

The Thomas Lord Audley School

Inspection report

Unique reference number	115207
Local authority	Essex
Inspection number	379037
Inspection dates	25–26 January 2012
Lead inspector	Stephen Abbott HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	698
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Brian Palmer
Headteacher	Jonathan Tippet
Date of previous school inspection	15 October 2008
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Age group	11–16
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Introduction

Inspection team

Stephen Abbott

Her Majesty's Inspector

Angela Skinner

Additional inspector

Barbara Firth

Additional inspector

Philippa Holliday

Additional inspector

This inspection was carried out with two days' notice. In planning the inspection, the inspectors took account of the school's attainment and progress data, its self-evaluation and improvement planning documents and responses to the on-line questionnaire (Parent View). During the inspection, inspectors scrutinised students' work and observed 38 lessons involving 38 teachers. They made short visits to other lessons and withdrawal groups to check on the provision for improving students' literacy across the curriculum and the provision for disabled students and those with special educational needs. They held meetings with senior and middle leaders, members of the governing body and groups of students, teachers and teaching assistants. They examined the college's assessment, attendance and behaviour records, the bullying and racist incident logs, the single central record of safeguarding checks and the minutes of governing body meetings. They analysed questionnaire responses from 116 parents and carers, 101 students and 57 members of staff.

Information about the school

The Thomas Lord Audley School is smaller than the average secondary school. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is broadly average. Just under a quarter of students have disabilities and/or special educational needs. The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups is 9%. Few students are at an early stage of learning English as an additional language. A small number of students attend alternative provision for part of the week in a local further education college. The school meets the current government floor standard.

After the last inspection, the local authority announced proposals to close the school. The decision was eventually reversed, but there was a temporary drop in enrolments.

The school is part of a federation with The Stanway School and Alderman Blaxill School, led by an executive headteacher under a single governing body. Staff are sometimes seconded to or from one of the other schools. Since September 2011, responsibility for the day-to-day management of The Thomas Lord Audley School lies with the three deputy headteachers. The federation is part of the North East Essex Education Partnership, along with five other local schools. All are at an advanced stage of planning to convert to academy status.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness	3
Achievement of pupils	3
Quality of teaching	3
Behaviour and safety of pupils	3
Leadership and management	3

Key findings

- The Thomas Lord Audley School is a satisfactory school that benefits from being part of a federation. Strong and effective leadership from the executive headteacher and the federation governing body has stabilised the school since the closure threat was lifted.
- Senior and middle leaders have delivered improvements that demonstrate their capacity for advancing the school further. Some of the school's work is now good, but there is still too much inconsistency.
- Students' achievement has improved and is now satisfactory but attainment remains below average. Students' success in vocational courses means that a large majority gain five or more grade C GCSEs, but fewer reach this level in English and mathematics.
- Most disabled students and those with special educational needs make satisfactory progress, but a few do not attend regularly enough to benefit from the support on offer.
- Teaching is satisfactory. It has improved in the last year, following a concerted programme of staff training, and an increasing proportion is now good or better. However, there are still considerable variations in certain aspects of teaching and assessment, including unacceptable variations in the regularity and quality of marking.
- Overall attendance has improved to a broadly average level, but there are still too many students who are persistently absent.
- Students' behaviour is satisfactory. Most students behave well in lessons but learning is occasionally slowed by low-level disruption, particularly in lower-attaining sets. Most students feel safe in the school, which takes a firm line on bullying.

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Schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory may receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

What does the school need to do to improve further

- Raise achievement further, particularly in English and mathematics, by:
 - ensuring that literacy is promoted consistently well by teachers of all subjects
 - increasing the proportion of mathematics lessons taught by specialists
 - ensuring that students build up useful notes in all subjects and are taught how to use them to support their learning
 - ensuring that all students attend regularly, with a particular focus on those who are persistently absent.

- Improve the quality of assessment by:
 - improving teachers' skills in assessing students' understanding and progress during lessons, and adapting their teaching where necessary
 - establishing and consistently implementing a realistic marking policy that ensures regular and effective guidance for students on how to improve their work
 - ensuring that all teachers use assessment information effectively to plan activities that provide appropriate levels of challenge in line with each student's individual starting point.

- Reduce the number of lessons subject to low-level disruption by making them more interesting and better tailored to the needs of each student.

Main report

Achievement of pupils

Most parents and carers feel that their children are making good progress, though some have valid concerns about behaviour and homework. Learning and progress were good or better in just under half of the lessons seen. In most lessons, the great majority of students show perseverance and a desire to learn. In the best cases, students show creativity, put forward ideas and develop independent learning skills. When they are given clear guidance on how to improve they respond well. Learning is satisfactory when students are given a more passive role. They show less initiative in managing their own learning, completing tasks without seeking to understand the bigger picture.

