



Summary report

George Hicks Campus

2008



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Executive summary

Background

This report summarizes the findings from the evaluations of the four George Hicks Campus schools and draws on information from discussions and meetings with staff about cross-campus issues. It outlines what is working well across the campus as well as common areas that need improving. In addition, it seeks to make recommendations for improvement, in order to better inform the planning for the new high schools. The evidence base is given in appendix 2.

The evaluators used the following grading scale to describe aspects of the school's work:

Grade		Description
1	Very good	Good in nearly all respects and exemplary in some significant areas
2	Good	Good in most respects. Weaknesses are minor and not in significant areas
3	Adequate	Satisfactory in most areas. No significant weaknesses, but no major strengths
4	Unsatisfactory	Some significant weaknesses (might be only one or two) that have negative impact on learning and standards

The schools

The George Hicks Campus comprises four mixed comprehensive schools, each of which has approximately 250 students in Years 7 to 9. The campus operated as one school until September 2006 when it was divided into four smaller schools on the same site. The decision to implement the 'schools within a school' model came after the school had outgrown its campus, exacerbated by the damage caused by Hurricane Ivan in September 2004. For two years after Ivan, students experienced part-time education and shifts in order to cater for the numbers on the campus. The site was divided up, rooms refurbished, leaders were chosen and trained, staff and students were allocated to the four schools in a period of little more than 10 weeks, ready for the start of school by the end of August. This was in itself a remarkable achievement.

The names of the four campus schools – Heritage, Leading Edge, New Horizons and PACE - were chosen by staff and students.

- Heritage High School has 263 students on roll, with roughly equal numbers of boys and girls. There are 14 students with English as a second language (ESL) and a further 93 who have special educational needs (SEN) ranging from learning problems to physical and behavioural difficulties. The school also has a small but significant number of students with severe emotional and behavioural problems.
- Leading Edge High School has 257 students on roll, with roughly equal numbers of boys and girls. There are 13 students with ESL and a further 26 who have SEN.
- New Horizons High School has 251 students on roll, with roughly equal numbers of boys and girls. There are 7 students with ESL and a further 32 who have SEN.
- PACE High School has 258 students on roll, with roughly equal numbers of boys and girls. There are 21 students with ESL and a further 22 who have SEN.

The schools each have a leader, a deputy and, since September 2007, a senior teacher who comprise the leadership team. The members of the leadership team have reduced or no regular teaching commitments, which allows them time for management responsibilities. In addition to the schools' leadership teams, there is a campus director who facilitates weekly meetings of the school leaders and manages all cross-campus issues such as maintenance and budgets.

The original George Hicks School was due to be inspected by the Schools' Inspectorate (now known as the Education Standards and Assessment Unit (ESAU) in October 2006. In view of the change to four schools, the Inspectorate cancelled the inspection and instead deployed the inspectors to work with the English, mathematics, science and Spanish departments in a developmental way in order to help them improve. Notes summarizing this development week were not published but were shared with the school leaders and campus director. They are referred to in this report in order to show the progress that has been made by the schools since that time in terms of the quality of teaching and the way that they provide for the needs of different students.

Main findings

All of the schools were judged to be providing an adequate education for their students, with strengths in some aspects. The four leaders have each attempted to establish a unique identity for their school, but all have focused strongly on improving teaching and learning, which is proving to be effective. Just over half the lessons seen were judged to be good or very good. The proportion of adequate or unsatisfactory lessons was 44 per cent overall, which although undesirable, is an improvement on what was found in October 2006. Each of the schools has developed a caring ethos and communication with parents is generally a strength. School leaders have established strong, and sometimes creative, links with, and support from, the local community and businesses.

The first year proved to be a steep learning curve for staff and school leaders alike. The decision to relieve the leadership of some management responsibilities, such as the budget and maintenance of the buildings, to allow them to focus on the students and their learning, has proved to be very useful. The schools are encouraged to develop their own personalities, but, there is also a need for good communication and regular meetings, because of the many shared facilities and staff that concern them all. These meetings for school leaders have been maintained into the second year and are facilitated by the acting campus director who plays a crucial role in looking after the strategic management of whole-campus issues and budgets.

