

From coasting to soaring: Highlands School

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Brief description

In October 2007, Highlands School was judged to be satisfactory with weaknesses in the quality and consistency of leadership, management, and teaching and learning in all subjects. This case study describes how strong and decisive leadership at all levels, coupled with a clear strategic direction, have driven rapid improvement culminating in an outstanding judgement four years later. This is one of 12 case studies about the schools featured in the report '[Getting to good](#)', published by Ofsted in September 2012.

Overview – the school's message

'We aim to motivate, excite and inspire every student every day. Our students become highly effective learners who are challenged by their work, take responsibility for their own learning and make better progress than the national average. We achieve this by maintaining a strong focus on individual achievement, tracking and sharing assessment information regularly and making sure that everyone takes personal responsibility for ensuring success. It is important to me that the school is one I would be proud to send my own children to.'



Bruce Goddard, Headteacher

The good practice in detail

Highlands school is an outstanding and vibrant school; a remarkable achievement considering that, in October 2007, it was judged to be satisfactory. Strong and decisive leadership at all levels provides clear, strategic direction. Achievement and attendance are significantly above average. The curriculum is rich, diverse and innovative. Staff and students have a strong sense of personal responsibility to make sure that everyone achieves

success. Morale is high and staff, parents, carers and students are proud to belong to such a [successful school](#).

'As the school has been transformed over the past few years so has the effectiveness of the governing body', says Matt Miller, the Chair of Governors. 'There is a culture of open and professional debate which has increased our ability to influence and support change. Highlands' governors have a range of valuable skills and these are now being used to benefit the school. We support the strong focus on achievement and are proud to see how successful the school has become.'

Improving the environment and behaviour

When Bruce Goddard arrived at Highlands School it was barely satisfactory: Bruce uses the term, 'coasting'. He could see the school's potential but it lurked beneath low expectations about behaviour, teaching and learning. He set out his vision on day one for staff, governors, students and parents and carers. Expectations that all students should achieve at least expected levels of progress were quickly established and the coasting, complacent ethos began to change to one of aspiration and achievement.

The poor learning environment did not engender pride and there was little celebration of students' achievements. So the school was spruced up and now it is bright, well ordered with high quality students' work on display and their many achievements celebrated. Tackling [behaviour](#) for learning was the key to kickstarting improvement and provided a strong foundation for raising the standard of teaching. One teacher said that she would have left after her first year if this aspect had not improved. Senior leaders took swift action to show that actions have consequences and students say that, at first, they thought this was a 'bit harsh' but that it really improved the atmosphere and ethos of the school. They say that, 'everyone knows the rules, respects them and they set the tone'.

‘We take responsibility for our own learning’.

Striving for individual excellence through better teaching and learning



The school's ethos is that teaching is only successful if students achieve well and make progress in every lesson. Effective questioning and active learning are given a high priority. Staff and faculty teams share skills and evaluate the effectiveness of lessons and a programme of intensive support and coaching ensures that teaching improves. Teachers regularly reflect on what makes the difference and what each person can/needs to do to ensure accelerated progress. There is a strong

and continuing focus on learning objectives and success criteria in each lesson and over time.

Improving students' progress

In the past, there was little shared understanding or use of data to evaluate the quality of education on offer and, in particular, teachers did not understand and were not using progress measures. Rigorous monitoring and regular reviews, including half termly assessments of students' attainment and progress, were introduced. Refined systems for self-evaluation include intensive annual **faculty reviews**. Despite budgetary constraints, the school underlined the importance of achievement by appointing an **additional deputy headteacher** with specific responsibility for overseeing achievement. She and the team of raising achievement coordinators analyse data, identify underperformance and set up interventions at key times to target, 'where we can make a real difference'. No time is wasted and periods, such as form time, which in the past lacked planning and focus are used much more effectively. The students believe that the rollover period at the end of the summer term, when they effectively move into the next year's routines, really sharpens up their learning and helps them 'hit the ground running' in September.



Students know their targets and that they are personally accountable for achieving them. Staff, students and parents and carers receive this information regularly and this ensures that attention does not waver. The impact of this sharper focus and strategies to raise attainment can be seen in improved progress and examination results.

‘The regular half termly reports give our learning a real boost because they mean that we keep a close eye on how well we are doing so there is no slacking off’.

Better communication and clarity of purpose

Responsibilities and job descriptions have been clarified, publicised and a behaviour team established to free up senior leaders who were spending a lot of time dealing with poor behaviour. This shared clarity about their roles empowers managers and enables them to be more influential. Meetings take place regularly and are increasingly effective. Agendas have been cleared of peripheral items, so that key issues are discussed in depth.

Regular monitoring, close working and faculty reviews, mean that heads of faculties are confident that they know the strengths of their teams and can deploy them effectively. They say there were always 'cracking members of staff' but the lack of effective communication and routines meant that their inconsistencies and strengths were not always used effectively.

Challenging underperformance

Performance management is rigorous and systematic reviews are carried out with each teacher at regular times during the year with a sharp focus on student achievement. There were many difficult professional discussions and sometimes unpopular decisions had to be taken in the early days as the impact of raised expectations about the quality of teaching and greater teacher accountability began to hit home. Several teachers left, some with severance agreements and others moved on realising that they were not able to reach the

high expectations or were not able to commit to the increased demands. Challenging conversations still take place but they happen in an environment where everyone is clear about their responsibilities and also knows that effective support is available to help them improve. The outcomes of performance management are linked to progress up the pay scales to ensure that all salary increases are based securely on outcomes and performance.

Sharing good practice and celebrating success

Many meetings include opportunities for members of staff, including those who are less experienced, to share their 'magic moments.' This develops a shared understanding of what good and outstanding practice looks like and it boosts confidence. Staff say that everyone is 'working together, not trying to do it all yourself or expecting someone else to do it.' They say that everyone is encouraged to be reflective and flexible and to review their practice and provision so that needs are better met. The school has a number of short-term sharply focused working parties which all teachers can join thereby harnessing their interests, enthusiasm and specialisms.

Parents and carers: a positive force for improvement

Parents and carers are voluble in their praise for the quality of communication which, they say, helps them to know what is going on and become involved. One who attended the headteacher's initial open evening said that she found the headteacher inspiring. 'He gave the impression that the school would move forward, and it did.' Another said: 'The school takes pride in its students and listens to them so that everyone is working together and knows what is expected.'

‘The system of regularly grading our progress as outstanding, good, inconsistent or cause for concern means that there is no such thing as satisfactory in this school and that is fine because we know we shouldn't really settle for ok.’

The school's background

Highlands School is a large mixed, community comprehensive school for students aged 11 to 18, serving a suburban area of west Enfield in outer London. It attracts a multicultural intake, 50% of whom are from minority ethnic groups. The proportion of students who speak English as an additional language is above the national average. The school has specialist status for modern foreign languages and technology.



Other examples featured in the report *Getting to good*

Primary schools

All Saints CofE Primary School
Brookside Primary School
Jubilee Park Primary School
Mendell Primary School
St Benedict Biscop CofE Primary School
St Clement Danes CofE Primary School

Secondary schools

Dronfield Henry Fanshawe School
Ecclesfield School
Highfields Science Specialist School
Stockland Green School
Woodside High School

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