Over the last three years, students' overall attainment has followed an upward trend, helped by their success in vocational courses. The proportion of students gaining five or more GCSEs at grade C or above is now average, but the proportion with English and mathematics is below average, despite a sharp improvement last year in both

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subjects. Part of the problem is that too many students gain a higher grade in English but not mathematics, or vice versa. Nevertheless, achievement is now satisfactory.

Until this year, students have made slower than expected progress in English. This has most evident among girls, whose progress in mathematics has also been weak. A strong programme to support students at risk of underachievement is raising standards in these core subjects. The school's own assessments show that current Year 11 students, especially the girls, have been catching up, and their progress in English and mathematics since they joined the school is now satisfactory.

The school is now working to accelerate students' progress in Key Stage 3. This is particularly important, as attainment on entry has been declining in recent years. Teaching has improved in mathematics and a programme has been launched involving all Key Stage 3 subjects in developing literacy skills. Although its implementation is still inconsistent, the programme has already had some impact. Much faster progress in the last term is helping students to catch up to the levels expected for their age.

The achievement of disabled students and those with special educational needs is satisfactory, reflecting the support they receive in lessons and withdrawal groups. Their progress against their targets is constantly monitored and there are some individual examples of students making such good progress that they no longer need support.

Quality of teaching

The school's own lesson observations show that teaching has been improving steadily. Most students, parents and carers feel that teaching is good, and this is the case in around half of lessons. The most effective teachers have good subject expertise that helps them to choose the effective teaching approaches that reflect the full range of learning needs. They enthuse and engage students well and help them to develop independent learning skills, so they build up worthwhile notes and get into the habit of referring back to them. In the best cases, teachers observe students while they work independently, addressing any misconceptions as they arise and encouraging the more-able students to move on to more challenging work. They provide regular guidance to students on how to improve their work, through marking and feedback during lessons and they encourage students to assess their own and each other's work. For example, exemplary note-making and marking were seen in an outstanding German lesson: students frequently looked back at previous work; they valued the frequent 'what went well' summaries and acted upon the 'even better if' comments.

However, only a minority of lessons contain all these good features. In some cases, teaching is good overall but weaker in one or two aspects. Half of the teaching is satisfactory, delivering key information, but in a less inspiring way that does not link together so well over time. In many of these lessons, the same work is set for all

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students, rather than being tailored to meet the needs of different groups. Some teachers make only cursory checks to monitor students' learning. The inconsistent nature of assessment is even more apparent in students' books and folders. In some classes, students' work is not marked often enough. Where teachers do mark regularly, they do not always provide guidance on how to improve, or check that students have acted upon previous comments. The setting of homework is also inconsistent.

The teaching of personal, social, health education programmes makes a satisfactory contribution to students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. The teaching of English, including literacy across the curriculum, is improving in response to recent training initiatives. English teachers are getting better at using assessment to promote learning and in planning to meet the needs of different students. The school has found it difficult to recruit enough specialist mathematics teachers. Non-specialists teach their own subjects well, but do not always appreciate how mathematical ideas link together or how some teaching approaches cultivate future errors and misconceptions. As a result, students' conceptual understanding can be insecure, leaving them over-reliant on half-remembered rules.

Disabled students and those with special educational needs receive regular, well-focused support from a team of learning support assistants. Catch-up classes and one-to-one support are provided to help students reach age-related expectations in mathematics and English. Students with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties are supported well by the pastoral and learning support teams to improve their self-control and ability to concentrate in class. This was illustrated in a drama lesson, where careful lesson planning, effective leaning support and good behaviour management enabled several such students to engage in a sensitive role play.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

The school's pastoral care system has contributed to improvements in students' behaviour and attendance. Students understand and largely respect the school behaviour policy. Behaviour is good in most lessons but learning is slowed in a few cases by low-level disruption, particularly in lower-attaining sets. The school's behaviour records show that the concerns raised by some students, parents and carers are well founded. However, the same records also show that behaviour is getting better. Behaviour around the school is satisfactory. Most students conduct themselves well, but there are isolated incidents of disrespect towards other students and lunchtime supervisors. The Internal Support Unit is used well to address individual shortcomings in behaviour.

Girls' attendance, which had been low, has improved this year, particularly among those known to be eligible for free school meals. As a result, overall attendance is now broadly average. Persistent absence has been cut, but is still too high for certain students, including some with higher levels of special educational needs who most need the stability of regular attendance. Their learning is badly disrupted because they miss too many lessons. The problem is exacerbated for Year 11 students on the

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alternative programme because their college sessions cut across lessons in core subjects, an issue addressed for future students by better timetabling.

Most parents and carers report that their children are well looked after. Action taken on all forms of bullying is particularly strong. The students agree, including former victims who say that bullying is taken seriously and usually stops permanently. The curriculum gives students an accurate perspective on their own and others' safety. Students behave safely in practical lessons and most say they feel safe at school.