The quality of leadership and management was found to be adequate in Leading Edge, New Horizons and PACE, and good in Heritage. The schools have received a considerable amount of professional development and support from their learning community leader, ESAU, their link inspectors and officers from the Department of Education Services. The four school leaders have proven to be determined and committed to school improvement. They have each shown a willingness to listen and learn from the support and professional development offered. They have used their initiative to seek out help and have aimed to give their school a unique identity. This has resulted in an element of healthy competition, as they have sought creative ways to improve.

There have been some difficulties associated with the sharing of staff, resources and facilities across the campus. Two of the main challenges have been (a) the fact that many teachers have had to teach across two or even four schools, and (b) the low levels of literacy and numeracy of the students.

(a) Sharing of staff: Teachers who teach in more than one school are known as 'shared staff'. This arrangement enabled the four schools to share facilities and function without having to make significant changes in staff allocations and structure. However, it was not without its difficulties, for example:

Difficulties for staff:

- Each school has its own rules. Teachers have to constantly be aware of which rules apply in which school
- School leaders require different information
- The school leaders have different expectations and organizational procedures
- Shared staff are sometimes answerable to their head of department and sometimes to the school leader, and this poses difficulties
- Coordinating a subject department across four schools is very difficult when expectations, rules, schedules and organizational procedures vary

Difficulties for students:

- Students in each school only receive one lesson per week in some subjects - such as life skills and drama, and this is not enough
- Students miss parts of lessons and some tutorial time due to the complexity of scheduling some cross-campus lessons – for example band practice

(b) Low levels of literacy and numeracy: Many students in all four schools have very low literacy and numeracy skills and this, of necessity, affects their progress in all subjects. Although the schools have each adopted various strategies to improve literacy, currently only Heritage High School has gathered enough data to be able to reliably report that one of its programmes is having a positive effect.

The main strengths of all four schools are:

- A caring ethos
- A focus on improving teaching and learning
- Good day-to-day management
- Provision for creative subjects, particularly music
- Communication with parents
- Links with the community.

The main areas in need of improvement are:

- Having to share staff
- The development of students' social skills
- Analysis and use of data
- Assessment and tracking of students' progress
- The monitoring of teaching and the effectiveness of the initiatives to improve literacy
- The management of students' behaviour

All four schools were judged to have the capacity to improve with continued support from the campus director and learning community leader.

Given the short amount of time that the schools had to be established and the complexity of some of the organizational issues, the progress made has been remarkable and a credit to all involved. Teachers and parents generally feel that the move to four smaller 'schools within a school' has been a success, mainly because behaviour can be more easily managed in these smaller settings. There are a number of unresolved challenges and lessons to be learned from the two years the schools have been in operation. Hopefully, the findings in this report can help to inform the plans for the way that the new high schools are organized and managed.

Commentary on common strengths and areas for improvement across the campus

How well do students achieve and make progress?

In all four schools, students have weak literacy and numeracy skills. Many enter Year 7 with attainment in English and mathematics that is often well below expected levels. This was evidenced by the students' test results and evaluators' own assessment from lessons and students' work. The attainment of the current Year 7 is better than in previous years.

Overall, students make adequate progress and some of the least able make good progress because of well-targeted interventions in literacy. There has been less of a focus on numeracy.

In general, teachers' expectations of what students can achieve are too low. A few students have been identified as being gifted and there is some special provision for them, which is useful. More could be done in classes to stretch and challenge all students; where this happens, students respond well.

What is the quality of students' personal development?

The quality of students' personal development was judged to be adequate in all four schools. Most students behave well and know right from wrong. They are learning to care for others through fund raising and activities in the community. Some are being given responsibility around the school, for example, through newly-formed student councils. This is a very positive step, but more students would benefit from being given responsibilities. Lessons in life skills, religious education, drama and music help to develop their personal skills and qualities. Tutorials are not used consistently well in all cases across the four schools and opportunities for helping with students' personal development are often wasted.

Although relationships between students are generally positive, in some cases there is an element of aggressiveness in their interactions as they move around the school. Their social skills are often under-developed for their age. In addition, in one school, Heritage, there is a disproportionate number of students with severe emotional and behavioural problems, who are very difficult to manage, and this places considerable extra demands on the school's leadership and staff.

