

Helenswood School

Inspection report - amended

Unique Reference Number	114600
Local Authority	East Sussex
Inspection number	326046
Inspection date	25 March 2009
Reporting inspector	Patricia Metham HMI

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

Type of school	Middle deemed primary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Girls
Number on roll	
School (total)	1258
Sixth form	174
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Lesley Swarbrooke
Headteacher	Lucy Monk
Date of previous school inspection	1 March 2006
School address	The Ridge St Leonards-on-Sea TN37 7PS
Telephone number	01424 753040
Fax number	01424 752529

Age group	11–18
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Amended Report Addendum

Report amended due to a change to the report following a complaint

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an Additional Inspector, who evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues:

- Achievement and standards in the sixth form.
- How well the school is meeting the needs of less able students, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
- The impact of the school's specialist status for performing arts.
- Specific aspects of leadership and management, such as the effectiveness of governance, the monitoring of teaching and the contribution made to community cohesion.

Evidence was gathered from discussion with governors, leadership and management, staff and students, from a review of school documentation and scrutiny of work, and from parental responses to a questionnaire. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail but inspectors found no evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments, as given in its self-evaluation, were not justified, and these have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

Helenswood is a large school on two main sites about 1.5 miles apart: the lower school for Years 7 to 9 and the upper school for Years 10 and 11 and the sixth form. Most students are of White British heritage. While there are fewer than average students with a statement of special educational needs, the overall proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is broadly in line with the national profile; their needs are largely associated with social and behavioural issues or language and communication difficulties. The sixth form is federated with the neighbouring William Parker School and coverage of an agreed curriculum is shared between the two schools. Helenswood has specialist performing arts status, re-designated in 2006. It is part of a group providing school-centred initial teacher training (SCITT). The headteacher has been in post since January 2009.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

Helenswood is currently providing a satisfactory quality of education, following two years in which a consultant headteacher undertook a process of review and an acting headteacher then ensured the steady day-to-day running of the school. The appointment in January 2009 of a substantive headteacher with a clear and ambitious vision for the school, persuasive management skills and formidable energy has led to further rigorous review and a well-structured development plan. The school's capacity to improve is satisfactory. The identification of immediate priorities, the raising of expectations and more systematic monitoring of teaching and learning are beginning to have a positive impact. The governing body is becoming more confident in its role as 'critical friend', benefiting from open and constructive dialogue with the new headteacher. Particularly striking is the commitment shared by governors, staff and students to Helenswood's ethos and style as a girls' school and their justifiable confidence in its importance to the local community. Helenswood is a centre of excellence for the performing arts. Through its Youth University and work with local services, the school provides a well-supported range of learning opportunities for young people and adults.

Students enter with broadly average levels of attainment, although the proportion of higher attainers is relatively small. By the end of Year 9, they reach standards in English and mathematics that are better than the county average, but science has remained an area of relative weakness. In 2008, overall GCSE results were broadly in line with the national average, which reflects a satisfactory rate of progress. Students opting for individual sciences achieved significantly better results than those taking the applied science double award. Standards in mathematics were above average while those in English remained slightly below, although this has been attributable in part to staffing difficulties. Appropriate strategies are now in place to raise standards. These include after-school support for underachieving students, team teaching, additional training for staff, and guidance from consultants on the use of assessment information. It is too early to assess the impact of these initiatives. Results in subjects directly linked to the school's performing arts specialism have been good, especially in dance.

Regular assessments of students' progress are being established in all departments and a 'traffic light' system is now used to identify underachievers, who are then closely monitored. Most parents find this clear and helpful. The headteacher acknowledges that as yet, not all teachers are using the relevant data efficiently, but further training and regular monitoring are spreading good practice. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, especially those linked to behaviour and communication, make steady progress but it is slower than that of their contemporaries. Individual students and their parents speak positively about the support they have been given, especially by teaching assistants, but overall provision for those with particular needs has lacked close management and accountability. Appropriate plans are in place to address this. Achievement and standards in the sixth form have been significantly below national averages, not showing the improvement called for in the 2006 inspection report. There is, however, evidence that since the start of this year, more systematic use of assessment information and more purposeful monitoring of progress are beginning to push up levels of attainment.

The variation in standards from subject to subject reflects variations in the quality of teaching. The headteacher's accurate assessment of teaching as satisfactory overall is based on recent results and her own observations. Students are generally keen to learn, responding well to teaching that is lively, based on confident subject knowledge and varied in style. There is,

however, some teaching that lacks pace and does not give students sufficient opportunity for practical investigation, group work and independent learning, and where expectations are not challenging. Strengths that are well established across the performing arts are now being developed more widely, such as an emphasis on experimentation and presentation, with peer- and self-assessment by students complementing well-pitched guidance from teachers. There has until very recently been no specific senior management responsibility for monitoring teaching. Records of lesson observations show considerable variation in approach and rigour between departments, with little evidence that points for improvement have been followed up. A well-structured template for recording observations has now been drawn up for use across the school, including the sixth form. More systematic and rigorous monitoring and clear lines of accountability are being put in place.

As the school rightly judges, students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. Students value opportunities to take on responsibility both in school and within the local community. Many take part in performing arts projects that explore key events in local history and complex social and ethical issues such as bullying and prejudice. Students feel safe and are confident that any problems will be quickly and fairly resolved, either by staff or by peer mentors. They understand the importance of a healthy lifestyle and most make healthy choices. Clubs, sports and activities such as dance are well supported. Students in all year groups are emphatic that they enjoy school and, apart from a more relaxed approach to school uniform, do not see the need for any significant changes. Attendance is good, although some families continue to arrange holidays during term-time despite strong opposition from the school. Students develop some skills that equip them well for later life, but their limited competence in literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology means that students' preparation for future economic well-being is satisfactory.

