

Highdown School and Sixth Form Centre

Surely Row, Emmer Green, Reading, RG4 8LR

Inspection dates 1–2 May 2013

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected	
	This inspection:	Requires improvement	3
Achievement of pupils		Requires improvement	3
Quality of teaching		Requires improvement	3
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Good	2
Leadership and management		Require improvement	3

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement. It is not good because

- Achievement requires improvement because too few students make good progress between the ages of 11 to 16, especially in English and in science.
- Not enough students reach the higher grades A*–A at GCSE because of a lack of sufficient challenge in many subjects.
- Disabled students and those who have special educational needs make slower progress than their peers, as do those students supported through pupil-premium funding.
- Teaching is not consistent across subjects or year groups and does not lead to students' good progress over time. Teachers' marking is not always good enough.
- Teachers too often give students work that is too easy and do not use questions well enough to encourage students to think deeply.
- There are inconsistencies in the way some subject and other academy leaders check how well students are achieving in their respective areas.
- Governors have not always been as effective as they should have been in holding the academy to account for the quality of teaching and the progress that students make.
- Until recently, academy leaders have done too little to make sure that the high levels of students' achievement and effective teaching seen in the recent past have been maintained.
- The sixth form requires improvement because too few students make good progress.

The school has the following strengths

- The new headteacher has begun to tackle the academy's weaknesses with energy and precision. Teaching and achievement in the weaker subjects are improving.
- Students make good progress in reading and mathematics.
- Students behave well in lessons and around the academy and feel very safe.
- Governors have shown they are not afraid to take the difficult decisions needed to make sure the academy improves.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 42 lessons or parts of lessons, including 10 that were seen together with senior leaders.
- Inspectors listened to students read and visited classrooms with senior staff to look at how well disabled students and those who have special educational needs were learning. Inspectors also visited lessons with senior staff to look at students' progress in mathematics, English, science and languages, and at learning in a wide range of other subjects.
- Discussions were held with senior and middle leaders, staff, the Chair of the Governing Body and three other governors, and groups of students.
- Inspectors observed the academy's work and looked at its self-evaluation and planning documents, external evaluations of its work and examples of students' work.
- Inspectors took note of the 150 responses from parents on the online questionnaire (Parent View). Parents' and students' responses to the academy's own recent surveys and written comments made by parents while attending parents' evenings were considered. Inspectors also analysed 57 questionnaires returned by staff.

Inspection team

Michael Merchant, Lead inspector	Additional Inspector
Charlotte Evers	Additional Inspector
Gill Carter	Additional Inspector
Teresa Hill	Additional Inspector
Kanwaljit Singh	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- Highdown School and Sixth Form Centre converted to become an academy school in November 2010. When its predecessor school, of the same name, was previously inspected by Ofsted in January 2010, it was judged to be outstanding.
- The academy is larger in size than the average-sized school.
- The large majority of students are of White British heritage.
- The proportion of students that are known to be eligible for the pupil premium (additional funding from the government for groups of students, including looked-after children and those known to be eligible for free school meals) is below average. There are currently a very small number of students who are in the care of the local authority.
- The proportion of disabled students and those who have special educational needs supported through school action is above average; the proportion supported at school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is broadly average.
- A very small number of students spend some of their time studying work-related courses at Reading College.
- The academy has specially resourced provision for disabled students and those with special educational needs (The Visual Impairment, or VI unit), which is managed by the governing body. There are currently eight students in the unit whose primary needs include visual impairment.
- The academy meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for students' progress and attainment.
- A new headteacher was appointed in December 2012, following the retirement of the previous headteacher. The new headteacher took up post in April 2013 and worked closely with the interim headteacher, now the deputy headteacher, between January and April 2013. A new deputy headteacher also took up post in April 2013.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that teaching is good or better in all subjects so that all groups of students make better than the expected three levels of progress between ages 11 to 16 by:
 - making sure that teachers always expect the very best work from all groups of students in their classes
 - ensuring that work set in lessons matches students' different capabilities, particularly the more able, and that all are fully involved in the tasks set
 - developing the use of questions by teachers so that they constantly check students' understanding and encourage them to think more deeply about the topics they are learning
 - improving the quality of marking so that all students have a clear idea of precisely what they need to do to improve their work and that all act on the advice given to them by teachers
 - rapidly giving support to those students in danger of underachieving, including disabled students and those who have special educational needs and those eligible for the pupil premium
 - improving the quality of support given in lessons to those students who need additional support in their learning, including those in the specialist VI unit.
- Improve the effectiveness of leaders and managers by making sure that:

