

Heathlands School

Heathlands Drive, St Albans, Hertfordshire AL3 5AY

Inspection dates

26–27 September 2017

Overall effectiveness	Outstanding
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Outstanding
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Outstanding
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Outstanding
Outcomes for pupils	Outstanding
Early years provision	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school

- Leaders at all levels are relentless in their pursuit of excellence. They are committed to ensuring that deaf pupils receive the best possible education and care.
- Leaders are constantly evaluating the quality of education pupils receive. They question and challenge each other to keep improving the school. Consequently, they have addressed all the issues identified at the last inspection.
- Pupils' behaviour is outstanding in lessons, in school and on the playground. This is because all adults manage pupils' behaviour highly effectively.
- Pupils make outstanding progress from their very varied starting points. All pupils leave the school with recognised qualifications and take up further education courses.
- Teaching is outstanding because all adults who work with pupils know their individual special needs exceptionally well. Teachers and teaching assistants are highly skilled and adapt activities so that pupils achieve extremely well.
- Governance is outstanding. Governors know precisely how to question school leaders and check that pupils are making substantial progress in their learning and personal development.
- Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is a strength of the school. Pupils understand their own special needs and are sensitive and accepting of the needs of their fellow pupils.
- Children have an outstanding start to their education in the early years. They make excellent progress and are well prepared for when they move into Year 1.
- Safeguarding is effective. The exceptional culture of safety in the school makes a strong contribution to pupils' outstanding personal development and welfare.
- Pupils' exceptional progress is not well presented. Consequently, it is difficult for parents to have a clear picture of the outstanding progress pupils make when compared with all pupils of the same age.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that leaders present the school's information about pupils' progress effectively to clearly illustrate the substantial progress that pupils make over time.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Outstanding

- Since the last inspection, the headteacher has built a highly effective leadership team. Senior and middle leaders routinely evaluate what is working and what is not. They ensure that all staff are included in their discussions, and are able to quickly address any issues that arise, with everyone implementing agreed actions. This approach works exceptionally well and results in rapid school improvement. For example, in 2016, there were a high number of fixed-term exclusions. A new approach to managing the most challenging pupil behaviour was implemented and, in 2017, there were only two fixed-term exclusions, a reduction of 75%.
- All leaders are involved in monitoring the school's work. Middle leaders have a particular brief to check that the curriculum is helping pupils to learn well. This enables them to give effective advice and support to teachers about how to adapt their teaching approaches or curriculum content so that pupils learn better.
- The special educational needs coordinator has a significant impact on making sure that pupils get the most suitable support from external agencies. She is exceptionally skilled at finding solutions to specific barriers to learning and behaviour for individual pupils.
- Pupil progress meetings take place every term and are part of the school's effective performance management system. Teachers are able to talk with leaders about the progress of all the pupils in their teaching groups. Teachers say that this is a demanding process which they greatly value because leaders help them find different ways to support and improve pupils' learning.
- Staff training is highly effective because leaders make sure that it is linked to school improvement priorities, for example the recent training for all staff in how to manage extremely difficult pupil behaviour. Teaching assistants particularly value the extra time leaders have allocated before school starts for them to work with teachers.
- The well-balanced curriculum is carefully matched to pupils' needs. Pupils are given every opportunity to shine and develop their skills and understanding through the projects they are involved in. The school has recently introduced Spanish as a subject in the upper school. Inspectors observed a lesson where pupils were able to confidently sign vocabulary in Spanish and test each other on words they had learned only the week before. This is a testament to the high-quality teaching pupils receive.
- The use and understanding of information and communication technology stands out as an exceptional feature across the school. For example, in 2017, pupils won two national and one international film awards for their short film about British Sign Language (BSL). The video was made in 2016 by pupils from Year 6 to Year 8. Pupils in Years 2 and 3 made a film about why BBC Newsround should have subtitles. This proved a highly effective and creative way to teach pupils the skills of persuasive argument, part of the requirements of the national curriculum for English.
- There is an extensive range of extra-curricular activities. These are designed to help deaf pupils take part in activities that would be more difficult to access outside school, for example ballet and Scouts.
- Pupils are exceptionally well prepared for their life beyond school as citizens of modern

Britain. This is due to the many opportunities they have to learn about the world they live in, including some outstanding community-based projects. For example, younger pupils worked on a project with the local old people's home. They taught the elderly residents how to sign and the residents taught the pupils how to dance. They were learning together.

- Parents are highly supportive of the school and say communication with parents has improved significantly since the last inspection. The parent champion has helped set up the school's social media page and is encouraging parents to use the Heathlands app. All 22 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, were positive about the impact of the school on their children's learning and welfare.
- The school makes excellent use of additional government funding. The pupil premium and the Year 7 catch-up grant are carefully targeted to help those pupils eligible to have the support and resources they need to make the best progress in their learning. The sport premium is used effectively to add to the opportunities younger pupils have to take part in suitable sports activities.
- The school has received effective support and guidance from the local authority.

