

Highfield School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	110940
Local Authority	Cambridgeshire
Inspection number	325257
Inspection dates	4–5 December 2008
Reporting inspector	George Derby

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

Type of school	Special
School category	Community
Age range of students	2–19
Gender of students	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	86
Sixth form	9
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	John Thake
Headteacher	Jennie Moran
Date of previous school inspection	29–30 September 2005
School address	Downham Road Ely CB6 1BD
Telephone number	01353 662085
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Highfield School is an all-age day special school for students with a wide range of complex learning needs. There is a small but growing number of students with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD), students with severe learning difficulties (SLD) and those with moderate learning difficulties (MLD). A third of students have autism. All have a statement of special educational needs. In Years 10 and 11, some MLD students spend part of their time undertaking courses at the local secondary school but there are now fewer of these students being admitted and an increasing number of students with complex learning, sensory and medical needs. Attainment on entry to the school, because of students' special educational needs, is considerably lower than expected for their ages.

There is a very small number of children in the school's Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). Students in the post-16 provision are taught alongside those from Key Stage 4 in ability groups in the school's 'leavers' department'. Most MLD students leave the school to go to local colleges at the end of Year 11. Other students stay on to Year 14 and experience a wide variety of courses at school and at colleges.

The school provides outreach support to local mainstream and special schools and to other community facilities. A new after school club began at the beginning of November, which is the responsibility of the governing body.

The school has many prestigious awards. It has just been granted the Inclusion Quality Mark, has an Investors in People award, Healthy Schools award, Activemark and Sportsmark. During the past two years there has been a relatively large turnover of staff, mostly due to retirement, promotion or staff leaving to pursue higher level courses.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

This is a good school. The headteacher and senior leaders have created an excellent ethos in which students, some of whom have had unsuccessful placements previously, flourish. This is because of the close attention to their personal development, which is outstanding. The 'can do' culture gives students the confidence to try hard and to believe in themselves. Their self-esteem rises rapidly and they hold their heads up high as ambassadors for the school. They are able to express an opinion and contribute well to school life. Students love school and some say they cannot stay away; as a result, their attendance is excellent. They are exceptionally well looked after and cared for, especially those with medical conditions. Students leave the school well prepared for the next steps in their education because of the good curriculum and the rich variety of activities they take part in which meet their needs and interests well. The large amount of time spent on a considerable variety of physical activities certainly pays off and, consequently, their understanding of the need to keep healthy is excellent. There is a wide variety of offsite learning at local schools and colleges and different routes and pathways to ensure that the right 'diet' of courses is provided for older students.

Parents are overwhelmingly positive about the school and the way it cares for their children and helps them to make progress. This school goes the extra mile to support not just the students but also parents. For example, the appointment of a parent support advisor fully illustrates the school's wish to strengthen the partnership even further. Parents made many positive comments praising the school's communication with them and the support they receive. As one put it, 'This school has been the scaffolding around our family.'

Academic progress is good. This is because of the careful setting and review of personal targets and how students are helped to master skills such as being able to sustain concentration, improve their ability to use signs or symbols and deal with any specific behaviour difficulties. Their work, reports and their records show they achieve well. The school's data appears to show that some individual students remain at a similar level from year to year. Given the nature of some students' needs, and especially those with PMLD, the school's assessment systems are not precise enough to show the very small steps of progress that some students make, although other records do actually show they have made good improvement in their skills. The school recognises that it does not always analyse data fully enough to determine what could be done next to improve progress even more.

Teaching is good and students' needs are generally well met. A particular strength of the good or outstanding lessons is the way the students are helped to learn in very small steps. These are built up successfully so students are absolutely secure about what they are doing and learning. However, when needed, students are encouraged to take bigger leaps and are successfully challenged to use their thinking skills. Across the school, through excellent relationships with staff and the effective support they receive in lessons, students work exceptionally hard and concentrate remarkably well. Teachers usually plan work which caters for the different groups in their classes and teaching assistants work hard to include students with PMLD in lessons. However, at times, it is not always clear what these students are meant to learn from

the activity. In addition, systems to support their communication and access to learning, such as through technology, are not yet fully developed. The school has worked hard to provide specific facilities to support their sensory needs but the range is narrow and the size of some of the provision is quite limited.

