	Rachel Cave
Date of previous school inspection	1–2 May 2013
Telephone number	01189015800
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