

Inspection of an outstanding school: Columbus School and College

Oliver Way, Chelmsford, Essex CM1 4ZB

Inspection dates:

10 and 11 May 2023

Outcome

There has been no change to this school's overall judgement of outstanding as a result of this ungraded (section 8) inspection. However, the evidence gathered suggests that the inspection grade might not be as high if a graded (section 5) inspection were carried out now. Inspectors are recommending the next inspection to be a graded inspection.

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils of all ages enjoy school. They are happy in this caring and inclusive environment. Over time, their confidence grows as they learn to build positive relationships with staff and their peers. Pupils feel safe because they trust the adults who work with them.

Pupils learn to communicate their views, needs and interests effectively in the school. Typically, they gain the knowledge and skills that they need to prepare them well for adulthood. However, some older pupils do not build their reading accuracy and fluency as quickly as they could. This limits their progress in writing and reading.

Classrooms are typically calm and interesting places to learn. New pupils settle into routines well. Those who need extra help to manage their feelings are supported sensitively. Pupils know that they are expected to be kind to each other. Consequently, bullying is rare and dealt with appropriately if it happens.

Pupils are proud of the in-school café and school-based charity shop they run. They appreciate the opportunities to learn out in the community, including taking part in drama productions and supported work experience. Most parents are highly positive about the difference that the school makes to their child's life.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

Leaders want pupils to be the best that they can be. The trust-wide values, 'be unusually brave, push the limits, be big hearted, discover what is possible', underpin the provision. Leaders have refreshed the curriculum to support these values. The revised curriculum covers a broad range of subjects. It is designed to allow pupils to build new knowledge

and skills securely on what they already know. Some aspects of this work are still being embedded.

Leaders' intentions to secure pupils' communication, speech and language skills are deeply rooted in the school's offer. Pupils with the most complex needs are supported to join in with stories and different experiences by using sensory approaches, such as touch and sound. All pupils are supported to be able to communicate their views. Pupils become confident in using different strategies, such as eye movement, body language and electronic devices, to express their opinions. Staff know pupils well. They make regular checks on pupils' learning and work closely together to meet pupils', often extensive, needs. Many pupils make good progress during their time in school.

Pupils, including those with the most complex needs, enjoy the stories staff share with them. The strengthened focus on reading means that, for those pupils who can, learning to read is a priority. Younger pupils and children in the early years regularly practise the sounds that letters make. Books are typically matched closely to the sounds that pupils know, so they build confidence in reading and spelling new words. Pupils are supported to improve their reading. However, interventions for older pupils are not always precisely targeted. Staff are still developing the consistency of their practice in using phonics to help pupils to learn well. As a result, some pupils, including students in the sixth form, do not build their independence in reading, spelling and writing as much as they could.

Clear routines ensure that pupils of all ages understand leaders' high expectations of their behaviour. Staff use consistent spoken and body language to reinforce these expectations. In the early years, children respond well to the songs and rhymes adults use to signal a change in activity. Staff act quickly to address the signs that a pupil may be anxious or upset. Break and lunchtimes are sociable events, where pupils are supported to play and eat together.

Pupils enjoy learning new skills, such as cooking and shopping. Trips out in the community are popular events. These experiences are effective in developing pupils' confidence and independence in the wider world. Sixth-form students apply their arithmetic skills, alongside their social and communication skills, when serving customers in the school café and shop. Pupils are tolerant and respectful of individual differences. The well-planned personal, social and health education (PSHE) curriculum is enhanced by a comprehensive programme of themed assemblies, celebrating, for example, equality and diversity. Pupils are supported to make informed choices to take the next steps beyond school. Many move on to college courses.

Leaders and the trust are mindful of staff workload and well-being. Relationships between the school and families are typically positive. However, a minority of parents feel that communication between school and home is not as strong as it should be. Leaders have acted to continue to improve these links.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

School leaders and the trust ensure that safeguarding training is updated regularly. Any concerns are addressed quickly. Staff understand their responsibility to support pupils' social and emotional well-being alongside any wider safeguarding needs. They work closely with families, external agencies and health professionals to secure this. Pupils are taught how to keep safe and to manage risks, including when using the internet.

The school's single central record of pre-employment checks on new staff meets requirements. Safeguarding records are detailed and well maintained. School leaders and the trust ensure that the information recorded is closely monitored.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- The support for older pupils who need to catch up with their reading is not always focused precisely enough to address gaps in their phonics knowledge and skills. This means that some pupils do not improve their reading fluency and independence as quickly as they could. This also impacts on their writing. Leaders should ensure that reading interventions are informed systematically by any phonics learning needs and that staff receive any further training required to deliver the phonics programme consistently well.
- A few parents feel that communication links with the school are not strong enough. Where this is the case, these parents feel less well informed about their child's progress and, occasionally, the reasons why decisions are taken. Leaders should continue the work already started to strengthen communication further and to ensure that relationships with all parents work well.

Background

When we have judged a school to be outstanding, we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains outstanding. This is called an ungraded inspection, and it is carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. We do not give graded judgements on an ungraded inspection. However, if we find evidence that a school would now receive a higher or lower grade, then the next inspection will be a graded inspection, which is carried out under section 5 of the Act. Usually, this is within one to two years of the date of the ungraded inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour, or the quality of education, we will deem the ungraded inspection a graded inspection immediately.

This is the second ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be outstanding in July 2014.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, '[disadvantaged pupils](#)' refers to those pupils who attract government pupil premium funding: pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years and pupils in care or who left care through adoption or another formal route.

School details

Unique reference number	138122
Local authority	Essex
Inspection number	10255260
Type of school	Special
School category	Academy special converter
Age range of pupils	3 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	273
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	33
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	David Hall
Executive headteacher	Barney Geen
Principal	Mark Savage
Website	www.columbusschoolandcollege.org
Date of previous inspection	19 September 2017, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The school is part of the Academies Enterprise Trust.
- It is larger than the average-sized special school.
- Places are offered for pupils aged between 3 and 19 years with complex needs, including severe, profound, and multiple learning difficulties. Many pupils have a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder.
- At the time of the inspection, there were no children on roll in the school's nursery.
- There have been leadership changes since the previous inspection, including the appointment of an executive principal. The current principal was appointed in April 2023.

- The recently formed academy council, reporting to the trust board, has oversight of local challenge and support for school leaders and for engagement with parents and the community.

Information about this inspection

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- The inspectors conducted deep dives in the following subjects: communication and language, early reading, mathematics and PSHE. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with subject leaders, visited a sample of lessons jointly with leaders, and spoke with teachers and other adults. They also spoke with pupils about their learning and looked at samples of their work.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, the inspector checked safeguarding policies, the school's record of pre-employment checks on new staff and a sample of child protection files. She also spoke with representatives from the trust, leaders, including the designated safeguarding leads, and other staff about safeguarding practices at the school.
- Additional meetings were held with the executive headteacher, the principal, other members of the leadership team, trust leaders and school staff.
- A range of documents were checked, including behaviour logs, attendance records and school policies.
- There were 42 responses to the online questionnaire, Ofsted Parent View, which were considered alongside 41 free-text responses from parents. Inspectors also spoke with some parents as they collected their children from the school.
- There were no responses to Ofsted's questionnaire for school pupils. Inspectors spoke with pupils during the inspection to hear about their school experiences.
- Inspectors held meetings with staff and spoke with them throughout the inspection to gather their views. They also took account of the school's recent survey of teachers' views.

Inspection team

Christine Dick, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

Jackie Mullan

Ofsted Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
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