How effective is the teaching and what impact does it have on students' learning?

The quality of teaching was found to have a similar profile across all four schools. There was some good or very good teaching in every school and across all year groups, subjects and teaching sets. However, 44 per cent of the lessons seen were judged only adequate or were unsatisfactory. Given the low levels of literacy and numeracy, a much higher percentage of the teaching needs to fall within the 'good' or 'very good' categories. The combined figures for the four schools are given in the table below:

	Very good	Good	Adequate	Unsatisfactory
Total No (%) of lessons	22 (19%)	43 (37%)	32 (28%)	19 (16%)

All schools had provided teachers with a framework for what is expected in a 'good lesson' in their school. This has resulted in a high degree of consistency of planning within schools: most teachers set objectives for the lesson and share them with students. They make good reference to key words in their subjects as part of the drive to promote literacy across the curriculum. However, not enough teachers are using a range of different strategies with their classes and matching these to students' different stages of learning. Some teachers were not able to manage students' behaviour, which often deteriorated because of boredom when the work was either too easy or too difficult.

This picture of teaching in the four George Hicks Campus schools, however, shows considerable improvement from the situation in October 2006 when a team from the Schools' Inspectorate spent a development week in the school working mainly with English, mathematics, science and Spanish departments. The letter to the schools following the development week said, "Overall, there is a lack of consistency in the quality of teaching and learning across and within schools. There is no real common understanding of what a 'good' lesson looks like. This makes conversations about improving teaching more difficult as there are few common expectations. Teachers need and welcome input and support..." It is evident that the leaders listened to and acted on this advice, but there is still much room for improvement.

The quality of teachers' marking is generally too variable and there is no common approach within or across schools. In a few subjects, teachers are starting to use the recently produced national curriculum attainment levels, which is a positive step. Teachers use rubrics effectively in subjects such as social studies and drama to show students what they need to do to achieve. Assessment is generally weak across the campus, and this was noted as an area for improvement in most of the schools.

What is the quality of the curriculum?

The four schools follow the same curriculum, which is organized centrally to accommodate the shared staff and specialist facilities for art, music, home economics, drama, design technology and physical education. Students receive a broad and balanced curriculum that includes a good range of creative subjects. Music is a strength of the campus and students benefit from opportunities to learn an instrument and participate in the band. Over 200 students from all year groups and sets across the campus attend band practice regularly.

The individual schools have some scope within the whole campus timetable to alter the setting arrangements and some subjects have secured flexibility by timetabling several classes together; for example, this enables the music department to teach music lessons alongside instrumental instruction.

There are only two life skills teachers for the whole campus. This results in students receiving only one lesson per week, which is not enough given the weak social skills of so many students. All four schools would benefit from finding more ways to support students' personal development, such as in tutorial time in the mornings, which is not always used in the most constructive way by teachers.

The schools are attempting to meet the needs of their most able students who have been identified as gifted by providing some enrichment activities for them. However, the number so identified is surprisingly small at 18 students, given the total campus population. It is commendable that some thought is being given to their particular needs, but these and other students are not challenged and stretched enough in their regular lessons throughout the week. Some of the imaginative approaches that are provided for these gifted students would be of benefit to other students as well.

The school caters for less able students in the lower sets or through sessions in the Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC), and this is generally effective. However, communication between teachers in the TLC and those who teach regular classes is not very effective, and there is some discontinuity in students' learning. Because students in sets 3 and 4 receive extra literacy lessons, they have to miss out on the opportunity to learn Spanish, which is taught at the same time.

How effective is the provision for students with (SEN) special educational needs?

Overall, in the lessons observed, students with SEN made adequate progress in all schools. The schools are very aware that, in the past, too many of the students with SEN did not achieve as well as they should, particularly in the development of thinking, and literacy skills. Recently administered diagnostic tests have provided each of the schools with clear data that has enabled them to formulate plans to improve. In general, the strategies are too new to have had a noticeable impact on students' progress. However, Heritage had gathered enough data to reliably report that students are making very good progress on one of its programmes.

The quality of teaching of students with SEN varied from unsatisfactory to very good. As expected, when the teaching was very good, students responded well and made good progress. They fared less well in lessons where there were shortcomings in the planning for their different learning needs, or where teachers were unnecessarily harsh or impatient.