- leaders responsible for subjects and for specific groups of students, especially those with particular needs, make better use of the academy's systems for checking achievement and teaching in their respective areas
- governors are more active in monitoring the academy and checking that agreed actions are effective in improving the quality of teaching and the achievement of students.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils

requires improvement

- Students enter the academy with attainment that is broadly average. GCSE examination results are broadly average overall and rising faster than the national trend. The proportion of students gaining the highest A* and A grades in most subjects, however, is below average.
- The progress measures of most groups of students require improvement. In 2012, while the proportion of students making the expected progress in mathematics exceeded the national picture, the corresponding figure in English was much lower. Few students made progress that exceeded national expectations.
- Inspection evidence, supported by robust data provided by the academy, indicates that current students are making better progress than those who have recently completed their examinations. Improvement is particularly evident in science, where most students are now making the progress expected of them.
- The achievement of disabled students and those who have special educational needs, including those with visual impairment based in the specialist unit, requires improvement. These students do not always receive the precise support in lessons to allow them to make good gains in their learning, and their progress has not been checked well enough by academy leaders.
- There is still some difference between the achievement of students eligible for the pupil-premium funding and others in Year 11. Just over a half of eligible students in Year 11 in 2012 made the progress expected of them in English, and in mathematics two thirds did so.
- Students supported by the pupil premium attain, on average, a grade lower than others in English and in mathematics. This gap, however, is smaller than that seen nationally and is getting smaller year on year because the academy uses its additional funding to help eligible students through one-to-one tuition and extra staffing in classes.
- The achievement of all groups of students, including those whose circumstances make them vulnerable, varies and too few make good progress, indicating that the academy's commitment to equal opportunities is not completely put into practice.
- The academy enters some students early for GCSE mathematics, with the opportunity to take the examinations again for those not attaining target grades. This is having a positive effect on the attainment of the more able students, a greater proportion of whom are gaining the GCSE grades of which they are capable.
- The small number of students following more practical subjects off site are gaining good experience in a range of subjects. This is helping them acquire the necessary skills to gain suitable employment or further training.
- The academy makes adequate use of funding received through the Year 7 catch-up programme (extra money from the government to support those students who attained below expected levels in English and mathematics in Year 6). Through additional support, such students make the expected gains in acquiring number, reading and writing skills.
- Students' achievement in the sixth form requires improvement. In 2012, AS- and A-level students attained broadly average grades and made the progress expected of them. Inspection

evidence suggests that current students are making better progress but this has yet to be established as a clear pattern over time.

The quality of teaching requires improvement

- Teaching requires improvement because it is inconsistent across the academy. Teaching in too many lessons does not help students make good progress.
- Some teachers expect too little of their students, both in terms of work-rate and in terms of challenging them. In these weaker lessons, teaching is slow and uninteresting and includes undemanding activities. This results in some students sitting idly or chatting and interrupting the learning of others.
- Too often, teachers give the same work to everyone, which leads to some more able students becoming bored because the work is not challenging them.
- In some lessons, students listen to the teacher for too long without being actively involved.
- Questions are not always used as well as they could be in lessons to deepen learning. Although in many classes, teachers take care to check that students have understood an idea by asking individuals precise and often quite probing questions that encourage them to think deeply, this is not always the case. Many teachers still rely on volunteers putting up their hands rather than targeting questions to individual students. This makes it easy for some students not to participate in question-and-answer sessions.
- Teachers' marking across the academy lacks consistency. It does not always show students what they need to do to improve their work or follow up whether students have acted on this advice.
- The use of additional adults in class and the regular withdrawal of disabled students and those who have special educational needs for extra help is not always effective enough to ensure that these students make the progress they should. This also applies to many students in the VI unit, who are sometimes left muddled because adults are too slow to give them the help they need.
- The exception to this is the success the academy has had in providing effective support for those students who arrive at the academy with weak reading skills. Timely interventions and the alertness of most teachers to developing the reading and writing skills of students across a range of subjects mean that nearly all are competent readers by the age of 16, and many read eagerly for pleasure.
- Teaching in the sixth form requires improvement when teachers do not use questions well enough to encourage students to think and offer explanations. Nevertheless, there is some highly successful practice. Students made excellent progress in a Year 12 history lesson when studying the peace settlement following the First World War. The teacher's perceptive use of well-directed questions hit just the right note and prompted students to work eagerly in groups to think creatively and critically about the issues involved.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are good