The curriculum matches the needs and aspirations of most, but not all, students and is satisfactory overall. There are conspicuous strengths in the performing arts and the decision to introduce a number of more practical courses, such as Level 2 BTEC in music, was well judged. The range and quality of modern foreign language options are appreciated by students, with Spanish being particularly successful. Students feel that they have a reasonable choice of subjects. Although the marking of written work does not always give sufficiently detailed pointers for improvement, care, guidance and support across Years 7 to 11 are good. Pastoral and academic support complement each other well. The school works very productively with a range of local agencies and draws appropriately on specialist expertise to complement its support for vulnerable students. The profile of standards and achievement in the sixth form, however, indicates that students are not always well advised and too many undertake courses that do not play to their strengths. Since January 2009, the new headteacher has perceptibly sharpened up the school's self-evaluation, raised expectations and set out ambitious strategies for school improvement. Improving the quality of teaching and learning and the curriculum has rightly been the key priority, and good progress has been made in reviewing provision and putting together convincing development plans. She has consistent and positive support from those in the senior leadership team, whose range of experience and particular interests are being well deployed. The sustained impact of these well judged priorities and initiatives in improving students' achievement and standards has yet to be seen, so leadership and management are judged satisfactory at this stage. Management of the school's performing arts specialism is good, with a growing impact on teaching and learning within Helenswood. Each year, there is an ambitious programme of performance-based projects with primary and secondary schools, exemplifying Helenswood's role as a 'change school' for the national Creative

Partnerships programme. These projects are developed collaboratively and their impact carefully evaluated as a basis for future planning. The school's split site has worked against school cohesion. Events such as the annual dance show do bring older and younger students together but the lower and upper schools have distinct and separate identities. Students' understanding of their place in the local community is actively promoted through a range of community projects. Exchanges with schools in Continental Europe, participation in the Hastings-Sierra Leone association and substantial curriculum coverage develop students' awareness of the global community. In a similar way, through the curriculum, special arts projects and visits to places of historic and cultural interest, students gain a basic understanding of Britain as a multicultural community.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 3

Federation with a neighbouring school has extended the curriculum on offer and students enjoy many aspects of sixth form life. Until very recently, however, management and monitoring of teaching and learning were not sufficiently well co-ordinated or effective to ensure that provision successfully met all needs. Students have been accepted onto courses for which they were not well suited, with poor results. Assessment and tracking of students' progress have been uneven and lines of accountability have lacked clarity. Whilst the federation has until recently been an inadequate aspect of Helenswood's use of partnerships, there is evidence now of a more co-ordinated and purposeful approach associated with changes in school leadership and new management structures. Recent assessments indicate that students are making better progress, although overall standards remain a little below the national average. Current levels of attainment mean that students' preparation for life beyond school is satisfactory. Some teaching still lacks pace and challenge and does not sufficiently promote independent learning. However, there is also some effective teaching, featuring good subject knowledge, high expectations and a variety of approach. Students are courteous, mutually supportive and well motivated. They respond well to opportunities to take on responsibility but the school's structure makes this difficult.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure consistency of good teaching and assessment in all departments, and most particularly in the sixth form, to raise standards and to encourage students to become independent learners.
- Make rigorous use of assessment and information about students' progress to address underachievement, especially amongst students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

A small proportion of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory but which have areas of underperformance will receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

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Annex A

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	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?	3	3
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	No
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well being?	2	3
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	3	3

Achievement and standards

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

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

Personal development and well-being

How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2	3
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	2	
The attendance of learners	2	
The behaviour of learners	2	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3	

The quality of provision

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

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	3	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	3	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3	3
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	3	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	3	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	3	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	3	
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No	
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No	

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

26 March 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Helenswood School, St Leonard's on Sea TN37 7PS

Thank you for the help you so cheerfully and courteously gave us when we visited your school recently to see how well it is doing. Your willingness to show us your work and to answer our questions made our task easier and enjoyable. I am glad to have this opportunity to tell you what we found.

As many of you were keen to point out, Helenswood is a friendly community where teachers are supportive and you take good care of each other. The school is providing a satisfactory quality of education overall with some notable strengths, especially in the performing arts. We were pleased to hear that you feel safe at school and are confident that any difficulties will be quickly and fairly dealt with. Many of you make a positive contribution through involvement with the school council or acting as peer mentors. You understand the importance of a healthy lifestyle and make the most of the wide range of clubs, sports and activities available.

Your new headteacher has already set up some good systems in order to improve key areas such as teaching and the curriculum. In order to help each of you fulfil your potential and achieve qualifications that will give you a range of interesting possibilities when you leave school, we have particularly asked your headteacher and her staff to do the following things.

- Make sure that the most successful approaches to teaching and assessment are spread consistently across the school, including the sixth form, so that you all do as well as you can and are encouraged to become more independent learners.
- Use the information that is gathered about how each of you is progressing to ensure that anyone who is not doing as well as she could is quickly given additional guidance and appropriate support.

I look forward to seeing Helenswood School go from strength to strength. You can help by making the most of opportunities to develop your own ideas, both independently and through working with each other, and by having high expectations of what you can achieve.

With best wishes

Patricia Metham Her Majesty's Inspector