



## QUALITY ASSURANCE REVIEW

### REVIEW REPORT FOR VARNDEAN SCHOOL

<b>Name of School:</b>	Varndean School
<b>Headteacher:</b>	Shelley Baker
<b>Hub:</b>	Brighton and Hove Hub
<b>School phase:</b>	Secondary
<b>MAT (if applicable):</b>	Not applicable

<b>Overall Peer Evaluation Estimate at this QA Review:</b>	Effective
<b>Date of this Review:</b>	26/11/2021
<b>Overall Estimate at last QA Review</b>	Good
<b>Date of last QA Review</b>	11/11/2019
<b>Grade at last Ofsted inspection:</b>	Good
<b>Date of last Ofsted inspection:</b>	05/07/2017



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#### Quality Assurance Review

The review team, comprising host school leaders and visiting reviewers agree that evidence indicates these areas are evaluated as follows:

**Leadership at all levels**                      Effective

**Quality of provision and outcomes**      Effective

**AND**

**Quality of provision and  
outcomes for disadvantaged  
pupils and pupils with additional  
needs**

**Area of excellence**                      World class art provision  
Accredited

**Previously accredited valid areas  
of excellence**                      Small school system 11/11/2019

**Overall peer evaluation estimate**      Effective

***The Quality Assurance Review estimates are not equivalent to Ofsted grades.  
The QA Review uses a different framework to Ofsted and the review is  
developmental not judgmental.***

## **1. Context and character of the school**

Varndean School is a larger than average sized mixed state maintained secondary school located in Brighton. The school is now the most popular secondary school in the city and has an increasing number of students on roll. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals in the past six years is slightly below the national average. There are fewer students with English as an additional language (EAL) than the national average. The proportion of students with special education needs and disabilities (SEND) is above the national average, and the proportion of students with an education, health and care plan is also above the national average. The school ethos is based upon the belief that “it takes a village to raise a child”. There is a smaller school system. The smaller schools are named Lennox, Angelou, Russell, Turing and Ellis, and each school has its own identity.

### **2.1 Leadership at all levels - What went well**

- The headteacher has a clear vision and leads the school very well. The priorities of the headteacher and her senior leaders are strategic and have been well considered. Senior leaders work closely together and share the same vision. The school vision is exemplified as a butterfly, and all students are encouraged to grow in the school community. This vision was derived alongside staff and students, and all decisions are made through the paradigm of wellbeing. As a result, the climate for learning across the whole school is positive and students evidently enjoy their school experience.
- The leadership team have ensured that their ambitious vision and strategies have a positive and meaningful impact. There has been rapid and sustained change in several areas of school life. For example, as a result of leaders’ actions, students have a very positive attitude to learning following the lockdown.
- Each of the five smaller schools has a senior leader as head of school. This means that all senior leaders are concerned with pastoral issues and not only curriculum or teaching. This smaller school system is deeply embedded in the school culture and helps staff to know the students very well. There are weekly assemblies where students of different year groups can attend together and this helps strengthen the school community. Attitudes to learning are monitored and high year group scores are celebrated. Each smaller school follows a consistent approach while at the same time having its own distinctive ethos. Each school chooses its own charities to support, and there are rewards for students.
- Leaders focus on a world class education across all areas of school life. There is a focus on improving teachers’ subject knowledge and pedagogy. Senior leaders trust teachers as the experts in their areas and there is a professional learning community across the school. Much of the continuing development is within

subject areas, and many subject leaders run the city subject networks. There is a wise balance between direction and autonomy. Continuing professional development pathways allow for both individual autonomy for professional growth as well as targeted direction where necessary from line managers. Leaders are keen that teachers keep on improving. Middle leaders feel supported and listened to by their line managers. They feel ownership over their department review system. This system is also used with the smaller schools to ensure the same focus on pastoral as well as academic leadership.

- The culture of teaching and learning involves all staff, not just a teaching and learning team. The headteacher empowers her subject leaders to focus upon the teaching and learning of their subject. Subject leaders are given the professional trust to develop their own teaching and learning strategies. Systems for middle leadership accountability include the middle leaders' toolkit and newly developed department reviews, which are robust and developmental in evaluating the quality of education and sharing best practice. Quality assurance involves a visiting subject leader and deep dive activities, and discussions enable constructive reflections on learning. There is a consistency of teaching and learning approaches and high expectations are evident.
- The school engages very well with the local community and the smaller school system enables regular communication with parents. Leaders, teachers and staff want the very best for all students, and the wellbeing evenings focus on the whole child. Students are treated as individuals and they thrive at Varndean School.

