

Chelmsford County High School for Girls

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	115326
Local Authority	ESSEX LA
Inspection number	311914
Inspection dates	19–20 September 2007
Reporting 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	11–18
Gender of pupils	Girls
Number on roll	
School	858
6th form	258
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr David Bebb
Headteacher	Mrs Nicole Chapman
Date of previous school inspection	6 October 2003
School address	Broomfield Road Chelmsford Essex CM1 1RW
Telephone number	01245 352592
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Age group	11–18
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Introduction

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

Description of the school

Chelmsford County High School is a highly selective grammar school drawing girls from a wide area around Chelmsford. It has specialist college status in three areas: technology with mathematics and science; English and music; and languages. Competition for places is fierce; applicants take an 11+ examination with one in five being admitted. Students join from around 70 primary schools and significant numbers join from the private sector. None of the students is known to be eligible for free school meals and none is looked after by the local authority. None has a statement of special educational need and very few have learning difficulties or disabilities. One in five students are from minority ethnic groups and one in ten speaks English as an additional language. The vast majority of students continue their studies in the sixth form, where they are joined by about 20 who transfer from other schools.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Chelmsford County High School for Girls is outstanding and provides exceptional value for money. It maintains extremely high academic standards and meets the challenging targets it sets itself. Students' personal development and achievement are outstanding because teaching is exceptional, curricular and enrichment opportunities are excellent, and care, guidance and support are good.

The school makes excellent use of its triple specialist status to improve facilities and curricular opportunities and to forge links with the local community. The school's partnership with others is highly developed, particularly its links with business, industry and higher education. The school is a founder member of the Consortium for School Improvement, a local group that pioneered the 'leading from the middle' programme, which ensures that leadership is strong at all levels.

Students thoroughly enjoy school. They live healthy lifestyles and understand how to stay safe. They benefit from the outstanding opportunities provided and contribute in many ways both within the school and in the wider community. They develop skills that will give them a head start in adult life.

Students respond enthusiastically to the excellent teaching, which often gives them the chance to think for themselves and develop initiative. Sixth form teaching in particular is intellectually stimulating and often inspiring. Consequently, students make exceptional progress between joining the school at age 11 and leaving, usually at age 18. Their achievement is outstanding because they combine superb personal development with very high standards across a broad range of at least eleven GCSE subjects and often four or five A levels. Pastoral care and academic guidance are systematic and consistently excellent for sixth-formers, but the use of assessment varies across subjects in the main school, so students are not always as clear about how to improve.

Governors provide excellent leadership and it is a testament to them and the deputy headteacher that the school lost so little momentum in the five terms of interim leadership. During this period, it naturally focused on maintaining standards and implementing existing improvement plans, rather than developing new strategy. The appointment of a new headteacher in April 2007 has given the school a fresh impetus. She has set out a very clear vision that seeks to enhance the school's role in the local and global community and to prepare its students to be the leaders of tomorrow. However, she has taken over a school where self-evaluation processes and therefore the capacity to improve are good but not outstanding. Her strategic plan rightly focuses initially on auditing and reviewing existing provision, to identify the best way to turn her vision into reality. Leadership and management are outstanding overall, but the need for additional evaluation means that the clarity of the school's direction is currently good rather than outstanding.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 1

A very high proportion of students continue their studies in the sixth form, where they make further outstanding progress. They play a full part in the life of the school as prefects, actively running clubs, sports teams, charity events, and supporting staff in subjects and meetings.

Intellectual challenge and student engagement are features of the outstanding teaching and learning that maintain standards among the highest in the country.

The curriculum provides very good subject choice and considerable additional enhancement that meets students' needs exceptionally well. Mathematics and science subjects are very popular. The assistant headteacher and her sixth form team provide outstanding leadership, particularly in the organisation of care, support and monitoring of students' progress against their targets. Careers guidance is excellent, especially the very thorough preparation students receive for university application. Almost all students continue into higher education with most gaining places at highly regarded universities.

