

Highcliffe School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	113906
Local Authority	Dorset
Inspection number	311426
Inspection date	12 February 2008
Reporting inspector	Helen Hutchings

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

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1381
6th form	252
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Martin Axton
Headteacher	Judith Potts
Date of previous school inspection	23 February 2004
School address	Parkside Highcliffe Christchurch BH23 4QD
Telephone number	01425 273381
Fax number	01425 271405

Age group	11-18
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors. The inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues: the impact of the school's provision in contributing to improving standards and students' achievement; the effectiveness of systems to track and assess students' progress; and the impact of the school's specialist status on raising standards. Evidence was gathered from visits to lessons, an analysis of school data, scrutiny of students' work and teachers' planning, discussions with students, staff, representative governors and parents, the views of parents, and scrutiny of the school's documentation. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but the 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 the report.

Description of the school

The school is larger than most schools. Most students join the school from local primary schools in Dorset and Hampshire. Students' starting points on entry to the school are above average. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is average. Most students are from White British backgrounds and there are a few from a range of minority ethnic heritages. The school has held specialist language school status since 2000 and was awarded a second specialism in science and mathematics in 2004. The school works collaboratively with two other local secondary schools to provide sixth form courses. The school has gained a number of awards, including recognition as a High Performing Specialist School, Healthy School status, Artsmark, Sportsmark, Innovation Awards for 'The Highcliffe Challenge' and 'My Highcliffe', International School Status, European Schoolsnet Award for the Innovative use of ICT, Eco-School Award, Investors in Careers Quality Mark and the Inclusive Schools Quality Mark.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Highcliffe School is a good school. It also has many outstanding features. The vast majority of students and their parents rightly hold it in high regard, reflected in the comment of one parent: 'A brilliant school'. Although a high proportion of students live some distance away, the school has effectively placed itself at the heart of the community. It works exceptionally well with a range of providers, including other schools locally, to enhance opportunities for students. The popularity and success of the sixth form is reflected in the increased numbers in recent years. The school has high expectations and a good track record of improving students' attainment. As another parent said, 'The future's boundless'. The school's capacity for innovation has been recognised beyond the school in a variety of ways, for example, in the British Council's award for the breadth of opportunities for students to develop their understanding of international issues. The school's dual specialisms for languages and science and mathematics are exceptionally well embedded and have a wide-ranging impact on other curriculum areas across the school. Students are proud of exchange visits and the links with schools in other countries. Such activities make a strong contribution to students' outstanding spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

There is a positive buzz about the school's work, contributed to by the extremely wide range of extra-curricular activities and visits enjoyed by students. Sports activities are particularly well attended, making a good contribution to students' health and well-being. Students have the personal qualities and skills that equip them exceptionally well to make decisions for themselves and take full advantage of further educational opportunities when they leave school. They are mature and extremely responsible, showing great care for one another. Relationships between students themselves and with staff are warm, supporting a strong learning culture where adults and students are partners in the classroom. Students say that they feel safe and that staff deal very well with any incidents of bullying. The school is orderly and students respect one another and the fabric of the building, showing their appreciation of the improved facilities. When asked what they would like to see improved, they responded with, 'Nothing really, we like it as it is.'

Students are confident that their views are listened to and taken seriously. The school successfully extends students' understanding of democracy and their citizenship skills as members of the school council or as associate members of the governing body. Students particularly appreciate the opportunities they have to develop leadership and teamwork skills, for example, through the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme or in learning to work cooperatively in lessons. The 'Highcliffe Challenge' initiative, which sets a series of challenges beyond lessons, gives students a strong understanding of their own personal and academic achievement. Most students enjoy school, reflected in above-average attendance, and the school is keen to build further on recent improvements in attendance to support its drive to improve standards further.

Standards throughout the school and in the sixth form are above average. Results both at the end of Year 9 and in GCSE have been significantly above national averages for many years. The school is rightly proud that a significantly higher than average proportion of students gains good GCSE A* to C grades in both English and mathematics, and has plans to build further on the improvements made last year. As standards improve, the school is gaining the confidence to set increasingly challenging targets for its performance. The school's data indicate that it is on course to meet its targets this year. For the last few years, the school has successfully focused on raising the attainment of middle-attaining students and this has brought about overall

improvements. In particular, the gap between school and national performance levels has increased. Another significant success is illustrated in the improvement in boys' attainment, so that the gap between their performance and that of girls is less than found nationally. The school attributes improvements in standards largely to the rigour of its systems for tracking students' progress. The system is used very well to identify those who would benefit from 'booster' sessions. Students are enthusiastic about these additional lessons and feel that they are helpful.

Students achieve well because of rigorous and consistently good quality teaching and a wide-ranging curriculum which meets their needs. Teachers are confident in their subject knowledge and structure lessons well, in line with whole-school expectations. In the lessons observed, students were challenged well. They are expected to work things out for themselves and do so with excellent levels of engagement and attention. They monitor their own learning and achievements. Students say that they find their academic targets helpful, although some are too general. Marking also sometimes lacks detail, so that students are not always clear enough about exactly what they have to do to reach a higher grade or level. A few parents commented positively on the greater consistency that has been brought to the setting of homework by placing it on the school intranet, and appreciate that both parents and students can access this information from home.

