



Helenswood School

Inspection Report

Unique Reference Number 114600
LEA East Sussex
Inspection number 279423
Inspection dates 1 March 2006 to 2 March 2006
Reporting inspector Anne Feltham HMI

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

Type of school	Comprehensive	School address	The Ridge
School category	Maintained		St Leonards-on-Sea
Age range of pupils	11 to 18		East Sussex TN37 7PS
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	01424 753040
Number on roll	1268	Fax number	01424 752529
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair of governors	Mr Brian Fox
Date of previous inspection	3 April 2000	Headteacher	Mrs Jenny Blackburn

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and four Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Helenswood School is a comprehensive community school for girls, situated on two sites in St. Leonard's-on-Sea, just outside Hastings, East Sussex. The sixth form is shared with a neighbouring boys' school and pupils study at either or both schools, according to the courses they choose. After a period of significant uncertainty, in 2005 the school received confirmation that its sixth form provision would be maintained. Pupils come from a wide range of social economic backgrounds. The number of pupils entitled to free school meals is around the national average. The school has fewer pupils than is the case nationally from black and minority ethnic groups, or whose first language is other than English. The number of pupils with statements of special educational needs is slightly below the national average. The school has specialist status in the performing arts.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Helenswood school provides an effective education for its pupils and the learning environment is outstandingly caring and supportive. Attendance and behaviour are generally good. Pupils enjoy being at school and contribute well to developments in school and in the wider community. Sports and arts opportunities are strong and underpin the school's commitment to fostering healthy lifestyles. The school seeks the views of pupils and parents and makes good efforts to take these into account in developing and improving provision. Pupils enter the school with around, or slightly below, average attainment and make good progress through the school. Standards are particularly high in mathematics, business studies, drama and music. Standards and progress in English have shown recent improvement. The school is beginning to address appropriately underachievement in science, where standards are low in Key Stage 3 and improving at GCSE. Teaching is of a good quality overall: teachers know their subjects well and generally mark pupils' work carefully, giving helpful guidance on how to improve. Teachers are now rightly focusing on involving pupils more fully in planning and evaluating their own learning and on ensuring consistently high standards of behaviour. The headteacher provides excellent leadership, and works closely with the senior team, staff and governors to review provision and seek continuous improvement. She knows her school well and the inspection confirmed the accuracy of her evaluation. Effective management is demonstrated by the way in which the challenges of linking work on two sites, and over two schools in the sixth form, are addressed. The school has appropriately identified the development of subject leaders' management skills as key to future improvement. The school provides good value for money and demonstrates a clear capacity to improve. Specialist school status has had a very positive impact on work in the focus areas of performing arts, with some wider benefits to pupils and to those in the wider community.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 3

The future of the school's sixth form was uncertain over a protracted period of time, and was confirmed only in summer 2005. Plans for developing sixth form provision are appropriate and have the potential to lead to rapid improvement in an area where results in recent years have been low. Inspectors agree with the school that improvement is currently underway and there is clear capacity for further progress.

What the school should do to improve further

- raising standards in science at Key Stage 3
- continuing to secure improvement in standards and achievement in the sixth form
- developing the skills of subject leaders in monitoring and improving the quality of teaching and learning in their departments.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

Standards are broadly in line with national averages and pupils' overall achievement is good at Key Stages 3 and 4. Achievement and standards in the sixth form are satisfactory overall, showing recent improvement. At the end of Key Stage 3, standards in national tests are broadly average. The trend in improvement has been close to the national trend. Standards in English in 2004 dropped sharply but have now improved. Standards in mathematics are good. Standards in science declined in 2005 and were below average. The proportion of pupils attaining five or more A*-C grades is broadly average and an above average proportion attain A*-C grades. Results are particularly good in business studies, drama, mathematics and music. Pupils make good progress overall. Higher-attaining pupils fulfil their potential; lower-attaining pupils and those with special educational needs, or the few for whom English is not their first language, do well. The school is currently rightly targeting Year 9 pupils with slightly below average results to help them to do better at Key Stage 4. There has been a gradual decline in standards in Years 12 and 13 since 2003 during a period in which the school expected to lose its sixth form through reorganisation. This affected the numbers of students choosing to stay on and a significant proportion of potentially higher-attaining students opted to leave the school. In 2005, standards and achievement were low in AS and A2 examinations. Evidence from the inspection supports the school's view that standards in the current Years 12 and 13 are higher and that student achievement is at least satisfactory. The school retains a high proportion of its students who begin post-16 courses.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

