

Columbus School and College

Oliver Way, Chelmsford, CM1 4ZB

Inspection dates 2–3 July 2014

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected
	This inspection:	Outstanding 1
Achievement of pupils	Outstanding	1
Quality of teaching	Outstanding	1
Behaviour and safety of pupils	Outstanding	1
Leadership and management	Outstanding	1

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school.

- All aspects of the academy's work are outstanding. This is because the Principal has inspired a dynamic vision with the pupils and their development at the heart of all that the academy does.
- Exceptional personal and academic opportunities ensure that all groups achieve exceptionally well from their individual starting points.
- The academy works very closely with numerous agencies to secure the essential care packages required to meet the pupils' very individual complex needs. Parents are unanimous in their praise for all of the staff at Columbus who, as one parent stated, 'Go the extra mile to ensure that not only the child but the family are supported.'
- Teaching is outstanding because teachers have exceptionally high expectations of what their pupils can achieve and are very effective at ensuring that the work set matches pupils' needs.
- Pupils are constantly encouraged to communicate with adults and each other whether in speech or by the use of symbols and word picture systems, enabling them to make rapid progress in learning letters, words and numbers.
- The quality of provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage is outstanding. Children make rapid progress particularly in their communication and social interaction skills.
- The sixth form is also outstanding. Students achieve extremely well because of the many opportunities they have to become more independent.
- Pupils' behaviour and attitudes in lessons are outstanding. They enjoy school and take part in lessons and activities with great enthusiasm.
- Governors are exceptionally well informed about the progress of pupils and the quality of teaching. They provide a very strong level of support and challenge to the academy's leadership.
- The academy also benefits from their partnership with the Academies Enterprise Trust who offer an additional level of accountability and challenge to the senior leaders in terms of academy development and performance.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 21 lessons and parts of lessons all of which were jointly observed with senior staff.
- Meetings were held with teachers, senior leaders, members of the governing body, a representative from the Academies Enterprise Trust, the school council and a parent. They also held a telephone conversation with a representative of the local authority.
- A range of documentation regarding safeguarding and attendance, behaviour, school development and evaluation, lesson planning, teaching over time, information regarding pupils progress and subject development were all scrutinised.
- Inspectors looked at the work in pupils' books, in classrooms and around the academy. Several pupils were also heard reading during lessons.

The team took account of the 27 responses to the on-line questionnaire, Parent View, as well as the academy's own questionnaire and two letters sent in by parents. The responses of 135 staff were also considered as were the results of the academy's pupil questionnaire.

Inspection team

Lynda Walker, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Joanna Jones

Additional Inspector

Sa'ad Khaldi

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- Columbus is a larger than average special academy for pupils and students with profound, severe, complex learning difficulties aged 3–19. There are currently 226 pupils on roll. 122 are based on the School Campus (aged 3–13) and 101 are based on the College Campus (age range 14-19). The campuses are located 200m apart.
- Pupils come from the Mid Essex area and occasionally the London Boroughs. Two thirds are boys and at present less than one fifth of the pupils are from ethnic minority backgrounds.
- Over two fifths of the pupils are eligible for the pupil premium which is above the national average. The pupil premium is an additional sum of money provided by the government to support the achievement of certain groups of pupils, such as those who are looked after and those known to be eligible for free school meals.
- In April 2012 Columbus became a National Support school and is part of a National School Alliance offering support to other schools in the North Chelmsford area through a SEND service.
- In May 2012 Columbus became an academy in partnership with The Academies Enterprise Trust and benefits from the full range of school improvement and advisory support which this sponsor offers.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that all staff have the opportunity to spend time at both the school and the college campus in order to learn about the differing needs of all of pupils so they are able to support their particular individual needs more effectively.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils is outstanding

- Often from low starting points, children in the Early Years Foundation Stage rapidly improve their ability to communicate and, according to their capabilities, speak and listen very effectively. Frequent opportunities to communicate using gestures, signs and symbols throughout the school day drive progress at a rapid rate.
- Pupils with profound and multiple difficulties develop responses and increase their interaction exceptionally well.
- Pupils read widely and often across all subjects. Dedicated 'Drop Everything and Read Time' has been introduced across both the school and college campus to further support reading and communication skills.
- Pupils entitled to Year 7 Catch Up funding and those entitled to pupil premium funding make outstanding progress in line with other pupils. This is because of the academy's well-judged use of the funding, for instance in music therapy. Here communication, attention and physical engagement is reinforced and enhanced. The attainment levels of pupils eligible for the pupil premium at the end of Year 11 are similar to classmates in both English and mathematics.
- Pupils from all groups, including those who speak English as an additional language, those from ethnic minorities and those with autistic spectrum conditions and complex learning needs make equally good progress. This is because teachers adapt activities extremely effectively to take account of each pupil's learning needs.
- The outstanding use of communication techniques in every lesson means that while pupils make excellent progress in every subject they continually practise their early literacy and numeracy skills throughout each activity. Every pupil who needs it is able to have a means of expressing choice, responding to questions or asking for help. Signs, symbols and switches are a regular part of everyday lessons and pupils are confident users helping their communication skills to flourish.
- Outstanding sixth form provision means students continue to develop literacy and numeracy skills. They make excellent progress by learning to apply these skills in work-related tasks, cookery and travelling independently.
- By the end of Key Stage 4 and the end of sixth form most students have gained a recognised accreditation. These count towards their choice of college course and ensure they have the knowledge and skills to cope with the demands of the next stage of their education.
- Pupils with medical needs are particularly well supported by specially trained staff who make sure their needs are met so that pupils are able to carry on with their lessons alongside their classmates.
- Through the academy's outstanding assessment procedures, the performance of each pupil is tracked continually. Any pupil identified as underachieving are subject to an underachievers support plan in order to target and support learning and development. There is no discrimination and the academy makes sure that equal opportunities are at the heart of its work.

