

The Sandon School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	115379
Local Authority	ESSEX LA
Inspection number	311930
Inspection dates	27–28 September 2007
Reporting inspector	Sheila Nolan

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	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1200
6th form	143
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Hilary Lyne
Headteacher	Mr Jonathan Wincott
Date of previous school inspection	7 March 2005
School address	Molrams Lane Sandon Chelmsford Essex CM2 7AQ
Telephone number	01245473611
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Age group	11–18
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by five Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

The Sandon School, a specialist Mathematics and Computing College, serves students from a wide spread of both rural and urban areas. Almost all students are White British, with very few at the early stages of learning English. The proportion of students eligible for a free school meal is much lower than is typical nationally. One in eight students, lower than national figure, has learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Families in the area have ready access to a range of selective schools.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Sandon is a good and rapidly improving school. The overwhelming majority of parents strongly support the school's drive for improvement. They consider that 'its dedicated staff gives students a positive outlook on life and work, encouraging them to stretch themselves'.

A real strength of the school is its happy, caring ethos and emphasis on nurturing positive relationships. Students behave well, attend regularly and very much enjoy learning and the rich opportunities for out-of-hours activities, particularly sport and the creative arts. Their understanding of healthy living is excellent and they much appreciate the points earned for sensible food choices. Participation in physical activities is high, with students thoroughly enjoying before-school 'trampolining', for example. Students take responsibilities seriously and some provide exemplary service to others through peer mentor groups, the 'Here 2 help' scheme and the 'Virtual Helpers', who focus specifically on eliminating any cyber-bullying. The school supports and guides students well, ensures they are safe, and prepares them successfully for the next stage of education or training. Vulnerable students are especially well nurtured. High numbers of Year 11 choose to move into the sixth form, which is close to its current capacity. Despite meeting its challenging, specialist whole-school targets, however, the school rightly recognises that target setting for individual students is not sufficiently personalised in recognising each student's potential and that greater consistency is needed in departmental procedures for tracking students' achievements.

The vision and commitment of the headteacher, well supported by the senior management team and the majority of middle managers, have been at the heart of the school's rapid improvement since the last inspection. Supportive but robust governance has also contributed exceptionally well to recent developments. Parents consider the school is 'excellently led by a great communicator who is easy to speak to'. Honest self-evaluation underpins the rise in standards that are now above average in the main school and average in the sixth form. All groups of students achieve well because of the good teaching, much improved since the last inspection. The school is working hard to expand the present good curriculum so that students have greater opportunities for vocational and work-related courses both in the main school and in the sixth form. The school has used its mathematics and computing specialist status well to drive up standards, to provide a context for other school developments, and to enhance links with local schools and the surrounding communities.

A very few parents are concerned about behaviour in school and a few feel that their views are ignored. Inspectors found no evidence to support either concern. A minority were also concerned about some incidents of unsatisfactory behaviour on lengthy journeys on the school buses, which the school had already dealt with. In the short time since the last inspection, the school has clearly demonstrated that it has good capacity to improve further through the significant rise in students' achievements and the positive developments in their classroom experiences.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

The sixth form is good and improving. Standards have risen since the last inspection and are now in line with national averages. Students achieve well from their individual starting points. Checks on current students' progress indicate continuing improvement. However, targets in

some subject areas do not take enough account of earlier achievements and as a result do not always challenge students sufficiently.

Care, guidance and support for students are good, as is the students' personal development. Students are articulate and communicate confidently with adults. They respond well to the good teaching and make valuable contributions to the school and the local community, including peer mentoring, fund raising and taking assemblies in primary schools. They prepare well for their future economic well-being through work shadowing and young enterprise activities.

The sixth form is well led and the good curriculum matches the aspirations of current students well. Nevertheless, the school recognises that some would benefit from additional vocational courses. Retention rates are high, with most students remaining to complete courses in Year 13 because of good teaching and students' determination to succeed. Teachers' enthusiasm and good subject knowledge are common strengths of classroom practice. The effective steps taken since the last inspection to improve the transition from Year 11 to Year 12, together with rising standards and better teaching, demonstrate clearly the good capacity of the sixth form to improve further.

What the school should do to improve further

- Take steps to develop more flexible target setting so that it better matches the potential of individual students, particularly in the sixth form.
- Ensure that there is greater consistency in how subject areas check and record students' progress.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Standards are above average by the end of Year 11. Students achieve well from broadly average starting points. Students' progress accelerates as they move through the school because of the good teaching and the strong focus on examination specifications. In the sixth form, standards are average but students achieve well given their starting points.

In recent years, test results for Year 9 have matched or exceeded national expectations. Although progress in Years 7 to 9 is satisfactory overall, it has varied from year-to-year and across subjects. This variation has arisen partly because some students in each recent cohort have taken tests a year early. The provisional test results for 2007 indicate above average performance in English and average standards in mathematics and science, in contrast to the previous year when mathematics outstripped both English and science. Checks on current achievement in Year 9 indicate good progress, confirmed by the work seen in lessons.

There has been a steady rise in the proportion of the students gaining five or more higher GCSE grades that include English and mathematics. Over half of the students successfully did so in 2006 and the provisional figures for 2007 indicate similar results. This cohort made good progress from just average starting points. Generally, boys and girls make equally good progress in their examination courses. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities also achieve well. Students achieve particularly well in English language, and in mathematics and information technology, reflecting the school's specialist status. The school's robust information on Year 11 students shows a likely 10% increase in the proportion of the students gaining five or more higher GCSE grades and demonstrates that they are achieving well.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The personal development and well-being of the students are good, both in the main school and in the sixth form. Students are happy and responsible members of the school community. The overwhelming majority of students thoroughly enjoy coming to school, and most behave well and attend very regularly despite lengthy journeys. Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural awareness is good and is reflected in harmonious relationships and respect for the views and values of others.