## **2.2 Leadership at all levels - Even better if...**

- ... the Bright Spots programme was further developed so that leaders could identify world class teaching and disseminate this across the school through a coaching programme.
- ... leaders continued to use the evidence from subject reviews to identify best practice and areas for development.

## **3.1 Quality of provision and outcomes - What went well**

- The curriculum has an excellent rationale. There is an ambitious three-year Key Stage 4 curriculum for all students. The curriculum is broad and balanced, and students are able to study subjects in greater depth in Year 9. Subject leaders know that subject knowledge is covered and subject areas follow a spiral approach. The lockdown gave subject teachers time to plan for the scope, coherence and sequencing of their curriculum. There is frequent interleaving. As a

result, students are able to learn the curriculum well at the school and make good progress.

- The use of retrieval questions helps students to remember what they have learned before. Lessons start with a review of prior knowledge and this is evident in students' work. Lessons start with a do now task that recaps on previous work and provides students with the opportunity to really embed their subject knowledge. There is a clear sequencing of lessons, evident through conversations with students and in their work. Students are able to articulate the concepts, knowledge and skills they are learning.
- Probing questions are used in lessons to stretch and challenge individuals as well as highlight an inclusive culture. Modelling in many lessons is clear, as teachers share the thinking process and involve students in questioning. Teachers carefully demonstrate the process to help students understand. This style of whole class instruction helps to address possible misconceptions.
- The work given to students is often challenging and helps students to develop knowledge and skills. Where challenge in lessons is explicit, and high expectations shared by teachers, students respond very well. For example, students are able to produce exceptional ceramics work. These high standards are evident in many areas of the school, and students enjoy the opportunities given to be creative and independent.
- Leaders rightly prioritise responsive teaching. Where teaching is world class, teachers respond well to the needs of students, using research-based methodology. This often includes live marking and assessment at the point of learning, and teachers seek to provide the best practice for their students.
- Literacy is taught well at the school. There is frequent use and application of subject specific keywords. Tier two and three language is used as part of regular lesson routines. In addition, there are a wide range of targeted and monitored interventions such as Accelerated Reader and Lexonik. Students are able to read in tutor time and the love of reading is promoted.
- Students continue to shape the future of their school. Students are politically aware and passionately interested in their planet. They take on leadership roles in the school. Students understand modern Britain and actively engage in democracy across the school. They learn about diversity and equality and demonstrate leadership skills. They are articulate and confident, aware of cultural events and passionate about their planet. Students see themselves as agents of change and are not afraid to speak out in this supportive and empowering school environment.
- Students make good progress at the school, evidenced both in historic data and current attainment. Their work is well presented and students take pride in their achievements. Relationships are positive and there is a culture for learning. Students leave the school ready to be world changers.

### **3.2 Quality of provision and outcomes - Even better if...**

- ... the application of reading and vocabulary was more evident across the whole school.
- ... questioning was more consistently systematic across all lessons.
- ... the key elements of lessons were typified and their rationale explained, so that students could articulate both their prior and current learning.

### **4.1 Quality of provision and outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and pupils with additional needs - What went well**

- Leadership for vulnerable students is strong and all students make good progress. The school's recently developed strategy to improve the wellbeing and achievement of disadvantaged students is excellent. It is based upon careful consideration and expertise, combining a strategic overview alongside the well-established pastoral strengths of the smaller school system. This allows for greater personalisation of support as well as a curriculum which is adapted for disadvantaged students. The school's focus upon relationships, responsive teaching and the removal of barriers means that students thrive across the school, and the behaviour and attitudes of all students are excellent. There is a wide range of diverse enrichment activities for all students, for example an extensive offer for the Duke of Edinburgh Award, which allows disadvantaged students opportunities to build their confidence and excel.
- The SENCO has a strong vision for the department working with students and teachers to ensure good progress for all. She leads by example in teaching engaging lessons and has a whole school presence, getting into lessons to work more closely with students and teachers. Students are identified through transition from their prior school as well as through class teachers raising concerns. This means that students are swiftly identified and provided for.
- There are three teams, each specialising in either autistic spectrum condition, social emotional and mental health, or cognition. The regular reviews of data and information means that existing interventions are reviewed and adapted when necessary. Sometimes these data harvests lead to students being removed from the SEN register.
- There is an alternative and ambitious curriculum for some SEND students in English and science, students completing entry level qualifications before GCSE studies, learning in small groups with a subject teacher and teaching assistant. Adaptations are made for students which benefit their learning. For example, students with autistic spectrum disorder in mathematics benefit from the clear learning routines and well organised learning environment, and the sensory needs of students are provided for as they can choose the colour of calming lights.