The quality of teaching is outstanding

- The quality of teaching is outstanding because teachers keep outstanding assessment records of pupils' progress and are passionate about adapting learning activities precisely to meet the needs of each pupil. They know the children very well and plan in great detail so that they may successfully take the next small learning step. The pupils find their work challenging but always within their reach. As a result, pupils enjoy learning and make rapid progress.
- Staff are very confident of what they can achieve for pupils and their expectations are high. From the start to the end of the day every moment is seen as a learning opportunity. Staff and pupils have a clear sense of purpose and a sharp focus on work, learning and making progress.
- Communication lies at the heart of all teaching and this is supported by the academy's partnership with therapists and therapy assistants who ensure that all staff know and use the most effective form of communication for each individual.
- Highly effective teamwork is a feature of the academy. Teachers, teaching assistants and therapists work together to ensure that pupils stay engaged in their learning and maintain concentration and effort. Specialist staff make sure pupils are positioned so as to meet their health needs and enable them to learn in comfort. Therapies wherever possible take place within the classroom so that time for learning is used to the full.
- There is a common structure to lessons across the academy so that all pupils know what it is they are going to learn and they are supported in thinking about what they have done and what they need to do next to improve. For example, at the end of a cookery lesson the pupils were able to see photographs of themselves which had been taken during the lesson. This meant they were able to say whether they had been able to work independently to mix ingredients, wash up and put away equipment.
- The distinct way in which the learning of all pupils is handled ensures that the conditions are absolutely right for them to make fast progress. The most able pupils throughout the academy are challenged by their work and because of the partnerships that exist with the local primary and secondary schools there are numerous opportunities for them to work alongside their mainstream peers.
- Autistic pupils and those with complex learning needs are given clearly defined routines and these are carefully explained to them and referred to throughout the day. Symbols representing the work to be done and break times provide pupils with clear direction. They are able therefore to cooperate well and sustain concentration when at work. This was very evident in a lesson where pupils were very effectively following symbol instructions to make salt dough.
- The quality of teaching in the Early Years Foundation Stage is outstanding. Children learn to take turns, make choices and to interact with both adults and peers more effectively.
- The quality of teaching in the sixth form is also outstanding because it promotes interest and challenge. Teachers promote students' maturity by enabling them to do things for themselves and by using age appropriate resources. For example, students with profound and multiple learning difficulties were learning about electronic devices in the home and were able to make themselves a fruit smoothie by independently using a switch to operate a blender.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are outstanding

- Behaviour is outstanding. Pupils are very proud of the academy and are very appreciative of the wonderful facilities both on the school and college campus and this is evident by their very positive attitudes to learning. During a meeting with the school council students told the inspectors that it was hard to find a fault with Columbus College!
- Pupils' behaviour is managed very effectively for the few who, as a result of their severe learning difficulties and autism, have challenging behaviour. The calm and well ordered atmosphere across the academy contributes significantly to the outstanding quality of learning throughout the day.
- From a very early age pupils are encouraged to keep and follow the academy 'community code'. They learn to think about others and to consider their feelings, to take pride in their own and others achievements, to take responsibility for their own actions and behaviour and most importantly to believe in themselves. It was evident during the inspection that the code has real meaning for the pupils who were able to talk confidently about how well they felt supported, how friendly everyone was and how much they enjoyed their learning and how they could now do lots of things for themselves.
- Although pupils are made aware of the different forms of bullying, including cyber-bullying and prejudice-based bullying, it is evidently not an issue in the academy. Pupils told the inspectors that if they had any problems they could go to any adult who would quickly help them sort it out.
- There are no exclusions and very few sanctions have to be used. Behaviour management procedures are reviewed regularly and staff are made aware continually of best practice. The academy keeps very good records of incidents. Some pupils have very detailed care and behaviour plans and these are monitored and reviewed frequently to make sure they stay relevant.
- Staff are highly skilled at managing pupils' behaviour. They know the pupils well and invariably anticipate and consequently defuse instances of potentially inappropriate behaviour. Teachers and teaching assistants are particularly sensitive and skilful at minimising the impact of those pupils' behaviour who are prone to incidents.
- The care and safeguarding of pupils is outstanding.
- Attendance is now average but figures are adversely affected by absences caused by medical condition, recurring medical appointments and hospitalisation. The academy works closely with the Education Welfare Service to support parents to enable their child to attend school.
- Parents and carers rightly have confidence that their children are happy and safe and without exception, those who made their views known would recommend the academy to other parents.
- Due to their learning difficulties pupils do not always understand how to keep themselves safe but many do and over time they have a developing understanding of safety. Indeed students in the sixth form were able to talk about being careful when using the internet and social networking sites as well as being able to talk about being safe when travelling or going to the shops independently.
- Teamwork and relationships among staff are outstanding. Staff are tremendous role models for