Governance of the school

- The governance of the school is outstanding.
- Governors use their wide knowledge and experience in education to make sure that leaders have the sharpest possible focus on improving pupils' outcomes.
- Governors have a clear understanding of the issues facing the school. The minutes of governing body meetings show that governors question leaders thoroughly and that the correct actions are discussed that will make a real difference to the quality of education pupils receive.
- Governors are determined that the school is a safe place for pupils to learn and develop. The safeguarding governor has regular meetings with the designated safeguarding lead (DSL). They monitor records to check staff concerns are followed up and that the most vulnerable pupils are safe.
- Governors closely monitor the use of the pupil premium grant, the Year 7 catch-up funding and the sport premium funding. They were instrumental in making sure that the required reports on the school website are sharply focused, demonstrating the impact this funding has on improving pupils' outcomes.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Staff are exceptionally skilled and successful in helping to keep pupils safe. Safety is woven through every activity. For example, Year 10 pupils recently made a short film on how to make sure that they are not tricked into giving away personal details when using the internet.
- All the required safeguarding policies and procedures are in place and are published on the school's website. Staff receive effective training every term to refresh their skills

and safeguarding is on the agenda of most staff meetings.

- There are three designated safeguarding people. The DSL keeps very careful records which track precisely what the issue is, what action the school has taken and the impact of this action. The headteacher and DSL are relentless in contacting external agencies if concerns are not dealt with rapidly or resolved in a timely way.
- Staff understand how to manage risks exceptionally well. During the inspection, pupils were visited by two police horses. All pupils got the most from this visit and stayed safe throughout, thanks to the effective briefing for staff, pupils and parents.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Outstanding

- The quality of teaching across this school is excellent. It is almost impossible to distinguish between teachers and teaching assistants because the way they work with pupils is so similar and equally effective. For example, the use of questioning to check pupils' understanding of concepts and content is highly skilled. Pupils watch intently as adults, all equally proficient in BSL, sign their questions about a text or a mathematical concept. Pupils respond, also in BSL, with enthusiasm, and are confident in asking further questions if they are not sure. In a reading lesson, the teacher was using an atlas to help pupils understand the position of countries mentioned in their reading book. This also supported the learning of new words in BSL.
- The teaching of reading is strong. When pupils start in Year 1, most are able to fingerspell the alphabet and write letters in response to the sign. They make rapid progress in recognising words and are quickly able to read simple texts. Adults and pupils agree when pupils are ready to move on to the electronic reading programme. Adults very carefully monitor the quizzes that test pupils' knowledge and understanding of the texts they read. They use this information to challenge and develop pupils' reading skills still further. Reading record books are used effectively to record strengths, as well as weaknesses that need further teaching input.
- Adults are continually assessing pupils' learning and are able to respond rapidly if a pupil is finding something tricky. For example, in a Year 8 mathematics lesson, a group of very able girls were in too much of a rush to write a list of prime numbers from zero to 30 and, therefore, made some errors. The teacher skilfully encouraged the girls to reflect on the task and then asked another pupil to explain why 25 is not a prime number. The girls had a 'lightbulb moment', realising for themselves their mistakes.
- Teachers in the upper school are experts in the subjects they teach. They are also expert in the way they adapt and select teaching methods and approaches to help deaf pupils learn. For example, pupils receive very helpful guidance that is tailored to their individual needs.
- Teachers set a wide range of appropriate and challenging home-learning tasks. There is a well-attended home-learning after-school club for upper-school pupils who choose to have extra help and support. Pupils enjoy these opportunities and say it helps them to learn more about the subjects they study at school.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Outstanding

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding.
- Pupils are exceptionally knowledgeable about how to keep themselves safe. Internet and personal safety are woven throughout the curriculum. For example, older pupils are very aware of the potential dangers of child sexual exploitation.
- There are a few incidents of bullying and most pupils say that the school deals with these rapidly and effectively. A concern was raised to inspectors in the pupil questionnaire about teachers not listening to pupils' concerns. School leaders are aware of this and are doing everything they can to ensure that pupils perceive that they are listened to and that appropriate and effective action is being taken to address their concerns.
- The school provides many opportunities for pupils to develop self-awareness and self-confidence through the curriculum and extra-curricular activities. Even the very youngest pupils in the school were eager to talk to inspectors about their school, their work and their achievements. The new 'student leaders' understand what it means to be a good leader. They have a clear vision of what they hope to get out of their new role and what they hope will benefit the school.
- Pupils enjoy being active and a number of the older pupils take part in mixed-gender football games at break and lunchtime. There are occasional disputes, for example with regard to the rules of the game. Adults encourage and support pupils to sort these, and general relationship issues, out for themselves.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding.
- The school's recent changes to the behaviour management of the most challenging pupil behaviour is proving highly successful. Most pupils with behaviour problems are beginning to recognise what triggers their poor behaviour and manage their emotions more effectively.
- There is excellent behaviour in all lessons because pupils like and respect the adults who work with them. Pupils are able to build strong relationships because expectations for appropriate behaviour are understood well.
- Pupils love coming to school. One pupil said: 'I came here when I was two years old. It's like my second family.' Attendance has risen over the last year and is now close to national averages. This is due to leaders providing a wider range of class and individual awards for pupils who get to school on time every day. The school follows up non-attendance and lateness rigorously.

