



Saffron Walden County High School

Inspection Report

Unique Reference Number 115324
Local Authority ESSEX
Inspection number 290207
Inspection date 21 February 2007
Reporting inspector Mark Phillips HMI

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

Type of school	Comprehensive	School address	Audley End Road
School category	Foundation		Saffron Walden
Age range of pupils	11–18		Essex CB11 4UH
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	01799513030
Number on roll (school)	1474	Fax number	01799513031
Number on roll (6th form)	461	Chair	Mr Mark Hayes
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Headteacher	Mr John Hartley
Date of previous school inspection	3 March 2003		

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one Additional Inspector.

Description of the school

Saffron Walden County High School is a large comprehensive school located in the Saffron Walden Audley ward. The great majority of students come from socially and economically advantaged homes in the town and surrounding villages, have a white British heritage, and have English as their first language. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is considerably below the national average and the proportion of students with a statement of special educational needs is much lower than the national figure.

Saffron Walden County High School has been a specialist technology college since 1994, a training school since 2001, and was awarded Leading Edge status in 2003.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Inspectors agree with the school's self-evaluation that Saffron Walden County High continues to be a good school with many outstanding features, including a sixth form that is exemplary in every respect.

A parent wrote to the inspection team, 'Both my daughters have enjoyed the benefit of a caring and supportive community in which to learn and grow'. Outstanding care, guidance, and support is provided for students, including an exceptionally strong support team for students with learning difficulties and disabilities, and a robust tutorial system that ensures that every student matters in this large school. This is matched, in return, by some exceptional personal qualities shown by students. They enjoy their education, appreciating their classroom lessons and extra-curricular activities in equal measure.

Standards of students' work are high. When they arrive in Year 7, they are well-disposed to learning and have achieved above average results at their primary schools. By the end of Year 11, they are achieving results that are well above average overall, representing good progress as they move through the school, although the school's challenging targets for GCSE have not been met for the past two years. Science does not perform as well as other subjects.

The school has built a strong reputation as a training school, evolving and sharing good practice by educating new teachers and existing members of staff through in-house professional development programmes, and this has helped a good number of teachers to progress in their careers. There is much good and sometimes excellent teaching to be seen in the school at present. However, there are also some areas where teachers would benefit from continued training and sharing of good practice to help them (and their students) achieve the standards of performance that the school rightly strives for. Marking is an area for improvement across the school.

The school is at the forefront of developing curriculum provision with the aim of challenging students to achieve at the highest levels possible and also meeting individual, personalised learning needs. Whilst curriculum provision in the main school is good, the school recognises that it needs to make a full evaluation of these innovations once there is firm evidence of the impact that they have on the personal development and achievements of all students. This would be welcomed by parents and students.

The headteacher and his deputies are an outstanding team with an inclusive style of leadership, where governors, staff and students all have a part to play and share in school improvement. This ensures that this large and busy school runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis, that there is reflective practice at all levels and that there is effective self-evaluation of the school's performance. Whilst the school is involved in many initiatives and partnerships, it is significant that the first and clearest priority in the school improvement plan is concerned with raising and maintaining levels of student achievement. All this gives great confidence in the school's capacity for further improvement.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 1

The effectiveness and efficiency of this inclusive sixth form are outstanding. Standards are well above average and achievement is consistently high. This is because the environment for learning is extremely positive and much excellent teaching promotes rapid progress. Because students are keen to learn, they very quickly acquire the independent learning and other study skills they need to be successful.

Outstanding leadership and management ensure that students' progress is closely monitored and well-focused support provided where necessary. Students speak highly of the excellent care and guidance they receive both before entering and while in the sixth form. This guidance, together with a curriculum that is well matched to their needs and aspirations, helps to ensure that students are well suited to their courses, with the result that very few drop out early. Students' personal development is outstanding. They enjoy and appreciate their education, and make a significant contribution to the school and wider community. As one student said, 'We are encouraged to be well-rounded individuals and not just academically successful'.

What the school should do to improve further

- Continue using good practice and professional training programmes to ensure consistently good teaching throughout the school, leading to consistent student achievement across all subjects.
- Evaluate the impact of the school's curriculum innovations in Key Stages 3 and 4 to ensure that they have a positive impact on the personal development and achievement of all students.
- Review the effectiveness of marking throughout the school in order to help students understand what they can do to improve their work.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 1

When students arrive in Year 7, the standard of their work is already above that expected nationally. At the end of Key Stage 3, their results, which are well above expectations, show that they have made good progress. Overall results at the end of Key Stage 4 are also well above average. Students' good progress is confirmed by contextual value-added measures, and students with learning difficulties and disabilities progress as well as all other students.

GCSE subjects that performed very well last year included music, art, drama, and English language, reflecting areas where teaching is particularly strong and where there is some excellent extra-curricular provision. In comparison, 2006 science GCSE results showed relative underperformance. The school did not quite meet its overall targets for GCSE in 2005 or 2006 or its Key Stage 3 targets in 2006.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Students' personal and social development and well-being are outstanding. The relationships that they have with each other and with adults are very good and they show equally good responses to spiritual and moral issues. They are well aware of cultural differences through their work in school, particularly in humanities, the arts, and English.