What the school should do to improve further

- Develop more fully the use of assessment in guiding students' learning.
- Develop the rigour and scope of the school's monitoring and evaluation in order to support the translation of its vision into reality.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Standards and achievement are very high throughout the school. The achievement of students from ethnic and other minorities is outstanding. The very few students with learning difficulties or disabilities receive the support they need to reach high standards. Attainment on entry is high because students have to score high marks in a competitive 11+ entry test in order to be admitted. Progress in the first two years is outstanding. Students take the Key Stage 3 national tests a year early and most reach level 7 in English, mathematics and science. This is the maximum Key Stage 3 level for English and science. Students are not entered for the Level 8 test in mathematics because the relevant topics are not fully covered until Year 9. The early entry allows a broader curriculum in Year 9, including a GCSE, a short GCSE or GNVQ course in information and communication technology.

The school's triple specialist status is reflected in the wide range of GCSE courses taken by all students, including separate sciences, technology and a modern foreign language. Achievement is outstanding because the high quality of teaching develops confidence and personal skills that will enhance students' future employability as well as ensuring academic rigour. By the age of 16, nearly all students have at least 11 passes at GCSE, the vast majority at A or A* grade. For the last two years, the average student has passed the equivalent of 14 GCSEs, including four A* and five A grades. The school's record of attaining such high standards across so many subjects is unparalleled in the country.

Sixth form standards are very high, sometimes going beyond examination requirements, as in a further mathematics lesson, where students proved algebraically that every complex number has a complex square root.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Students' personal development and spiritual, moral, social and cultural development are outstanding. They follow instructions, work safely and try hard to do their best. They take full

advantage of the many opportunities to develop their learning skills, initiative and team work, both in lessons and in the wide range of enhancement opportunities provided. Given suitably challenging tasks students quickly grasp what needs to be done, take responsibility and organise themselves to very good effect. Students' enterprising approach, many varied opportunities and their high academic standards equip them well for their future lives. Their expectations of themselves are very high, although at times some can worry unduly. In other respects, students adopt healthy lifestyles.

Students like and are very proud of their school. Attendance is high and behaviour exemplary. Respect and consideration for others with diverse backgrounds, views and interests are well developed and there is virtually no bullying. Assemblies are good communal occasions but some students do not feel comfortable in singing overtly Christian hymns. Overall, however, the school is a very cohesive community. This quality is fostered by voluntary activities, such as teaching German to Year 4 students, and community service in the sixth form. The school has surveyed the views of parents and of students. However, a small but significant number of parents who responded to the pre-inspection questionnaire felt that not enough account was taken of their views or the views of students.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Teaching and learning are outstanding. Students come ready to learn, often asking pertinent questions. They work well individually and in groups, and support each other in their learning. Students get on well with their teachers and value the support they receive if they have any difficulties.

Nearly half the lessons seen during the inspection were outstanding and nearly all the rest were good. Most teachers have an excellent knowledge of their subjects. Lessons are well planned, maintain a good pace, have a variety of interesting activities and enable each student to progress. The best lessons balance teacher directed work with the opportunity for research and independent learning. However, teachers sometimes give too much direction and opportunities for additional challenge are missed.

Senior staff observed two lessons jointly with inspectors and accurately judged the quality of teaching and learning. The school's monitoring of lessons uses an observation form that focuses on areas that it is trying to develop. However, the forms do not give the clear guidance on the use of assessment for learning or on identifying areas for further improvement that would raise the proportion of outstanding teaching.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The school provides an outstanding range of curricular and other opportunities that support the outstanding progress of the students and provide well for the most able. The two hours per week of physical education support healthy lifestyles. Covering the Key Stage 3 curriculum in Years 7 and 8 creates time in Year 9 for additional GCSE courses and activities that develop social and leadership skills. The triple specialist status of the school is reflected in the broad

core curriculum in Years 10 and 11, with eleven subjects taken to GCSE level. The sixth form curriculum, while traditional, leads students to success in the pathways they have chosen.