Outcomes for pupils

Outstanding

- Pupils make outstanding progress from when they enter Year 1 to the end of Year 2. This is evident from work in pupils' books and from observations of how adults support

and work with pupils in lessons. In 2017, a few pupils reached age-related expectations in reading and writing. This was due to excellent teaching and teachers' effective use of the school's assessment system.

- The school's own information, work in books and observations in lessons also indicate that pupils make outstanding progress during key stages 3 and 4. This was not reflected in the 2017 GCSE results because some pupils joined the school in Year 10 and Year 11. Also, a high proportion of the group had additional and complex special needs compared with the 2016 group. It is a credit to staff, pupils, school leaders and the excellent quality of independent careers advice and guidance that all pupils left the school with recognised qualifications and moved on to further education.
- All groups of pupils make outstanding progress, including those who have additional special educational needs. This is because teachers and school leaders are exceptionally skilled at precisely identifying any barriers to learning. Leaders effectively target additional funding for disadvantaged pupils to meet specific needs. For example, one pupil explained: 'I like this school because I feel it's helped me a lot and I've learned a lot. I used to have very bad behaviour but this school has helped me to change and I'm much better. When I leave I want to have my own photography business.'
- The most able pupils achieve exceptionally well in their GCSEs. In 2017, several pupils achieved passes in their GCSE mathematics examinations.

Early years provision

Outstanding

- Children start in Nursery with some skills and understanding similar to hearing children of their age. However, some children have virtually no communication skills and are taught BSL, often from scratch, to think, communicate and learn with. Progress in all the areas of learning is outstanding because adults have such detailed knowledge of each child due to excellent liaison with parents. From the outset, adults plan for and meet children's specific needs. Learning journals are a very detailed and informative record for staff and parents of each child's progress.
- Teaching is outstanding because children blossom into confident communicators. One parent described her child as 'feral' before she started in the Nursery as she had no concept of how to communicate her needs, let alone focus on learning. Children make substantial progress in all aspects of communication because staff are highly skilled in teaching BSL.
- The learning space in the early years classroom and the outside area is very carefully planned. Activities are linked to the well-structured and exciting curriculum. The youngest children love the learning activities set out for them. For example, an inspector was 'rushed into the hospital' for immediate treatment by a child 'doctor'. This also illustrates how confident children are in sharing their experiences.
- Children are exceptionally safe in the early years area. They feel safe because they have complete trust in the adults who work with them. There is excellent supervision, including at break and lunchtimes. Safeguarding is effective.
- Leadership of the early years is shared by the early years teacher and the lower-school leader and is outstanding. Both talk with great knowledge and understanding of the

children, their starting points and their needs. They can show how the curriculum is designed to enable children to achieve their best in all areas of learning.

- Leaders foster the excellent relationships with parents by providing weekly sign and play sessions and twilight courses designed to help parents support their children's learning.

School details

Unique reference number	117685
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	10002666

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	Special
School category	Maintained
Age range of pupils	3 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	101
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Julia Trueman
Headteacher	Deborah Jones–Stevens
Telephone number	01727 807 807
Website	www.heathlands.herts.sch.uk
Email address	head@heathlands.herts.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	13–14 March 2013

Information about this school

- The school meets requirements on the publication of specified information on its website.
- Heathlands is a day and residential school. The residential provision was last inspected in June 2017, when it was judged to be outstanding.
- All of the pupils are deaf and have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan. About a third of pupils have additional special educational needs and/or disabilities.
- About half of the pupils are from deaf family backgrounds or have deaf siblings, with BSL being the main language at home.
- The majority of pupils are of White British heritage. The remainder of pupils are of Asian or African heritage, with a growing number of pupils from Eastern Europe.

- The school takes pupils from considerable distances due to its specialist designation. Some pupils travel long distances to and from school every day.

Information about this inspection

- The inspectors observed teaching and learning across all the school. All visits to classrooms were made jointly with senior leaders.
- Meetings were held with senior and middle leaders, all teaching and support staff, the chair and vice-chair of governors, groups of pupils and parents.
- Inspectors scrutinised 12 responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire for parents, 22 responses from staff and 17 responses from pupils to their online questionnaires.
- A wide range of documentation was examined, including safeguarding procedures, attendance records, the school's self-evaluation and the most recent development plan update.

Inspection team

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Her Majesty's Inspector

Elizabeth Cornish

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