Students enjoy their education. This enjoyment is shown by the very good behaviour of the great majority and in their good attendance rates. The school has been particularly proactive in encouraging students' attendance and discouraging them from taking holidays in term-time. Only a relatively small number of students show inappropriate behaviour, and they are dealt with appropriately.

Students understand the importance of eating healthily and are complimentary about the new options that are offered to them in the school canteen. They really enjoy their sport. Students' preparation for later working life and their economic awareness is good because of their good core skills and the school's commitment to work-related learning.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 1

Teaching and learning are good and sometimes excellent. In this school the vast majority of lessons are characterised by mutual respect and the willingness of pupils to comply with the requests of teachers. The best lessons typically begin with lively questioning that forces students to think, and then sessions proceed at a good pace. There is a high level of challenge and teachers use their subject expertise well to extend pupils' knowledge and understanding. Students enjoy these lessons because they are actively involved.

In most lessons teachers tell students what they are expected to learn and consequently good progress is made because students understand the purpose of the lesson activities. The school has effective procedures for assessing students' attainment and this information is used well to track students' progress. However, there is too much variation in the quality of teachers' marking across the school, which does not always provide clear guidance on the standard of work and what students should do to improve.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 1

The curriculum is good and enhanced by the school's specialist technology college status. The school provides a broad range of vocational subjects, in addition to a wide range of academic subjects. These are well suited to the needs and aspirations of pupils across the full attainment range. This is contributing to students' achievement and enjoyment and helping to foster positive attitudes to school in pupils less suited to more traditional GCSE courses. The school has also introduced an accelerated programme in Key Stage 3, early GCSE entries or three-year GCSE courses, and proposed additional enrichment courses in Year 11. The current Year 10 is the first group to experience this programme.

The curriculum is complemented by a comprehensive range of enrichment opportunities. Pupils of all abilities take advantage of the various music and sporting activities, clubs, educational and residential visits offered. These activities make an important contribution to pupils' personal development. Productive links with local businesses support work experience.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The school provides outstanding care, guidance and support for students. All requirements for child protection and safeguarding procedures are met. The school assures students' safety through careful attention to risk assessments and maintains accurate records over the large school site. Students tell us that they feel safe at school, they show responsible and safe behaviour in lessons and in the corridors, and know how to keep themselves safe when they are out and about.

Support for students with learning difficulties and disabilities is outstanding. Led by the special needs coordinator, the highly effective team of learning support assistants provides security and assistance for students throughout every part of the school day. This is recognised as especially important in such a large school.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 1

The leadership and management of the school are good with some strong features. The outstanding leadership of the headteacher and his senior management team provide the school with a very clear sense of direction. The willingness to be innovative, as seen in the new curriculum structure for example, is an indication of the school's high ambitions for future development. The full impact of these innovations has yet

to be seen in the school's performance. Systematic self-evaluation provides managers at all levels with an accurate view of the effectiveness of the school's provision. This leads to a focus on particular subjects or areas of the school where there is a need for improvement. Professional development is valued and used effectively to continually develop the quality of leadership and of teaching.

School governance is exemplary. Governors act as very strong 'critical friends' and work closely with the headteacher and senior leaders in driving school improvement. They fully understand the need to evaluate the impact of provision on performance. Financial management is secure. Links with local schools, colleges, businesses and the community are excellent and strengthened through the school's specialist activities.

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Inspection judgements

<i>Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate</i>	School Overall	16-19
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Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	2	1
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	1	1
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1	1
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	1
The standards ¹ reached by learners	1	1
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	1
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	2	1

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1	
The behaviour of learners	2	
The attendance of learners	2	
How well learners enjoy their education	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	2	1
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1	1

¹ Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average to below average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	2	1
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	1	
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets	2	
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	2	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	2	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1	
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No	
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No	

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

22 February 2007

Dear Students,

Saffron Walden County High School, Audley End Road, Saffron Walden, Essex, CB11 4UH

As you may remember, Dr Kenneth Thomas and I made a one-day inspection visit to your school recently. You will not be surprised to learn that we agree with you, the staff, and governors, that Saffron Walden County High continues to be a good school with many outstanding features. Your sixth form is exceptional in every way.

One of the things that impressed us most about your school was the contribution that you make to the school community through your involvement in student leadership forums, leadership of sporting and musical activities, and the part that you play in reviewing the quality of your lessons. The student representatives who we were privileged to meet in the inspection discussion panels showed exceptional maturity of thought and remarkable perception about the school. Everyone made us welcome during the inspection day, and we'd like to thank you all very much for that.

Mr Hartley and I have agreed that in order to improve the school even more for you, there are three things.

- The school should continue training and developing teachers to ensure that all of your lessons are at the same high standard.
- The school should take time to evaluate the impact that the new Key Stage 3 and 4 curriculum arrangements have on your work and personal development.
- Your teachers can make more effective use of the comments that they write on your work, to help you understand what you can do to make your work even better. This will also mean you taking even more notice of the advice that they give you!

Thank you very much once again for the important part that you played in this inspection, and the very best of luck with your future studies and career plans. Most importantly, please continue to enjoy your education and to make the most of the many opportunities that you are given at your school.

Yours sincerely,

Mark Phillips Her Majesty's Inspector