Leadership and management

The school has gained strong and effective leadership from the executive headteacher. Governance is a strength: the federation's single and effective governing body is committed to improving the school. Its members are actively involved in monitoring the school's work and they hold the school leadership to account well.

The school improvement plan provides a clear agenda for improvement, focusing on a few key priorities. However, target setting and monitoring of progress focus mainly on C grade targets with less attention being paid to value-added measures of progress which take account of students' starting points when they join the school.

The school's capacity for improvement is evident in the increasing attainment, faster progress and better attendance, particularly in some of the previously underachieving groups. Improvements have accelerated since September under the revised senior leadership team, which has been strengthened through secondments within the federation. There has been a steady improvement in the quality of teaching and learning as a result of a substantial programme of professional development and a rigorous approach to eliminating inadequate teaching. Teaching in several subjects has benefited from external advice, for example from the local authority and teachers from other schools in the federation. The school is increasingly involving its outstanding practitioners as role models and to provide training for their colleagues.

The school is developing its leadership capacity at all levels. Most middle leaders are responding well to an increased level of accountability. They take an increasing role in driving improvement and in monitoring the quality of provision. In Key Stage 4, subject leaders analyse students' examination scripts to identify common areas of weakness, which are addressed in subsequent lessons. However, there is an increasing recognition that such topics need to be taught better in the first place, particularly in Key Stage 3. The regular departmental and pastoral reviews show that the school's self-evaluation is accurate and robust. They reveal largely satisfactory but improving provision and practice. The monitoring of marking to ensure consistency is one example where subject leaders have been less successful.

The school curriculum has been expanded to include a wider range of vocational courses. Students' success in these courses has made an important contribution to

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the improved examination results. The curriculum provides satisfactory support for students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Extra-curricular activities include a range of educational and cultural visits and links with the London Olympics. However, there are no formal links with schools in Britain or abroad to provide experience of a wider range of cultures. The school promotes equality by monitoring the impact of its provision on different groups. Students form secure relationships and there are few racist incidents. Students from minority ethnic groups feel well integrated into school life.

The school has well-established safeguarding procedures that meet requirements, and an effective pastoral care system. The school engages parents and carers increasingly well, but a few parents and carers have been disappointed when their attempts to contact teachers, form tutors or pastoral leaders have suffered repeated frustrations.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	46	46	8	0
Primary schools	8	47	40	5
Secondary schools	14	38	40	8
Special schools	28	48	20	4
Pupil referral units	15	50	29	5
All schools	11	46	38	6

New school inspection arrangements have been introduced from 1 January 2012. This means that inspectors make judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2010 to 31 August 2011 and represent judgements that were made under the school inspection arrangements that were introduced on 1 September 2009. These data are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2010/11 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Primary schools include primary academy converters. Secondary schools include secondary academy converters, sponsor-led academies and city technology colleges. Special schools include special academy converters and non-maintained special schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning and development taking account of their attainment.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Attendance	the regular attendance of pupils at school and in lessons, taking into account the school's efforts to encourage good attendance.
Behaviour	how well pupils behave in lessons, with emphasis on their attitude to learning. Pupils' punctuality to lessons and their conduct around the school.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving based on its self-evaluation and what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the governors and headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.
Safety	how safe pupils are in school, including in lessons; and their understanding of risks. Pupils' freedom from bullying and harassment. How well the school promotes safety, for example e-learning.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



27 January 2012

Dear Students

Inspection of The Thomas Lord Audley School, Colchester, CO2 8NJ

Following the recent inspection, your school has been judged satisfactory. The school is improving after a period of instability when it was threatened with closure. Being part of a federation has really helped the school, which has gained from Mr Tippett's expertise as executive headteacher.

Over the last few years, examination results have been better in vocational subjects than academic ones. Better attendance, faster progress by girls and better teaching have played a big part in raising standards in English and mathematics, so your achievement is now satisfactory.

We saw a mixture of satisfactory and good teaching, and a few outstanding lessons. In some subjects, your exercise books contain helpful notes that you can look back on to help your learning, but not always. Some teachers give you very helpful guidance on how to improve, but your work is not always marked well enough. Behaviour and attendance are improving but some students do not help by disrupting some lessons or by taking too much time off school.

We have recommended some improvements. In some cases we have asked the school to make sure that the good features of the school are made more consistent, so everyone benefits equally. These include the way teachers check on your work during lessons, and the way teachers help you build up useful notes in all subjects. We have also asked the school to tackle persistent absence more strongly, to sort out the problems in marking, and to reduce disruption by making lessons more interesting.

Most of you enjoy school and feel safe. On behalf of the inspection team, I would like to thank you all for the welcome we received, and to thank especially those of you who gave up your time to talk to us or to complete our questionnaires.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Abbott
Her Majesty's Inspector

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