The personal development and well-being of pupils is good. Pupils enjoy school and this is shown in their above average attendance in Key Stages 3 and 4; attendance in the sixth form has improved this year. Pupils take an active part in school life. They willingly become school councillors, 'smile savers'- those who help other pupils in need - and community sports leaders. Large numbers participate in an extensive range of extra-curricular, sporting and other enrichment activities, productions and events, such as Arts Week. Behaviour is good overall but in a few lessons distracting behaviour affects learning; pupils comment that 'some teachers are not strict enough'. Relationships are generally good. Pupils say they feel safe from bullying, and the school listens to their, and their parents', concerns, when difficulties arise. Exclusions are decreasing, and are used only when all other routes are exhausted. Pupils' views on the development of the school are sought and acted upon. The school council makes a difference, for example, influencing improvements in facilities and in uniform. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is strong and multicultural experiences are embedded in the curriculum. Pupils are well aware of the importance of adopting healthy lifestyles, staying safe, and seizing work and enterprise opportunities because these are given a high priority in all aspects of school life.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teaching is good overall and, as a result, pupils make good progress in lessons. The very best teachers set varied activities that keep their pupils interested and involved, often with strict time limits to maintain a brisk pace of work. Teachers know their subjects well and they emphasise practical applications to make learning relevant. In a sixth-form physics lesson, for example, students were set the task of accurately measuring the length of a fish, equipped solely with their fishing twine, wristwatch and what they had learnt about pendulums. Teachers make effective use of ongoing assessment to plan their lessons and to check pupils' understanding. Marking usually gives pupils good guidance on what they need to do to improve their work. The rarer lessons that are not as strong often involve too much teacher-talk, with opportunities missed for students to develop their independent learning skills and to assess their own work. The school encourages teachers to structure their lessons with clear learning objectives and to undertake a plenary session at the end to consolidate key points learnt. In some cases, however, teachers only outline tasks to be carried out at the beginning of lessons, without explaining their purpose in relation to learning. Plenary sessions are often missed when time runs out and, as a result, the opportunity to evaluate and reinforce what has been learnt is lost. Although behaviour management is a strength of most lessons, a few teachers are too tolerant of minor misbehaviour that can sometimes slow the pace of learning.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

The school offers a broad curriculum that is well matched to pupils' needs. Pupils also benefit from an extensive range of enrichment opportunities through clubs and visits, and these have been strengthened further through the school's specialist status in performing arts. In the sixth form, a highly inclusive approach to enrolment has resulted in opportunities for all pupils to stay on, although courses have not always been appropriate to ensure successful achievement. The school is rightly significantly expanding the range of vocational courses on offer. In science, where results have lagged behind other subjects, the move to offer pupils the option of an applied science course has extended their opportunities for achievement. The school recognises that progress in science also needs to be improved by ensuring that pupils build systematically on their skills and knowledge as they move through Years 7 to 9. Working across two school sites presents both challenges and opportunities for Helenswood. The school exploits well the advantages of separate upper and lower schools, giving pupils an effective transition when they start their GCSE and other external examination courses. On the other hand, the physical separation of the buildings inevitably places restrictions on timetabling and flexible staff deployment. Specialist School status is well led and managed and has had a positive impact on pupils' achievement, particularly

in drama, music and performing arts. The school's performing arts programme is rich, with increasing numbers of pupils taking part in a wide variety of activities. Other subjects are involved in a programme of events but, as yet, impact is not widely discernible throughout the curriculum. Resources are maximised imaginatively to secure best value. In recognition of its work, the school holds the Artsmark Gold award.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 2

The care provided for pupils is outstanding and staff work very hard to ensure that pupils are happy and achieve. 'We like to find the best in every pupil' say managers. Pupils are very positive about the support they receive when joining the school, choosing options and careers, and considering the sixth form. Their academic progress is monitored carefully by tutorial teams, who work closely with subject teachers. Mentors provide additional focused support for pupils identified as underachieving. All pupils undertake work placements and some pupils have attended meetings of the Youth Parliament and United Nations at The Hague. The support for vulnerable pupils is very strong. Teamwork, nurturing pupils and inclusiveness are central to the ethos of this school and links with local agencies are excellent. 'The Lodge' team offers valuable withdrawal and reintegration provision for targeted pupils in Key Stage 3. Very good classroom support from teaching assistants, who often have specific subject expertise and experience, results in provision which is closely tailored to individual needs and also benefits whole classes. The school has very good systems for ensuring pupils' health and safety. Regular and rigorous risk assessment and child protection procedures are firmly in place. The extensive personal, social and health education programme is popular amongst pupils and it covers well the key areas of healthy lifestyles, staying safe, contributing to the community and economic well-being. In recognition of its work, the school also holds the Artsmark Gold award.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 3

