

Varndean School

Balfour Road, Brighton, East Sussex, BN1 6NP

Inspection dates 11–12 July 2013

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Good	2
	This inspection:	Good	2
Achievement of pupils		Good	2
Quality of teaching		Good	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Good	2
Leadership and management		Good	2

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school.

- Students achieve well and the progress of different groups is improving rapidly.
- The headteacher has restructured the leadership team, raised expectations and implemented new policies and procedures. This is improving the quality of teaching and so raising students' achievement.
- Teaching is good, with some that is outstanding. Teachers develop good working relationships in the classroom and have high expectations of their students.
- The leaders and the governors took immediate action to improve the dip in results in mathematics in 2012 and as a result progress has improved.
- The governing body has a very good understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development. The governors carefully check all aspects of the school's work and provide very effective support and challenge to the school.

It is not yet an outstanding school because:

- The proportion of outstanding teaching is not high enough. In some lessons, not all students are set work at the right level of difficulty or are provided with enough opportunities to work independently.
- Best practice in teaching is not fully shared across the school, and so the progress students make in different lessons is sometimes variable.
- Although attendance is improving it is still below average for some groups.
- A minority of students sometimes misbehave in lessons so affecting the learning of others.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 40 lessons, some of which were with senior leaders. As well as looking at students' work they also talked to them about their experience in the school and how well the school is doing.
- Meetings were held with the headteacher, a number of senior and middle leaders as well as with the students from each year group.
- The school's local authority advisor and the Chair of the Governing Body and vice-chair were also met.
- Inspectors looked at a variety of school documents, including the school's checks on how well it is doing, the school development plans, behaviour records, safeguarding records, governing body documents, and documents relating to the management of teachers' performance.
- Inspectors took account of 107 responses to the online Parent View survey, two letters from parents and carers, one meeting with a parent or carer and 22 responses to the staff questionnaire.
- The inspection took place near the end of the term for the school, after the end-of-term 'enrichment week' for students during which they attended field trips and activities to extend their experiences.

Inspection team

Moazam Parvez, Lead inspector	Additional Inspector
David Butler	Additional Inspector
Mehar Brar	Additional Inspector
Patricia MacLachlan	Additional Inspector
Cliff Mainey	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- Varndean School is a larger-than-average secondary school.
- The proportion of students from ethnic minorities is below the national average with a very small number of students who speak English as additional language.
- The proportion of students eligible for the pupil premium, which provides additional funding for students known to be eligible for free school meals, looked after children and children of service families, is above the national average.
- The proportion of disabled students and those who have special educational needs who are supported at school action and the proportion supported at school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs are higher than those found nationally.
- A small number of students attend off-site provision at City College and Plumpton College.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for students' attainment and progress.
- Since the previous inspection, the school has received The Eco School's Green Flag.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Increase the proportion of outstanding teaching by ensuring that:
 - work is always set at the right level of difficulty for individual students and that they are provided with opportunities to work independently
 - marking consistently and routinely informs students of what they need to do to improve
 - the best practice in teaching is shared across the school in order to raise attainment and accelerate students' achievement
 - the new behaviour policy is fully embedded across the school.
- Improve attendance further by:
 - reducing the number of students who are persistently absent by extending and strengthening links with their parents and carers
 - applying rigorously the system of sanctions and rewards to ensure that students in all year groups attend regularly.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils is good

- Students' attainment is improving over time. The school's internal tracking, based on examinations already taken, indicates that students currently in Year 11 are set to exceed the national average in the percentage of students attaining five or more GCSEs at grade C or above, including English and mathematics.
- After a fall in mathematics results in 2012, strategies were put in place to address this. As a result there has been a marked improvement in the progress of students in mathematics for 2013 as shown by data available in the school. This was confirmed by lesson observations and scrutiny of work.
- Early GCSE entry of candidates in both English and mathematics in Year 11 has proved to be effective. The school provides students with appropriately targeted intervention and the opportunity to enhance their grades through resitting the examination at the end of Year 11.
- A small group of students who were identified as needing additional support attended vocational courses at Plumpton College and at City College. The progress of these students was carefully monitored by the school to ensure that they achieved well.
- In English and mathematics in 2012, Year 11 students who were eligible for pupil premium funding were one GCSE grade below their peers in the school. However, through the use of careful interventions this has been addressed for both subjects for 2013 and the gaps in attainment are narrowing.
- Disabled students and those with special educational needs are very well supported and achieve in line with their peers, as a result of focused support and careful interventions.
- The school uses Year 7 catch-up funding effectively to provide extra support for lower-attaining students in literacy, for example through the accelerated reading programme. School data show a positive impact on the progress that these students are now making.
- Literacy has been developed well as it is included in a range of subjects; this allows students to make good progress in both Key Stages 3 and 4. This is confirmed by lesson observations and through a detailed analysis of the school's data and tracking systems

