

All parents of children at the school know the school is a Specialist School with specialisms in mathematics, computing and science but what exactly does being a Specialist School mean and, more importantly, what does it mean for the pupils?

What is a Specialist School?

Any maintained secondary school in England can apply for specialist status in one of ten curriculum specialisms, including our two specialisms of mathematics and computing (which is a combined specialism) and science. Specialisms are awarded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (the DCFS) and their website can be found at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/specialistschools/

The Specialist Schools Programme helps schools, in partnership with private sector sponsors and supported by additional Government funding, to establish distinctive identities through their chosen specialisms and achieve their targets to raise standards. Specialist schools have a special focus on those subjects relating to their chosen specialism but must also meet the National Curriculum requirements and deliver a broad and balanced education to all pupils. Specialist schools are the local centre of excellence in their specialist areas.

How does a school become a Specialist School?

The process of applying to become a Specialist School has been simplified significantly since we applied in 2003 but it still contains the same essential elements. As Specialist Schools are centres of excellence for the local area they must obtain the support of their Local Education Authority (Kent County Council in our case) and the local community, including local businesses. We are therefore the *only* Mathematics and Computing Specialist School in Swale and, according to the latest information on the DCSF website, we are one of only twelve Mathematics, Computing *and* Science Specialist Schools in the country!

When we applied for our first specialism, mathematics and computing, our submission to the DCSF was over one hundred of pages long and detailed demanding targets for the following three years for whole school improvement (not just in our specialism subjects) and for our work with the wider community, including working with local primary and secondary schools. Our application was successful without the need for any modifications so we became a Mathematics and Computing Specialist school. The Westlands School was the first Specialist School in Swale and we are still the only wide ability Specialist School in Swale with specialisms in traditional academic subjects.



Maths &
Computing

What happens next?

Once a school has received its Specialist Status the work of meeting the targets begin. Specialist Status is not about one or two departments making good progress so it is a whole school program, although staff from the areas of specialisms may take the lead on developing new initiatives. The specialist school plans cover three years and targets and progress are regularly reviewed through the whole of the three years.

After three years Specialist Status has to be renewed, extended or, in some cases, comes to an end. At the end of our three years the DCSF were in the process of changing how schools re-applied which included an Ofsted inspection and, as the school was so successful, we were not inspected until our fifth year of specialism! The impact of our Specialist Status and other initiatives clearly impressed the Ofsted inspection team as we were designated an Outstanding school. Shortly after the inspection we were invited by the DCSF to apply to become a High Performing Specialist School.

High Performing Specialist Schools

A High Performing Specialist School (HPSS) is, as its title implies, a Specialist School that has used its specialism to make a significant impact on the school and community. A school is invited by the DCSF to apply to become a High Performing Specialist School, only after their initial period as a Specialist School and providing they have met demanding standards. Then, as with the initial application for Specialist Status, the school must obtain the support of the Local Authority and community and submit their application. For HPSS, the requirement for school based targets is as demanding as for the original application but the community targets are even more demanding. High Performing Specialist Schools are expected to be centre of excellence in both the local and wider communities.

Unusually, our application for HPSS was accepted without the need for any modification or improvement and we added science to our specialisms in September 2009.



The Westlands School is the only High Performing Specialist School in Swale specialising in academic subjects.

What does being a High Performing Specialist School mean to parents and pupils?

- ✓ Outstanding pupil progress
- ✓ Highest quality teaching
- ✓ Excellent, modern facilities including extensive computer access for all pupils
- ✓ The widest range of courses of any local school
- ✓ A school at the forefront of educational innovation
- ✓ A range of Family Learning opportunities at the school
- ✓ Many pupils benefit from our support whilst they are still at junior school

The Rural Dimension



The most recent addition to our Specialist Status is the Rural Dimension. The farm has long been a strong feature of the school and it now forms a central part of the Rural Dimension. More and more children will be encouraged to take part in rural and environmental activities and learning will be taken outside of the classroom into all parts of the school.

Our work with the community

As both a Specialist School and High Performing Specialist School working with our community is a high priority. Many parents are aware of our work with local junior schools which have included Regis Manor, Minterne, Holywell, Grove Park, Borden, Barrow Grove, Homewood and The Oaks, to name but a few, but we also have links with all the local secondary schools.

Currently Westlands staff support our four Soft Federation Schools in mathematics, computing and science and we offer enrichment activities for their pupils such as the Year 6 Mathematics Challenge



We have offered support to a local prison, the Job Centre and Amicus Horizon, and have been in discussion with local charities such as the WRVS and Relate to produce websites. We are currently exploring links with Morrisons and the Kent Science Park.



Recently a local Brownies group visited the school to see the Star Chaser rocket as part of our Science Specialism Launch day.

Further information

For further information about any aspect of our Specialist Status please contact John Willis, Specialist Status Development Leader, on jow@westlands.kent.sch.uk or via the school switchboard on 01795 477475.

You may also like to view issues of our Specialist Schools Magazine, MegaByte, which can be found by clicking [here](#)