- Most students have positive attitudes towards learning and respond well to the effective systems the academy uses to manage behaviour.
- Good promotion of students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development contributes to their consistently good behaviour around the academy and in enrichment activities and assemblies. Students are invariably polite, courteous and friendly, offering help and assistance to visitors and other students.
- Behaviour is not yet outstanding because a small minority of students occasionally misbehave, which spoils the learning and enjoyment of others. This is particularly so when teaching lacks imagination and tasks are dull and repetitive.
- Students say they feel completely safe in the academy. They also say that if they have a problem, they know they can talk to an adult who will help them.

- Students have a good understanding of the different forms of bullying, including cyber-bullying. They report that the use of racist or homophobic language is extremely rare and if it does occur, students are confident that it will be challenged and dealt with successfully by staff. The academy actively encourages all students to express their individuality and appreciate that people are different.
- Students from different cultural and religious backgrounds get on well together and appreciate the harmonious climate created in the academy.
- Attendance is improving year on year and is now above average. Strong partnerships with outside agencies, such as education welfare and social services, support productive working with families to reduce the number of students who are persistently absent.

The leadership and management require improvement

- Until very recently, senior leaders have done too little to redress the decline in students' achievement or to improve teaching sufficiently. The academy has not been active enough in checking on those groups of students who could be doing better, particularly those supported by the pupil premium and those who need additional help.
- Leaders did not have a realistic view of how well the academy was doing and did not have an accurate view of its performance. This meant that leaders and governors had not clearly identified the most important issues that needed to be tackled to halt the academy's decline.
- The new headteacher has begun to tackle the academy's weaknesses with energy and passion. She has brought a 'breath of fresh air' to the academy, as one colleague commented, and other senior leaders now say that they now feel re-invigorated in their roles. She has lost no time in putting in place effective measures which are accelerating students' achievement and improving the quality of teaching.
- The headteacher has ensured that all staff, leaders, and governors now have a thorough understanding of well the academy is doing and what needs to be done to improve. As a result, self-evaluation is now accurate and this, together with better teaching and improved progress in key subjects such as science, shows that the leaders have shown a secure capacity to improve further.
- Good systems are now in place to monitor the quality of lessons and the overall progress of students. Clear feedback, coupled with appropriate advice and training, is offered to teachers whose performance falls short of the mark. However, some leaders do not always follow up these shortcomings with sufficient urgency so that the improvement in teaching is not as rapid as it could be.
- Some subject leaders and those responsible for groups of students, including the sixth form, are not yet good enough at checking the standards, learning and teaching in their respective areas.
- Academy leaders have not fully evaluated the effectiveness of the specialist provision for disabled students and those who have special educational needs or those in the VI unit. Leaders are not fully checking whether the deployment of additional adults in classrooms is providing the best support for these students.
- The new headteacher, with strong support from her senior leaders, has moved swiftly to ensure that all leaders are becoming fully accountable for students' achievement in their areas. She has not been afraid to take the difficult decisions necessary to make sure that weaknesses in the management of some areas of the academy do not continue to hold back improvements in students' achievement.
- Management decisions about teachers' movements up the salary scale are rigorous and there are clear links between teachers' performance and pay rises.
- The curriculum supports students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development well and there is a strong emphasis on securing improvements in students' literacy skills. More students are able to pursue the subjects included in the English baccalaureate. A range of vocational

courses meets the students' needs well.

■ Safeguarding arrangements meet all current requirements.

■ **The governance of the school:**

- Governors bring a wealth of skills to their roles and have undergone useful training. Until very recently, they have not had a realistic knowledge of how well the academy is performing in relation to other schools across the country. They are aware of the quality of teaching across the academy and are now involved in decisions that reward teachers for good performance. Governors understand how pupil-premium funding is spent but have had insufficient information to be able to check on its impact on the academy's most vulnerable pupils. In addition, the governing body has not, until recently, had enough information to identify patterns in pupils' achievement accurately or to make sure that teaching is improving quickly enough. Governors have been swift to respond to recent allegations of wrong-doing in the academy and have worked fearlessly to hold individuals to account for their actions.
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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	411980

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

Type of school	Academy converter
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	1,350
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	259
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Crispin Fairbairn
Headteacher	Rachel Cave
Date of previous school inspection	20 January 2010
Telephone number	0118 901 5800
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