The quality of teaching is good

- Teaching is improving and students achieve well over time and the fact that there was no teaching observed that was inadequate supports this judgement.
- Good or better teaching in the school is typically characterised by teachers asking questions skilfully to make students think hard and consolidate their understanding. Tasks are also usually well matched to the abilities of students and this means that individuals are able to make good progress. This was exemplified in one history lesson where Year 10 students were discussing the causes of the Cold War. The teacher very skilfully managed the lesson through effective questioning, very effective strategies that developed literacy skills and challenging activities that enabled students to make outstanding progress.
- Literacy is developing well in the school as it is not confined to English but is being addressed in all subject areas in a variety of ways. Good examples of this were seen in a range of lessons including one history lesson where the students were asked to interpret challenging key words and share them with their peers. In one geography lesson Year 10 students worked in pairs to define key terms about tourism and present them to the class.
- A strength of the lessons is the good relationships between the teachers and students and between the students themselves. This enables them to work together more effectively. A good example of this was seen in one lesson where a group of students supported each other in identifying language devices used in popular songs.
- Teachers do not always use the assessment data available to them to plan lessons that enable

students to make better progress. In some lessons this leads to tasks being set which are not appropriately matched to students' abilities. As a result, some students become disengaged and make too little progress. In some lessons, teachers do not include opportunities for students to learn without the help of the teacher.

- There is some outstanding practice but this is not being shared widely enough across the school to raise the overall quality of teaching still further.
- Some teachers do not mark work regularly or consistently set targets for improvement. When targets are set, they are not always followed up by students and checked by teachers. There is however some excellent practice evident in the school.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are good

- Students conduct themselves well in and around the school; the school is generally calm and orderly.
- Students in discussions stated that behaviour has improved significantly since the introduction of the new behaviour policy. They also said that misbehaviour was still evident in a few lessons but that this was becoming less common.
- Students are aware of different types of bullying and know how to keep themselves safe.
- The large majority of parents, carers and staff agree that the school makes sure its students are well behaved.
- Although absence levels are above the national average, the school has taken effective steps to reduce the absence of all groups, including students supported by pupil premium funding, who now attend more regularly. The majority of students attend well and are punctual to lessons.

The leadership and management are good

- The headteacher and the leadership team, well supported by governors, have been effective in focusing on improving the quality of teaching. This has led to 'the dangerous teachers club' being established where teachers challenge and support each other in trying new teaching strategies to improve their teaching.
- The headteacher and the governing body have restructured the leadership team to improve its effectiveness in raising attainment and improve progress through greater accountability.
- The curriculum has been redesigned to meet the needs of all students at Varndean School. The curriculum now incorporates more courses that will enable students of all abilities to make better progress.
- The headteacher and the leadership team have worked effectively to address the weaknesses in the mathematics department through close monitoring, targeted support and effective interventions.
- Tracking of students' progress towards challenging targets is now established and is used more effectively to hold staff to account. Performance management is used effectively to underpin decisions about movement up the salary scale for teachers. Challenging targets based on four levels of progress are used to raise expectations. Careful support and monitoring of performance enable staff to work towards achieving their targets and so further improve their teaching and the achievement of students.
- All staff who responded to the survey said they were proud to be a member of staff at this school. As one middle leader commented, 'The school is certainly moving in the right direction and the leadership is pushing middle leaders to raise standards across the board.' Subject leaders are very aware of what needs to be done to improve the quality of teaching and progress of students; however the monitoring of this is still inconsistent across the school.
- A new 'Schools Within Schools' model has been introduced in September 2012 which is designed to track and nurture students in a small school environment and to improve the quality of school

experience for students. As one parent or carer commented, 'We've really seen the benefit of the move to the four schools pastoral system where (our child) has been given great support.'

- Leaders ensure that students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is promoted very effectively. Students are provided with opportunities to take part in a wide range of enrichment activities, including visits to other countries. They enjoy the art and drama activities after school and are able to develop their interests and talents through this provision. One student remarked typically, 'Performing arts is really amazing here.' The school has achieved The Artsmark Gold award for contributions to the arts including the active part it plays in the Brighton Festival. Students in Year 7 discuss complex moral dilemmas such as, 'Is it ok to do something wrong when you can get away with it?' Students and staff have raised substantial funds for a number of charities and the school is the lead school in the Children Helping Other Children Smile (CHOCS) initiative.
- The headteacher and the senior team have introduced a new behaviour policy which has led to a more consistent approach to managing behaviour across the school. The impact of this can be seen in a slight reduction in exclusions and fewer behavioural problems. The students have commented positively on the impact of this in lessons.
- The school's local authority partner knows the school well and has supported the headteacher in driving up standards.
- The school's arrangements for safeguarding students meet statutory requirements. The school takes effective steps to ensure the safety of students when attending off-site activities.

■ **The governance of the school:**

- Governors challenge leaders through close checks on students' performance in examinations, for example, and they visit regularly. Governors have a good understanding of the quality of teaching across the school. They play an active role in the salary progression of staff by ensuring that students' progress justifies better pay or promotion. Governors fully support leaders' actions to tackle underperformance. They know about the targets set for teachers to manage their performance and how well they are progressing towards meeting them. Financial planning is very good and governors understand how pupil premium and Year 7 literacy catch-up funding and is being used and how effective this is in improving progress and achievement.

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	114579
Local authority	Brighton and Hove
Inspection number	412784

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	1,367
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Jon Dee
Headteacher	William Deighan
Date of previous school inspection	14–15 October 2009
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