During lessons, students mostly had good attitudes to learning. They tried to concentrate on tasks even though some had short concentration spans. They were respectful to the teachers and generally keen to succeed. When given the opportunity, the students worked together well and enjoyed being actively involved.

The support for students with visual impairment and those with physical difficulties is adequate. Students' access to occupational therapy is restricted because the occupational therapist has to administer physiotherapy as there is no specialist physiotherapy provision.

There is a small but significant number of students with very considerable social, emotional and in some cases mental health-associated conditions. It is difficult for regular staff to meet the needs of these students. The students make little progress and this is exacerbated by their frequent suspensions and interruptions to schooling.

The progress made by students against targets set in their individual education plans (IEPs) is inconsistent across all of the schools. Often teachers were unaware that the student had an IEP. On the occasions that they were, only rarely had any attention been given to them in teachers' planning. Monitoring of the provision for students with special educational needs is not adequate at present.

In general, students attending the TLC made good progress during their sessions. These are students that are performing at very low levels in most, if not all, areas of learning. Their poor achievement is compounded by poor self-image as a result of prolonged failure to learn. However, they spoke positively of their experience in the TLC and generally felt that the sessions were worthwhile and beneficial.

How well are the schools led and managed?

The way that the schools are led and managed was found to be adequate in Leading Edge, New Horizons and PACE and good in Heritage. The leadership teams in all four schools have focused from the outset on improving teaching and learning in their schools, which has been effective. Within each school, the members of the leadership team work well together and communication is generally good. Each school has produced an appropriate improvement plan. The leaders monitor and evaluate practice in classrooms, although this is not always as regular or as helpful as it could be. They make sure that the schools run smoothly each day. They have a high profile around the school, ensuring a calm atmosphere and helping to get students promptly to lessons.

In Heritage, the good leadership is most obvious in the positive relationships and ethos which are clearly evident across the school and in the creative deployment of staff within the constraints of the wider campus. The skills and expertise of the staff are effectively used: for example, a teacher-mentor gives help and advice where needed and an assistant teacher organizes all the support for students with special needs as there is only one special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) for the whole campus.

The schools are gathering data about the performance of individual students. Although the leaders are starting to analyse and use this data, they are not all making enough use of it to track students' progress, to identify underachievement or to evaluate the impact of policies and initiatives.

The campus director contributes to the smooth running of the schools. In addition to managing the overall budget and administrative staff, dealing with buildings and grounds maintenance, he facilitates meetings of the four school leaders and helps to promote good instructional practice.

Performance management is a regular practice across the campus. Teachers are given targets and helped to improve where necessary. Those who work across the campus often feel less positive about performance management as they are expected to be accountable to more than one person, for example, to their subject head of department as well as to the leader of the school to which they

have been assigned. The majority of shared staff are not happy with being attached to one school when they work across two to four schools. They do not feel that the school leader knows the quality of their work and they feel more allegiance to the head of their subject department.

The issue of how to manage the coordination of subject departments across and within the four schools has been a challenge from the outset. The current organization was probably the best compromise that could be achieved without making significant changes to the staffing allocations and structure. Basically, teachers of the following subjects were divided between the four schools: English, mathematics, science, social studies, Spanish and ICT. The other subjects – life skills, drama, art, music, design technology, home economics – are taught in specialist facilities that serve all schools. In some cases, these specialist subject teachers teach students only from two schools (for example, art and drama), but in other cases they teach students from all four schools separately or together. These specialist cross-campus subjects retain a greater departmental cohesion than the other subjects where the head of department works in one school and the rest of the department is scattered across four schools.

The difficulties associated with trying to lead a subject across four schools were highlighted in reviews of four heads of department by the Schools' Inspectorate between February and May 2007. Although the heads of department were doing their best in most cases to make the arrangement work, it was proving difficult to sustain and hard to engender a subject ethos when they rarely saw each other and met infrequently. In addition, there were problems to do with sharing resources across four sites and having to move equipment from one school to another. Communication has been assisted by improvements in the ICT networks and access.