Students, including those who are vulnerable, feel safe in school. They respond well to the effective personal, social and health education programme and very actively choose healthy options in the canteen. They value the termly rewards for healthy choices. Students participate well in physical activities and are found even before school in organised vigorous exercise. Many students make a strong contribution to school life through the school council, the 'buddy' and mentor schemes and the 'Here 2 help' group. They are active in eradicating bullying in any form. The overwhelming majority of students are confident that their views matter and that they make a valuable contribution to improving the school. They are active in the wider community through fund raising for charities and music and drama performances for local audiences. Students have responded well to opportunities provided by specialist mathematics and computing status, work experience and careers guidance and prepare themselves well for their future economic well-being.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Teaching and learning are good. Regular monitoring of teaching ensures that there is no inadequate teaching and that some excellent classroom practice is shared across the curriculum as far as possible.

Warm working relationships are reflected in the students' confidence in their teachers. This helps them to engage well in learning, as do teachers' enthusiasm for their subjects and their strong subject expertise. In a Year 7 science lesson on chromosomes, students were genuinely excited by the 'discovery activities' and gained much from sympathetic encouragement. Good pace, humour and high expectations of work and behaviour help students concentrate well on their work. Lively discussions in sixth form lessons in, for example, psychology and religious studies promote students' interest well. Within the specialist mathematics area, students achieve exceptionally well because of the careful reviews of their understanding in lessons. Specialist status has also supported teachers' use of information and communication technology (ICT) resources in lessons, although not all subject areas yet use the resources as well as they might.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The curriculum meets the needs of the great majority of students well and encourages them to develop their interests through the wide and popular range of additional activities, particularly in sport and the creative arts. Visitors as well as visits, both at home and abroad, extend and enliven classroom experiences, broadening students' horizons.

Students follow a broad and balanced curriculum that has improved since the last inspection to meet statutory requirements. Provision for personal, health, social and citizenship education is good and contributes very effectively to students' personal development. The impact of the school's specialist mathematics and computing status is evident in improved resources and in strong links with the wider community. The school is working steadily towards providing additional vocational opportunities to complement the leisure and tourism option and the flexible work experience programme. In the sixth form, students select from a good range of advanced level courses that match their aspirations well.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Care, guidance and support are good. Students report that problems are dealt with promptly and that there is 'always someone to turn to' when the need arises. Good support from external agencies helps students overcome difficulties, including health problems. Parents of vulnerable young people are loud in their praise of the school's efforts.

Students benefit greatly from mentoring sessions that address both personal needs and progress in studies. They know how well they are doing across subjects and are well informed on how to improve. However, the school has rightly identified that there is still too much inconsistency in how well students' progress is checked within their subjects and that students' academic targets should be set more individually building on earlier achievements.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Leadership and management are good. Some aspects are particularly strong, such as the culture of self-evaluation that pervades all areas of the school but is especially incisive at senior level. Leaders are ambitious for the students and the impact is evident in the good personal development of most, in rising standards, and in the increasing rate of progress of students, particularly in older years. The very able leadership of the headteacher has nourished a real sense of teamwork at all levels within the school. He has successfully developed a sense of collective accountability for school improvement. The school is rightly proud of its efforts to maintain an inclusive ethos that is reflected in the good progress of all groups of students. The mathematics and computing specialism is well led, as is the expanding sixth form. The school clearly demonstrates that its capacity for further improvement is good.

Governance is outstanding. Through regular meetings and fact-finding visits, governors challenge and support the school extraordinarily well. They strike a happy balance between holding the school to account and not unduly disturbing its smooth, efficient running. Teachers and support staff appreciate the school's positive and professional culture. As a result, middle leaders and their teams share a genuine commitment to do the best for the students. Senior and middle leaders rightly recognise that students will benefit from more personalised academic targets and from greater consistency in how students' progress is assessed in subject areas.

The views of parents, students and the local community are much valued and inform initiatives, including the recent uniform changes for students. The school council is rightly proud of its part in negotiating the school's conduct code and in the development of the covered playground area.

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?	2	2
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?	2	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	2	

Personal development and well-being

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

The quality of provision

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

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?	2	2
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	2	
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	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

29 September 2007

Dear Students

Inspection of The Sandon School, Chelmsford, Essex, CM2 7AQ

After our visit to Sandon, we would like to share our findings with you and thank you for your friendly welcome and for taking time to talk to us. We are very pleased that you enjoy school so much, attend regularly, and are so responsive to the school's drive to help you adopt a healthy life style. You are very appreciative not only of the good teaching you experience but of the many activities open to you outside of lessons. You are really keen on sport and creative arts and enthusiastic about school productions. You also think the 'Atlas Centre' with its excellent information and communications technology (ICT) facilities is a real bonus of the specialist mathematics and computing status.

Sandon looks after you very well. You are fortunate to learn in the pleasant, refurbished classrooms. You told us that you feel safe and that there is always someone to turn to when you need help. Many of you make a difference to your peers through mentoring, the school council, the 'Here 2 help' group and the anti-bullying 'virtual helpers'. Because of the hard work of your excellent headteacher and governors and your many very committed teachers, you are achieving well. This opens the door to a wide range of further educational and training opportunities both at Year 11 and at the end of the sixth form.

Because you cooperate well with what your school is trying to do for you, we are convinced that you will continue to support your teachers and respond actively to their attempts to help you make even faster progress. We have asked your teachers to work on setting individually negotiated subject targets. We have also asked them to make sure that all subject areas check your progress equally well.

Some of your parents are concerned that not all of you behave as well on the school buses as you do in school. We would ask you to think about this and make sure there are no further complaints.

With best wishes for your future.

Sheila Nolan

Lead Inspector