A particular strength of the school is the enrichment programme. Planned enhancement times and the extra-curricular activities include a variety of out of school clubs, visits and extended trips, some overseas. Students also learn to take responsibility in the local and school communities. Personal, social and health education is organised very effectively, with each topic being taught by a teacher who specialises in that aspect. It also includes study skills at relevant stages.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 1

Care, guidance and support are good overall and outstanding in the sixth form. The tutorial arrangements are well organised and effective. Appropriate careers education is provided. The school promotes healthy living through the canteen and suitable topics in the curriculum. Sixth form students can take classes such as yoga and ballroom dancing, introduced to counter stress. Staff are very aware of the needs of students. A local authority outreach tutor visits to provide valuable support for individuals but no counsellor is available to whom students can refer themselves.

The school monitors students' progress well. Mentoring is provided in Year 11 for students who have difficulty reaching their targets, and it is planned to extend this in other years. Academic guidance for students in the main school is based on regular assessments. It enables them to compile progress and achievement files but, while the clarity of their understanding of what to do to improve is good in history and English, it varies across other subjects.

Wheelchair access has been provided for ground floor rooms. Procedures to ensure students' safety and protection are properly in place. Staff are vigilant in monitoring students' departure but there is no protective rail to guard pedestrians from the busy road in front of the main entrance.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The school has been very successful in maintaining highly effective leadership and management during a period of transition in which the governing body has played a key role. Subject leaders and other middle managers are a major strength within a streamlined management structure that holds them accountable for examination outcomes.

The talented new headteacher is working very effectively with others to turn her vision for the school into reality through a strategic plan. While this is still at an early stage, the head has quickly secured the support of staff and morale is high. The strong drive for further improvement is reflected in development planning across the school. The evaluation process includes a good analysis of examination results by subject to identify strengths and weaknesses, but is less sharp in areas where outcomes are harder to measure. Effective monitoring ensured that the last three-year plan was implemented and judged against success criteria. However, the evaluation did not determine why some changes were more effective than others.

The governing body makes an outstanding contribution to school leadership and strategic development. Governors are highly committed and very well informed, for example through regular visits to different subject areas.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaints about school inspection', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Annex A

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	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?	1	1
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	1	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	1	1
The standards ¹ reached by learners	1	1
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	1	1
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	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 extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1	
How well learners enjoy their education	1	
The attendance of learners	1	
The behaviour of learners	1	
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?	1	1
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	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.

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1	1
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	1	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	1	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1	
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

21 September 2007

Dear Students

Inspection of Chelmsford County High School for Girls, CM1 1RW

I am writing to tell you about your school's recent inspection. First, I would like to thank you on behalf of the inspection team for all the help you gave us and for your willingness to talk frankly.

Your school is outstanding in several ways. First, you make excellent academic progress and the standards are very high. Second, and equally important, your personal development and achievement are outstanding. These things happen because the school's leaders make sure that good care, guidance and support are combined with outstanding teaching, and an exceptional programme of curricular and enrichment opportunities. Your new headteacher, Mrs Chapman, has begun the task of making the school even better by increasing its links with the local and global communities, and by making sure that you learn how to be the leaders of tomorrow.

Nearly all of you thoroughly enjoy school, live healthy lifestyles and understand how to stay safe, though we are a little concerned that a few of you drive yourselves too hard on occasions. You make terrific contributions to the school and wider communities and you develop skills that will give you a head start in adult life. You respond enthusiastically in lessons, which often give you the chance to think for yourselves and to use your initiative. Sixth form teaching in particular is intellectually stimulating and often inspiring.

You would rightly be suspicious of an inspection that said everything was fantastic. For example, some parents told us that the school does not always communicate with them as well as they would like or take enough account of your views. However, we made just two recommendations for the school:

- to improve the use of assessment in guiding your learning
- to make the very good approach to school improvement even better through more and sharper evaluation that identifies why things work well.

The first point applies mainly in Years 7 to 11, because, along with care and support, guidance is outstanding in the sixth form.

On behalf of the inspection team, I wish you all the best for the future.

Yours sincerely Stephen Abbott HMI, Lead Inspector