

Plume School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	115318
Local Authority	Essex
Inspection number	357731
Inspection dates	2–3 March 2011
Reporting inspector	Paula Heaney 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	11–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1844
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	382
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Joan Binder
Headteacher	David Stephenson
Date of previous school inspection	19 September 2007
School address	Fambridge Road Maldon CM9 6AB
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and five additional inspectors. Inspectors observed 48 lessons and saw 47 teachers. Meetings were held with groups of students, members of the governing body, staff and the School Improvement Partner. Inspectors observed the school's work, and looked at a range of documentation, including 281 questionnaires from parents and 200 from students

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at a number of key areas.

- What actions has the school taken to improve outcomes and achievement at the end of Year 11, with a specific focus on mathematics, upper-ability boys and those known to be eligible for free school meal?
- Has students' attendance improved across the school and has persistent absence reduced in particular?
- What is the quality of learning and support like in the sixth form in helping students improve the progress they make?

Information about the school

The Plume School is a large school with a performing arts specialism. Most students are from White British backgrounds. The school has slightly more girls than boys. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is below the national average. An average proportion of students have special educational needs and/or disabilities. The school is on two main campuses. Students in Years 7 and 8 are based on the Mill Road Campus and those in Years 9 to 11, together with the Sixth Form College, are based on the Farnbridge Road Campus nearby. A small proportion of performing arts provision is currently delivered on an additional site in the town. The school holds a range of awards including the Sportsmark and Artsmark Gold awards and the Excellence in Mentoring Award. The headteacher joined the school in April 2009.

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: how good is the school?**2****The school's capacity for sustained improvement****2**

Main findings

The Plume School is a good school and it has good capacity to improve further. This is because the headteacher and leadership team are focused clearly on improving students' attainment and ensuring that lessons are of a consistently good quality to ensure students make the progress of which they are capable. Leaders and managers, and increasingly teachers, evaluate the strengths of the school and the areas for improvement accurately. Appropriate actions are put in place and are having a positive impact across the school, such as the focus on improvement in mathematics and in the sixth form. The governing body knows the school well and provides appropriate challenge and support to the leadership team.

Students' outcomes are good overall, although attainment is at the national average. Most students make good progress as a result of good teaching and learning, good support and an interesting range of subjects and courses which meet their needs. Some students make very good progress, especially those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, whom the school supports particularly effectively, and often individually, to achieve of their best. Attainment in English and science is a particular strength of the school, as is attainment in the vast majority of performing arts subjects. Many students who choose vocational courses are not only successful in progressing to the next level of study but are supported by the school to maintain their GCSE studies in English and mathematics. As a result, almost all students in Year 11 take examinations in these subjects. A small minority of lessons do not meet students' needs or interests. While teachers receive appropriate support to improve their lessons they do not share good practice across departments as a matter of course. Although assessment practices are good overall, inspectors found inconsistencies in departments' approaches to assessment, how regularly work was marked and in the helpfulness of comments to inform students how to improve. Students' attainment in the sixth form is satisfactory, as is the progress they make.

The promotion of community cohesion is outstanding at The Plume School. Students of all abilities and from all backgrounds are encouraged to take part in activities within the school, and locally, nationally and internationally to extend their knowledge and understanding of other cultures. For example, a highly successful event, 'Taxi Day', involving the town of Maldon, enabled Year 9 students through performing arts activities to lead a carnival style procession through the High Street of around 120 decorated taxis transporting disabled children from London. Close links with a school in Gambia, involving other key community members as well as students from the school, have been highly effective in raising cultural awareness, and links with an inner city school with a much more diverse population are underway. Through a wide range of activities, students make a good contribution to the community and the school ensures all students can participate by funding those who would otherwise not be able to take part.

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Students say they feel very safe. They behave well in most lessons and in and around the school. They are mostly polite and confident, and work very effectively together in lessons. Through the wide range of extra-curricular activities the students develop good team-working skills to prepare them effectively for employment

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise attainment by ensuring that more lessons are consistently of a good or better quality, share good teaching practice more effectively across departments, and include a range of activities that challenge and interest students sufficiently, so that all make the progress of which they are capable.
- Implement and monitor a whole-school approach to assessing students' progress, using the good practice already established, for example, in English, to:
 - inform teachers and managers of students' progress and attainment more effectively and consistently
 - ensure that students' work is marked regularly and that comments and feedback are sufficiently detailed to help students improve
 - adopt a more consistent approach to the setting of homework, particularly in the lower school.
- Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the management actions already in place in the sixth form to improve students' progress and raise attainment further.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

2

Examination results are in line with national averages overall and are high in English, science and most of the performing arts subjects. Students' performance in vocational subjects such as leisure and tourism, media and sports is above average. While results in mathematics are just below the national average, almost all students in Year 11 are entered for the GCSE examination. School data indicate progress in mathematics is improving but it is too early to judge the full impact of improvement actions in this subject. The achievement of A* and A grades in GCSE examinations is above the national average.