Some of the difficulties that shared staff have are associated with teaching students from several schools. Of most concern were the different expectations of the schools, for example, to do with uniform and behaviour. It is hard for the shared staff to remember and act upon four different policies for behaviour and uniform. Some schools have introduced 'dress-down' days, for example, which cause problems for shared staff who teach students from two or more schools together, when one school has a dress-down day and the others do not.

The schools have organized a good range of professional development for their staff, relating to generic whole school issues. However, some staff feel that there is a need for training in their own specialist subjects, for example, in physical education.

There has been much discussion about alternative arrangements for the coordination of subjects and whether they are needed at all in the schools of the future. The plans for the new high schools include more cross-curricular, project based approaches that are not focused so tightly on individual subjects, which suggest less need for subject coordinators and more need for the coordination of whole-school, cross-curricular aspects.

The four schools have their own identifiable areas within the campus, separated by chain link fences, which do little to enhance the appearance of the site. There is some variation in the amount of space that each school has and New Horizons, for example, lacks outside space for its students. In all four schools, the security guards play an important role in managing students during non-lesson times, such as before school, during breaks and lunch. They generally manage this very effectively and show a concern for students and their welfare.

How effective are other aspects of the schools' work?

The support and guidance offered to students and level of care for their welfare

The provision for support, guidance and students' welfare is adequate in all four schools, with some good aspects as well as some areas that need to be improved.

All of the schools provide caring and secure environments for their students. Students have access to a nurse, dental nurse, supportive security guards, psychiatric support and counselling, in addition to their form tutor. The counsellors provide very valuable support to students, teachers and parents. However, each school would benefit more from having its own counsellor.

The schools keep appropriate records on individual students, including health, academic records and information from primary schools.

Most schools have developed appropriate behaviour management strategies, though these are not always implemented consistently and teachers do not always cope well with the challenging behaviour of some students. The suspension rates in the four schools have been very high, although most have fallen this year. The schools have begun to implement effective systems such as putting students "on report", where students' behaviour and performance in lessons are monitored and recorded by teachers with information for parents as well. In general, most students behave well in lessons that they see as relevant and interesting. The exception to this is the small number of disturbed students whose needs are not being well met in these mainstream school settings.

Students' attendance is generally satisfactory and managed appropriately by the schools. However, the school leaders do not analyse attendance and suspension data rigorously enough to look for trends and patterns that might help them to know which strategies are working and which are not.

Links with parents and the community

The schools have developed good links with parents and the community. Parents are kept well informed in a variety of ways, both about events at the school and their children's progress. Teachers are accessible via cell phones, which is greatly appreciated by parents.

Parents are generally happy about the transition to the four smaller schools and feel that behaviour is now managed more effectively and that the atmosphere is more caring and secure.

Links with the local community and businesses are also good. Some school leaders have developed this aspect well, with strong links with local businesses. In Leading Edge, students in Year 9 benefit from a week's work experience as part of the 'Learning through Internship' programme; this is a very positive initiative. Businesses have been supportive of the schools and provided resources, such as cell phones for teachers.

Members of the community are regular visitors to all four schools and students take part in community activities including supporting charities.

Provision for literacy, numeracy and ICT across the curriculum

All of the schools have worked hard to promote literacy across the curriculum and, where the teaching is effective, the impact of this has been positive. Teachers use key words and find opportunities to discuss language and to encourage speaking, listening, reading and writing in their subjects. Most schools have introduced silent reading sessions, sometimes in tutorial lessons, and have involved members of the community in reading to students. The reading time in tutorials is not always effectively used. The lack of a good school library is hindering progress in this respect.

Provision for numeracy across the curriculum is less well developed in the four schools. It is an area that no school has yet tackled in a coherent way, although there are some strategies to improve students' skills such as through the FASTT Math computer program. There were some examples of students using and applying their numeracy skills in subjects other than mathematics, but these were not planned for systematically or seen in many lessons across the schools.

The use of ICT across the curriculum is good in all schools and a major strength in Leading Edge. Teachers make use of the available resources, including interactive white boards, PowerPoint presentations, video clips and web resources to add interest to their lessons. Many of the students are confident users of ICT and view computers as commonplace resources for research and presentation of their work. Many take advantage of the resources and use the computers in classrooms before and after school for their school work. There is a good 'acceptable use' policy and most students have very mature and sensible approaches to working with computers.