The overall leadership and management of the school is good, with outstanding leadership by the headteacher. She works closely with the senior team to run the school very efficiently, actively seeking, and responding to, the views of parents and pupils. In recent years school leaders have sought to resolve protracted uncertainties about the future of the school sixth-form, with the result that this joint provision is now secure. Effective management ensures that all possible benefits are derived – and difficulties minimised – from the challenges of linking provision on the two school sites and ensuring good liaison with the other school in the sixth form federation. Another example of the effective management of the school is the way in which staff recruitment difficulties, which have affected the performance of some subject areas in particular over time, have been largely overcome by a responsive approach to new

ways of recruiting and retaining staff, for example involvement with local initial teacher-training initiatives. The senior team has a good knowledge of the school's strengths and has identified and is tackling weaknesses well, for example, in action underway to improve pupils' progress in science. The governing body is highly committed and knows the school very well; governors fulfil their responsibilities effectively, and a particularly successful aspect of their work is their involvement at subject level. The school is aware of the key role in school improvement of middle managers, and a range of good strategies are being employed – for example, participation in the "Leading from the Middle" initiative – to improve further the performance of its curriculum leaders. Heads of department monitor the work of their teaching teams on a regular basis, analyse performance effectively and plan well for future action. Good measures in place are increasingly improving the quality of teaching and learning, but there is still some variation across subjects. Leadership of the sixth form is sound, and appropriate mechanisms are now in place to improve the quality of provision rapidly. The school development plan addresses all aspects of the work of the school and supports improvement very well. Performing arts specialist status has resulted in raised standards in focus subjects, is beginning to bring wider benefits across the curriculum, and is enabling the school to develop further its existing wide links with the community. Resources are used very efficiently and the school provides good value for money. The school enjoys the respect of the wide range of agencies with which it deals and these links have had a positive impact on pupils' achievement.

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Inspection judgements

<i>Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate</i>	School Overall	16-19
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Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	2	3
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	1	2
The quality and standards in foundation stage	NA	NA
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	Yes	Yes
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	3	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	3
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	2	

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2	
The behaviour of learners	2	
The attendance of learners	2	
How well learners enjoy their education	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	2	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	3
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1	2

¹ Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2	
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets, through quality assurance and self-review	2	
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	2	
How effectively and efficiently resources are deployed to achieve value for money	2	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2	
The adequacy and suitability of staff to ensure that learners are protected	Yes	Yes

The extent to which schools enable learners to be healthy	
Learners are encouraged and enabled to eat and drink healthily	Yes
Learners are encouraged and enabled to take regular exercise	Yes
Learners are discouraged from smoking and substance abuse	Yes
Learners are educated about sexual health	Yes
The extent to which providers ensure that learners stay safe	
Procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements	Yes
Risk assessment procedures and related staff training are in place	Yes
Action is taken to reduce anti-social behaviour, such as bullying and racism	Yes
Learners are taught about key risks and how to deal with them	Yes
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution	
Learners are helped to develop stable, positive relationships	Yes
Learners, individually and collectively, participate in making decisions that affect them	Yes
Learners are encouraged to initiate, participate in and manage activities in school and the wider community	Yes
The extent to which schools enable learners to achieve economic well-being	
There is provision to promote learners' basic skills	Yes
Learners have opportunities to develop enterprise skills and work in teams	Yes
Careers education and guidance is provided to all learners in key stage 3 and 4 and the sixth form	Yes
Education for all learners aged 14–19 provides an understanding of employment and the economy	Yes

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

Dear Pupils I am writing on behalf of the inspection team to let you know the judgements we have made about your school. We think your school is a good one, where teachers provide outstanding care and support to help you learn well, make good progress and be healthy. Your teachers say “we like to find the best in every pupil” and this encouragement helps you to prepare very well for adult life. As well as providing good subject teaching, the school is also developing new areas – for example, expanding vocational courses in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form – to give you more opportunities for success in the future. During the inspection we noticed that you are keen to learn and that your behaviour in lessons is generally of a high standard, especially when teachers are firm. You help each other readily, relationships in class are good, and you contribute well to school life and to the community beyond your school. In order to become even better, your school needs to:

- Help you to make better progress in science
- Make sure that more of you stay on beyond Year 11 and do well in the sixth form
- Involve you more fully in planning, evaluating and improving your own work in some subject areas.

Thank you for taking part in the inspection, by talking to us about your work and your life in school and for making us so welcome. With very best wishes for your future success.

Yours sincerely Anne Feltham Her Majesty’s Inspector of Schools