Most students make good progress. This is because they have a wide range of subjects and courses that interest them and because teachers know their students very well. Teachers ensure in most lessons and through the support students receive outside of lessons that students make the progress of which they are capable, as learning is matched closely to their abilities. As a result of the good support students receive in the school's Flexible Learning Centre on the Farnbridge Road campus and Ocean Centre on the Mill Road campus, students with special educational needs and/or disabilities make very good progress. The school has identified that for some students in receipt of free school meals progress is hampered when they do not attend regularly.

These are the other features of students' outcomes.

The large majority of students enjoy school and most say they learn a lot in lessons and are well supported by staff.

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Behaviour is mostly good in lessons and around the two main sites. Students work very well together in lessons.

Students say they feel very safe in school.

Attendance is improving and is satisfactory as actions to reduce persistent absence are having a positive impact.

Students are encouraged to lead healthy lifestyles through the wide range of sporting and performing arts activities offered by the school and participation rates are good.

The school enables students to develop good economic well-being by supporting them to achieve core skills in English, maths and science alongside their other subject choices and through well-developed enterprise and work placement activities.

Students develop a wider cultural awareness beyond that of the locality through activities and performances which they take part in within the school and in the local community.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	2
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment ¹	3
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	2
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	2
The extent to which pupils feel safe	2
Pupils' behaviour	2
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	2
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attendance ¹	3
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low

How effective is the provision?

The large majority of lessons seen by inspectors were good. These lessons were planned well, took into account students' abilities, and included a variety of learning activities to maintain students' interest and to challenge them sufficiently. Questioning was used skilfully to include individual students and to test and extend their knowledge. Students

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were encouraged to work together to solve problems and to discuss with each other how to approach their learning. Most learners were able to describe confidently what they were doing and why, and knew what was expected of them. Where information and communication technology was used most effectively, such as in a Year 7 mathematics lesson on simplifying ratios, students' enjoyment, participation and learning were evident. Although inspectors saw no lessons where students' progress was inadequate, in the less effective lessons, activities were designed for the whole group and did not, as a result, provide sufficient challenge for the most able in particular. Students told inspectors that lessons where they work predominantly from text books do not hold their interest or help them to learn sufficiently well.

While assessment practices across the school are good overall, and evident in the majority of good lessons seen, inspectors found marking and assessment to be inconsistent across the school. Where good practice exists, such as in English, students are very clear of their goals and what they need to do to achieve them and to improve further. When marking and feedback were effective, they were detailed: spelling and grammatical errors were corrected and areas for improvement were followed up. A few parents and carers with students at the Mill Road campus told inspectors that the provision and marking of homework was sometimes inconsistent.

The school ensures a wide range of subjects, courses and opportunities are available for all students to match their needs, interests and aspirations, within and beyond the school's specialism. High quality and successful partnerships exist with local further education colleges and training providers to ensure a broad curriculum and provide greater access to vocational and work-based routes than the school itself can provide. The school also ensures that students continue to study the core subjects of English, mathematics and science. Progression to the next level of study is high.

Students' support needs are addressed swiftly through prompt action by the school. External agencies are used effectively to support students with specific needs. More vulnerable students are monitored and supported very well. Permanent exclusions have reduced and the school is successful in supporting its students to remain in school, particularly through the individual support provided through the Flexible Learning and Ocean Centres.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	2
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	2
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	2
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	2

How effective are leadership and management?

Senior leaders and middle managers have high expectations of staff and students alike and they have developed an ethos with a clear focus on raising achievement. Areas of

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underperformance have been identified and are being tackled successfully, through a very thorough approach to reviewing performance across selected departments. The recent appointment of achievement managers has had a positive impact in making teachers more accountable for their performance and improving the progress of students. Target-setting is realistic and challenging. Senior leaders provide good support to middle managers in sharpening improvement planning based on the information managers gather on student and teacher performance. Lesson monitoring is suitably rigorous and rightly focuses on students' learning and progress.

The governing body provides good support and challenge to the school. Its members are committed and knowledgeable individuals who take their roles seriously and give freely of their own time, visiting the school regularly outside of meetings. The governing body performs its statutory duties well. Policies are monitored and evaluated on a regular basis. Safeguarding arrangements are good. Effective procedures are in place to ensure students' safety. Staff, including governors, are well trained and knowledgeable about their responsibilities. The school ensures the students are aware of how to keep safe and students say they are very clear how to report any concerns. Parents are highly supportive of the school in this regard.