the pupils and they demonstrate resilience, understanding and care.

The leadership and management are outstanding

- The Principal is determined that every pupil at Columbus School and College is given every opportunity to succeed. Her passion, commitment and determination to ensure that this happens mean that there is no room for complacency. She, together with members of the leadership team, drives improvement through rigorous monitoring of the provision and outcomes and by seeking the best from each and every pupil and member of staff.
- The academy works well with many different agencies to support families. Members of the Behaviour, Safety and Well-being team support the personal, medical and emotional safety of the pupils and their families. This goes well beyond statutory requirements. As one parent stated 'Columbus is a breath of fresh air, offering support unheard of at any other educational establishment.'
- Leadership responsibilities are delegated and shared extremely well among teachers with responsibility for aspects of the academy's work. All staff have access to high quality professional development opportunities which are both linked to priorities identified in the academy's development plan and their own personal development. In addition, the well-being of staff is seen as a priority and is well supported.
- The high proportion of outstanding teaching is due in part to the support and training that teachers and teaching assistants receive to develop their skills. The academy has however identified the need to extend their training programme so that all staff have the opportunity to spend time in different key stages across the academy so that they have a deeper understanding of the different and varying needs of the pupils.
- Self-evaluation procedures are very effective. The work of each teacher is robustly and regularly reviewed, a process which teachers find constructive and positive. Leaders have a relentless approach to maintaining and continually improving teaching standards. Teachers' performance is linked clearly to salary progression and levels of responsibility.
- The subjects and activities that the academy offers the pupils are highly appropriate and balance academic rigour with personal social and emotional development very well. Communication, literacy and numeracy are important features of its work. The opportunities for pupils to participate in a very wide range of activities both during school time and after school are extensive and do much to promote pupils' self confidence and self esteem.
- The heads of learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage, Key Stages 1,2,3 and 4 and the sixth form are all very effective leaders and they all rigorously monitor the quality of teaching within their departments. They carefully track the progress of every individual pupil and ensure that interventions to support learning are quickly put in place if required. As a result, the progress of pupils across both the school and the college is outstanding.
- Leaders also ensure that opportunities to promote the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils are well planned. Pupils across the academy are given opportunities for quiet reflection, learn about the difference between right and wrong and learn to take responsibility for their environment. Pupils of all abilities learn about other cultures through dance, music and drama or through sensory experiences such as smelling or tasting herbs and spices from different cultures.

- The pupil premium and primary sports funding has been used for the benefit of pupils to make improved progress in their communication and social development. The expansion of physical education activities has promoted healthier and more active activities.
- Effective planning and controls are supported by on-going external monitoring by members of the Academies Enterprise Trust and the leadership team has benefited from this close working relationship.
- There are some excellent links with local schools and businesses helping to develop pupils' academic and personal development and providing experiences that will benefit pupils in the future.
- Leaders successfully eliminate discrimination through their very effective policies and procedures which make sure positive relationships are fostered and that all pupils have equal opportunities to all the experiences on offer.
- Safeguarding procedures are rigorous and robust and meet all statutory requirements.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - Governors have the experience and expertise to perform their roles and responsibilities extremely effectively. Through regular visits they have a very good understanding of the quality of teaching and the day-to-day challenges and triumphs. Governors have an excellent understanding of data and the quality of teaching. They monitor performance management for all staff, including the Principal, and make sure that the quality of their work is related to their pay and professional development. Financial aspects are well managed by the governing body. Governors particularly check the spending of pupil premium funding, the primary sports funding and Year 7 catch-up funding. Governors also regularly attend specific training and nominated members are very well informed for instance on health and safety matters and the safeguarding of the children.

What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>

School details

Unique reference number	138122
Local authority	Essex
Inspection number	440174

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

Type of school	Special
School category	Academy sponsor-led
Age range of pupils	3–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	226
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	75
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Keith Lomax
Principal	Virginia Bellard
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	01245 491492
Email address	admin@columbusschoolandcollege.org

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