A clear vision by the headteacher and determination for improvement, together with strong teamwork, are at the heart of the good leadership and management of the school. All staff know the part they should play and work hard to achieve the goals set out in their particular action plans and the strong school improvement plan. The work of subject leaders is broadening and they have recently undertaken a programme of peer observation in preparation for evaluating the quality of teaching and learning in their subjects. However, this evaluation is yet to happen and the subject leaders do not have full oversight of the planning or the monitoring of pupil progress. Governance is good. Governors have a good range of skills, which they bring to the school, and strong knowledge of its work.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The department is well organised with students grouped effectively according to their needs. This enables staff to provide a good range of work-related learning and to target courses on and offsite appropriately. All post-16 students have severe or complex needs and the activities are carefully chosen. As a result, staff maximise the opportunity for them to gain Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) Towards Independence Awards and Alliance and Qualifications Authority (AQA) unit awards. They achieve well in these and continue to build their personal skills. Personal development is excellent. Students are given wide opportunities to develop socially, through their dedicated cyber café and also working with partners and collaboratively in lessons. There is a good focus on independence training and on activities for daily living. Teaching is good and work is generally well matched to needs, although occasionally there are missed opportunities to use information and communication technology (ICT) to support learning for those with the most complex needs. Care, support and guidance are outstanding aspects of this provision particularly with regard to the preparation for leaving school.

Leadership and management are good. There is a good vision for the development of courses and tailoring to personal needs. However, bearing in mind that some students could be in the department for up to five years, the planning is organised in a way which does not make it easy to track students' experiences and opportunities over a long period.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

Currently, there is only a very small number of children in the EYFS, while building work is being completed. However, leadership is good and the coordinator has used this time well to develop planning and resources and ensure that provision is ready to 'hit the ground running' when further children attend. The good curriculum and effective monitoring and tracking procedures are all positive responses to the new national requirements. Those children attending already are well taught; staff know them and their needs particularly well and work closely with families to ensure children get consistent messages about next steps. They settle quickly into school

and learn to trust, cooperate and 'have a go', even when they might 'naturally' find this quite hard. There are excellent relationships and all staff work together extremely well to ensure that no learning time is wasted.

Support for personal development and well being is outstanding; children show real enjoyment of the good learning opportunities and make good progress in their learning and development in all the areas of learning, in small but significant ways. They make particularly good progress in their communication and early literacy and number skills, and achieve excellently in their personal development and behaviour. Health and welfare requirements within the new national framework are all exceptionally well met. The well-qualified staff, good staffing levels and meticulous attention to children's well-being means they are very safe.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve provision for students with PMLD, especially in relation to their sensory experience, their access to lessons and communication through technology.
- Ensure that the school's systems for assessment can show the very small steps of progress that some students make and that the analysis of trends and patterns in the progress of different groups leads to improvement.
- Enable subject leaders to monitor and evaluate the quality of teaching and learning, the curriculum and the progress that students make in their subjects.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Students overall make good progress in relation to their targets, and in English, mathematics and science. Higher attaining students achieve well. The highest attaining Year 11 students in 2008 gained lower GCSE grades in English and mathematics and higher grades in practical subjects such as art, design and technology, and drama. Despite the level of students' needs increasing, students have increased their performance in GCSE examinations over the past few years. Other students achieved well in the Youth Award gaining Bronze, Silver and Silver Challenge awards. Many AQA unit awards and ASDAN modules were achieved in the post-16 department. Some students show little progress in recorded 'P levels' (national levels of attainment for students working below National Curriculum Level 1), although their records show good progress for their capabilities. The school recognises that the current system does not enable such very small steps to be easily recorded. Staff are in the process of adopting a more effective assessment and recording system so that students with PMLD can have their progress over time recorded and acknowledged.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

The school very effectively nurtures each individual child and promotes great enjoyment. Students say it is a 'lovely, lovely school' where they know staff will help them. Behaviour and attendance are excellent. Students say, 'We don't fight at our

school, we help each other,' and many instances of assistance and support were observed. The calm, harmonious atmosphere of mutual respect is a significant strength; excellent adult and pupil relationships bolster students' self-esteem and self-awareness. An excellent personal, social and citizenship programme encourages personal responsibility and understanding of others. All this gives students an extremely strong moral code and awareness of others' differences and needs. This means that students' spiritual moral social and cultural development is excellent, preparing them well for the multicultural society in which they live.