Students respond very positively to the excellent levels of care, support and guidance provided by staff. The school has developed a very comprehensive system of data collection and staff use it very effectively to identify any student who may be vulnerable or experiencing problems. Students speak warmly of the personal support and encouragement they are given to raise their own expectations. They appreciate the structure that mentoring provides for them and staff are seen to be 'fair but firm'. The success of this approach is reflected in the low level of exclusion. A few parents of students with learning and/or disabilities comment very positively on the extent to which the school 'goes the extra mile' to provide support at times of particular personal difficulty.

An undoubted reason for the school's success is the outstanding leadership and management of the headteacher and senior team, resulting in a vision for the future shared by all members of the school community. The vast majority of parents identified the strength of leadership and management. The headteacher's determination and calm approach have been key factors in taking the school through a time of financial challenge. Financial viability has been achieved and significant improvements made to the quality of accommodation, although more remains to be done to upgrade facilities for physical education and sport. The issues identified at the time of the last inspection have been addressed successfully. This stability has enabled leadership to be strengthened at all levels. New roles have been established, enabling support staff to play a vital part in supporting young people. Performance is challenged robustly. Staff development has been focused and very effective so that there is an infectious enthusiasm about improving practice further. Staff morale is high and the school now faces the future with an exceptionally strong sense of teamwork and understanding of the school's distinctive nature and direction. It has already demonstrated its extremely strong capacity to bring about a sustained increase in standards and this process has gained a momentum, with students currently achieving above previous years' levels. Governors play a key part in the school's strategic planning and challenge as well as support. Self-evaluation is an integral part of the work across the whole school, both for staff and students. The clear awareness of the school's strengths and areas for improvement, together with strong planning, places the school exceptionally well to raise achievement further.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The school's vision for a sixth form catering for the full range of students' needs is becoming a reality as the range of courses, including vocational courses, steadily increases. The school recognises that provision needs to be widened further, with more courses matching students' differing levels of attainment. The strength of leadership and its determination to provide a high quality experience for all are reflected in the way in which leaders listen to students' views and provide them with excellent advice and guidance. Students value the flexible approach to the curriculum, which enables them to follow courses of their choice. Because they follow relevant courses that interest them, students achieve well. Standards are above average and the average points score per entry has increased significantly over the last three years. The proportion of students continuing from AS to A level is high. As in the main school, the improvement to the systems for monitoring and tracking students' progress is enabling potential underachievement to be identified and tackled early. As students understand more clearly the quality of their work, improvements are already evident in AS results. The school's projections show that it is on track for further improvements in A level results this year.

A particular mark of the effectiveness of the sixth form is the very strong record of success students have in achieving places in universities and further education institutions of their choice. Students trust their teachers, and the very good working relationships between staff and students add significantly to the positive atmosphere in lessons. Sixth form students value their facilities, such as their own café. They provide excellent role models for others in the school. They are mature and value the opportunities they have to develop their own skills through the major contribution they make to whole-school life. For example, they lead sporting and environmental activities, and act as associate members of the governing body or mentors to younger students.

What the school should do to improve further

- Make students' academic targets more precise so that they know exactly what they have to do to improve the quality of their work.

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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?	2	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	1	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1	1

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2	2
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	2
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?	1	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1	
How well learners enjoy their education	1	
The attendance of learners	2	
The behaviour of learners	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	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1	1

¹ Grade 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.

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1	1
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	1	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	1	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1	1
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	1	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	2	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1	
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	

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

Dear Students

Inspection of Highcliffe School, Christchurch, Dorset BH23 4QD

It was a great pleasure to meet some of the students during our recent visit to your school. Thank you very much for the warm welcome. We were particularly impressed by the maturity you showed in our discussions.

Here are some of the main findings from our report and I hope that you will take the opportunity to read the report in full as well. You are rightly proud of your school – Highcliffe is a good school. It also has some outstanding features.

- The results in the Year 9 tests, GCSE and A level are improving steadily and the school has a great potential to continue to help you to achieve even more.
- Good teaching and a good curriculum help you to do well.
- You get on exceptionally well together so that most of you enjoy school a lot and take part in a very wide range of extra-curricular activities.
- The school's dual specialist status gives it a distinctive nature. As well helping you to do well in your academic subjects, it helps you to have an outstanding understanding of international issues and many of you have very good opportunities to go on school visits abroad.
- Your success academically and the broad range of your other personal skills prepare you well for your future beyond school.
- 'My Highcliffe' gives you an excellent way of developing a wide range of interests and of monitoring your own progress.
- You make an excellent contribution to the school and the wider community in a number of ways, such as taking responsibility as student leaders or school councillors.
- All the staff manage the school exceptionally well and there are clear plans for how things will develop in the future.

The school is always striving for improvement. You said that your targets are helpful, and we agree, but judge that they would be of more benefit to you if they gave you more precise guidance about exactly how to make your work better. You can always help by asking for clarification if you are not sure what is required next.

Best wishes and good luck with all your many activities this year.

Yours sincerely

Helen Hutchings Lead inspector