- Specific training has been delivered to teaching staff on reasonable adjustments for students with an autistic spectrum condition, as well as access arrangements and dyslexia. There is a concerted effort to have good communication with parents of students with SEND, to ensure they feel heard and supported. The SENCO is very keen for there to be equity for all SEND students. The SENCO is involved in the triage plus meetings at the school, to ensure that there is personalised provision for students.

#### **4.2 Quality of provision and outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and pupils with additional needs - Even better if...**

- ... the adaptations for students with SEND were developed even more across lessons in the school.
- ... the strong strategy for disadvantaged students continued to be embedded across the school.

### **5. Area of Excellence**

World class art provision (with an emphasis on ceramics).

#### **Accredited**

#### **5.1 Why has this area been identified as a strength? What actions has the school taken to establish expertise in this area?**

The school has developed outstanding ceramics provision over the last fifteen years. This has become a unique part of the art curriculum, and a specialism that has contributed to the popularity of the subject with students and prospective parents. Art rooms are well resourced and provide a stimulating environment for students. The students' outstanding artwork is showcased around the whole school, acting as motivation and inspiration for students. The whole school display role in Varndean is managed by one of the team and has focused on promoting high expectations, subject knowledge, careers in the particular subject areas and the work of people from different backgrounds in the school and the wider community. The school holds a well-attended artist open house every year as part of the Brighton Festival which celebrates the work of GCSE and Key Stage 3 students to the school and local community.

Because of the investment in high quality professional development within the department, lessons across both key stages demonstrate a commitment to excellence in modelling success criteria to students. Expertise ensures teaching is highly responsive to student needs, allowing students to express their creativity in a framework of clearly defined high standards.

The school has been involved with a Crafts Council initiative, "Firing Up" which provided training for and enabled students from the local ceramics degree course to work with students. Subsequently, the organisation and maintenance of resources and ongoing acquisition of new skills has transformed the teaching of ceramics, and the results are evident in the work of students. Students plan carefully and produce ceramics work of exceptionally high quality. They enjoy the opportunities to learn independently and to express their creativity. The art department has shared their expertise across the city during joint practice development days, training other art teachers in the delivery of projects. Excellent practice is embedded and this is a strong area of excellence.

#### **5.2 What evidence is there of the impact on pupils' outcomes?**

The school has maintained outstanding GCSE results for over seven years with above national average results. Since 2017, 90% of students have met 4+ grades, and 35% of students have met 7+ grades in GCSE exam results over successive years. There is a high and growing take up of GCSE art. Students enjoy the opportunities to produce artistic and ceramic work, and their sketch books demonstrate the development of excellent outcomes. The department improvement plan and department meeting minutes show excellence in leadership. This has led to the careful planning of professional development and implementation in lessons. Students are articulate in expressing their passion for art in the school, and parents frequently make positive comments during school open evenings.

#### **5.3 What is the name, job title and email address of the staff lead in this area?**

Helen Sevink  
Head of Art  
[helensevink@varndean.co.uk](mailto:helensevink@varndean.co.uk)

**6. What additional support would the school like from the Challenge Partners network, either locally or nationally?**

The school would like to continue to engage in the quality assurance reviews, so that senior leaders contribute to and benefit from reviewing schools. The school would like to continue to benefit from the national conferences and the Sharing Leading Practice sessions.

**This review will support the school's continuing improvement. The main findings will be shared within the school's hub in order that it can inform future activities.**

**Schools can access the School Support Directory; the Challenge Partners online tool that enables schools to connect with other schools in your hub and across the national network of schools.**

**Schools can also attend Sharing Leading Practice events where schools showcase excellent and/or innovative practice. Sharing Leading Practice events allow school leaders with specific improvement needs to visit a school or attend an online webinar hosted by a school, with outstanding provision in that area.**

**Both the School Support Directory and the Shared Leading Practice events can be accessed via the Challenge Partners website.**