The school is strongly committed to equality of opportunity and monitors the performance of groups closely. Data indicate that actions to improve the progress of those known to be eligible for free school meals are having a positive impact. The school works hard to ensure students of all abilities can progress into the sixth form or to education and training opportunities at other providers. The promotion of community cohesion is outstanding. Through an in-depth analysis of the school's own context and skills gaps in the area, the school plans carefully and successfully how to develop students' cultural experiences locally, nationally and internationally. Aspects of the curriculum, such as equine studies and horticulture, have been developed with local skills shortages in mind to promote students' employability.

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These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	2
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	2
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	2
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	2
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	2
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	1
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	2

Sixth form

Students' achievement in the sixth form college is satisfactory. Attainment in GCE A ♦ level examinations rose in 2010 but is still just below the national average. Students make satisfactory progress when compared with their starting points. They make good progress on GCE A level drama and physical education courses, on vocational BTEC National qualifications and very good progress on the advanced level child care course. Management roles have been strengthened in 2010, with a sharper focus on raising achievement. Clear actions and targets are set, and monitored and evaluated more regularly. Inspectors saw evidence of improvement through detailed records showing students' in-year progress and of the positive impact management actions are having in helping students make the progress of which they are capable. Attendance is more closely monitored and has improved.

Teaching and learning are good in the sixth form. Students have access to a wide range of subjects and courses at advanced level, with plans to extend the smaller range of provision at intermediate level. Support for students is good through student support mentors, with an increasing proportion of students progressing into higher education. Sixth form students make a positive contribute to the school as a whole through mentoring younger students.

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These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	3
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	3
The quality of provision in the sixth form	2
Leadership and management of the sixth form	2

Views of parents and carers

Most parents and carers are highly supportive of the school with a very high level of satisfaction with their children's enjoyment of school and being kept safe. Especially in the lower school, a few disagreed that the school helped them to support their children's learning or took account of their suggestions and concerns. Inspectors agreed that the provision and marking of homework in the lower school is not consistent and have asked the school to act on this.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Plume School to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school. The inspection team received 281 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 1844 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	105	38	158	56	14	5	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	96	34	180	64	4	1	0	0
My school informs me about my child's progress	102	36	154	55	23	8	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	94	34	150	54	25	9	6	2
The teaching is good at this school	69	25	182	65	21	8	2	1
The school helps me to support my child's learning	59	21	163	58	42	15	3	1
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	40	14	196	70	28	10	4	1
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	89	32	147	53	18	6	1	0
The school meets my child's particular needs	83	30	170	61	16	6	4	1
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	77	28	158	56	26	9	4	1
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	50	18	167	60	35	13	4	1
The school is led and managed effectively	54	19	183	65	22	8	5	2
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	104	37	152	54	15	5	4	1

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

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

	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
Type of school	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	59	35	3	3
Primary schools	9	44	39	7
Secondary schools	13	36	41	11
Sixth forms	15	39	43	3
Special schools	35	43	17	5
Pupil referral units	21	42	29	9
All schools	13	43	37	8

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2009 to 31 August 2010 and are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2009/10 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

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

Sixth form figures reflect the judgements made for the overall effectiveness of the sixth form in secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on 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 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:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement. ■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils. ■ The quality of teaching. ■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships. ■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
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.

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.



4 March 2011

Dear Students

Inspection of Plume School, Maldon, CM9 6AB

I would like to thank you for your friendliness and courtesy during our visit. We enjoyed meeting you and appreciated your comments and opinions. Your behaviour is good in most lessons and around the two school campuses. Your attendance is improving and is now satisfactory.

The inspection found that yours is a good school. While examination results are around the national average overall, they are better in some subjects particularly in English, in science, on most performing arts courses and on a number of vocational courses. Teaching and learning are good in most lessons, but a small minority of lessons do not meet your interests or needs fully. You have a wide range of subject and course choices to help you progress in the future and the support you receive to make the progress expected of you is good. Leadership and management in the school are good.

We have asked the school to do the following.

Increase the proportion of good and better lessons across subjects and departments to ensure that you all make the progress of which you are capable.

Ensure the work you produce is marked regularly and consistently across departments, that the comments you receive are helpful to you so you can improve further and that homework is provided more consistently in Years 7 and 8.

Continue with and evaluate the impact of the management actions to improve provision in the sixth form to raise attainment and the progress you make.

You can all help by telling teachers how you learn best, by behaving well at all times and by attending regularly.

Yours sincerely

Paula Heaney

Her Majesty's Inspector

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