Students' knowledge about healthy lifestyles is excellent and they are proud of the different things they do to help others through fundraising and through jobs and recycling around the school. They have a particularly good knowledge of how to keep safe. They say they would like to take even more responsibility and the school is already exploring different ways of enabling students to have an even stronger say in both their own learning and in the general life of the school community.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teaching is good and staff generally match the work well to students' needs. Excellent relationships and careful support and guidance by teachers and assistants in lessons make learning successful. Occasionally, what students are to learn is not made clear enough or reviewed sufficiently at the end of a lesson but activities interest them well and all students are extremely motivated to learn. In an excellent lesson, students made remarkable progress in understanding the complex idea of 'calm' because of the skilful way that sign, symbols and pictures were used and the way staff worked together to help students choose the right one from a range of facial expressions. Good use of the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) supports student's communication well, although the school is aware that there is scope to use electronic and other communication aids for those children with the most complex needs. Detailed assessment of students in lessons and careful observation of them ensures that staff and students are very well informed of the next steps.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The school is highly focused and successful in the way it provides students with many opportunities to learn new skills and to apply them in and outside the classroom. Some aspects of the management of subjects, such as the detailed overview of what is taught and when, are still developing through improvement in curriculum leaders' roles. However, all the required subjects are taught and are enriched by an excellent wide-ranging programme of visits, visitors and clubs. The new after-school club is a good provision but not all students have an equal opportunity to attend because some families cannot arrange transport from the school.

The curriculum is further strengthened by the therapy provision and the ways in which staff support this. There is a good range of accreditation in place which allows each student to achieve at his or her own level and the school makes extremely good use of its mainstream links to stretch and challenge students here. Students with PMLD are offered a range of individually tailored learning opportunities and sensory experiences. A strong careers programme and good range of work experience and enterprise arrangements supports students well into their next stage of life.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

The school's extremely calm and nurturing environment has a marked effect on students' personal development. Students with medical conditions and severe physical disability are extremely well cared for. Students feel, and are, extremely safe because the school is highly vigilant and surrounds them with an ethos of care and concern for the individual. Safeguarding procedures, recruitment, risk assessments and health and safety issues are all dealt with rigorously. Students' individual education plan targets (IEPs) are precisely set and there is a careful review of progress in relation to these. Strong partnerships with therapists, parents and other agencies really help to form a 'team around the child' and ensure everyone is absolutely clear about next steps for each pupil. The school has already begun training for 'Routes for Learning' so that students' progress is monitored in even smaller steps, thus strengthening its work with PMLD students even further.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

One reason for the school's success is strong teamwork. Although there has been a relatively large number of staff changes over the past two years, senior staff have worked together to support new and inexperienced staff so they gain good skills in working with students with complex needs. Improvement since the last inspection has been good.

This is a school which knows itself well and which plans effectively for the next steps in its development. Challenging whole-school targets are set which are met and often exceeded. Occasionally, its analysis of pupil achievement does not go as far as it could in fully identifying trends and patterns, although plans are in hand to provide more refined information. The outreach initiative which supports schools and institutions locally is a great success and well received by consumers. The school is well placed to improve further.

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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?	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?	2	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

How effective is the provision in meeting the needs of children in the EYFS?	2	
How well do children in the EYFS achieve?	2	
How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the children in the EYFS?	1	
How effectively are children in the EYFS helped to learn and develop?	2	
How effectively is the welfare of children in the EYFS promoted?	1	
How effectively is provision in the EYFS led and managed?	2	

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	4	4
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	2	

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.

Personal development and well-being

How good are 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	1	
The behaviour of learners	1	
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	2	

The quality of provision

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

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2	2
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 leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	2	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	2	
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	2	
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	



8 December 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Highfield School, Ely, Cambridgeshire, CB6 1BD

Thank you for meeting with the inspectors and sharing your very positive views of the school. Inspectors agree with you that your school is good and that you make good progress and achieve well. You told us how much you enjoy coming to school and your attendance is excellent. So is your behaviour! We know a few of you had problems with this when you first came to the school but Mrs Moran and the senior staff have created a brilliant atmosphere where you thrive. You now manage your behaviour excellently. You are praised for what you do well and the support you get from your teachers and assistants really helps you to overcome your difficulties.

You do extremely well in your personal skills and you are great ambassadors for the school. The staff really help you to develop your confidence. As a result, you try really hard with your work and learn well because you know 'you can do it'. We thought your ability to concentrate on some very difficult tasks was remarkable, especially the youngest children. You do this because you have excellent relationships with the staff, trust them fully and they care for you particularly well.

We have asked Mrs Moran to help make the school an even better place. This is by:

- making sure that the school checks carefully on the very small steps of progress that some of you make, and looks at how you could make even better progress
- providing better facilities and give more help to those children who are at a very early stage of learning and communicating
- asking staff who are in charge of different subjects to check how well you are taught, what you are taught and how well you are doing.

Yours sincerely

George Derby
Lead inspector