

The Billericay School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	115384
Local Authority	ESSEX LA
Inspection number	311932
Inspection date	5 March 2008
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	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	1654
6th form	264
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Robert Orr
Headteacher	Mrs Susan Hammond
Date of previous school inspection	20 September 2004
School address	School Road Billericay CM12 9LH
Telephone number	01277 655191
Fax number	01277 314414

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an Additional Inspector. Inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues: standards and achievement; leadership and management; the quality of the curriculum and other activities and their impact on students' personal development. They gathered evidence from school records, observing lessons, looking at students' work, and from interviews with senior staff, governors and groups of teaching staff and students. Other aspects of the school's work were investigated in less detail, but inspectors verified the accuracy of the school's own evaluations of teaching and learning by conducting some lesson observations jointly with senior staff. They checked safeguarding records and validated other aspects of the school's self-evaluation.

Description of the school

The Billericay School is a large and over-subscribed mathematics and computing specialist school, mainly serving the town of Billericay but also drawing students from Basildon and other nearby areas. The entitlement to free school meals is well below average, as is the extent of social and economic disadvantage in the area. However, the proportion of adults locally who have experience of higher education is below the national average. The vast majority of students are from White British backgrounds and have English as their first language. Students with minority ethnic heritage make up less than 6% of the student body, the largest minority group being those of Asian heritage. The standards reached at age 11 by students joining the school are in line with national expectations, but there is some variation from year to year. The number of students with identified learning difficulties or disabilities is increasing, but remains well below average. Approximately 55% of pupils are boys.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

The Billericay School is a good school that works outstandingly well in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being and provide good value for money. It plays a leading role in the Billericay Education Community and the local '14 to 19' partnership. As an extended school, it works very effectively with social services and other agencies and has strong community links. The school benefits from good leadership and management at all levels, particularly from the headteacher. Her very clear philosophy means that the core subjects are emphasised strongly, students' needs are put first and that the school has an inclusive and caring nature. Leadership of the mathematics and computing specialism is outstanding.

Most lessons are well taught and very few are unsatisfactory. As a result, standards are improving and most students are currently making good progress. A small exception occurs in the sixth form, where a few students take A level courses that do not fully suit their needs. Otherwise, the curriculum has significant strengths, particularly in the range of enrichment activities, the strong support for modern foreign languages, the enhanced provision for mathematics and computing, and the extensive and popular extra-curricular programme. Enrichment includes powerful elements that contribute strongly to students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Recent examples include a talk from a Holocaust survivor and a meeting with the politician Tony Benn. Students help to maintain the school's supportive environment by showing sympathetic consideration, tolerance and understanding for each other and through their outstanding contributions to the school and wider community. These include helping with primary school sports, teaching information and communication technology (ICT) skills to the local community, buddy systems to support vulnerable students, involvement in the school and local youth councils and good take-up of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme. The curriculum also includes elements of work-related learning, enterprise and financial capability which combine with the above average standards of literacy, numeracy and ICT capability to prepare students exceptionally well for their future lives.

Students' enjoyment of school is reflected in their increasing attendance, which is now above average. The combination of good teaching, effective care, guidance and support and the enriched curriculum ensures that students' personal development and well-being are good. The imminent 'Healthy School' status and the provision for sports help students to live healthy lifestyles. They feel safe, behave well and treat each other with respect. Students respect the school's stance on internet safety and its zero tolerance policy on drugs; the school arranges random visits from drugs 'sniffer' dogs to confirm that there are no drugs on school premises. Students say that bullying is infrequent and effectively dealt with by the school. They also say that behaviour has improved in the school. A few parents disagree about behaviour, but the overwhelming majority agree that their children make good progress, feel safe and enjoy school.

The school uses self-evaluation effectively at all levels to identify strengths and areas where it can improve. Governors are well informed and supportive. They hold the school to account well. Senior staff have established effective systems to monitor the quality of teaching and to review the work of departments. Their approach to evaluation incorporates coaching for middle managers such as heads of department and pastoral leaders. The combination of subject and leadership expertise makes the school's action planning particularly effective. The management of change is good because the impact of new ideas is monitored and evaluated carefully. One example is the introduction of the 'enhanced support programme', which allows selected students to take one fewer GCSE option to allow more time to work on the others. Another is

the switch from year-based pastoral support to a house system. Both have benefited from further adjustments this year that make them more effective. These enhancements to care, guidance and support have played an important part in improving standards. The school is currently revising the curriculum to meet the needs of students better and to develop their ability to learn and think independently.

The inspection confirmed the school's view that teaching is good. Inspectors accompanied senior managers on five lesson observations. On each occasion, senior staff gave accurate assessments of the strengths and weaknesses they had seen. In all most all cases, their judgements of lesson quality matched those of the inspectors. Lessons are well planned to meet the different needs of learners, including those with learning difficulties or disabilities. Classrooms are well ordered and students respond positively. In many cases, students know their current levels of work and know what they need to improve. Teachers present information well and organise a variety of learning activities. However, as the school recognises, lessons do not always convey the necessary links between subjects to create the 'big picture' for students or to develop their ability to think and learn independently. For example, in a Year 7 science lesson, students compared the effects of heating copper and magnesium. Good organisation meant that they did this safely and recorded the important facts in their books, although the lesson could have been improved by questions to promote deeper thinking. In contrast, thinking skills were well developed in a Year 10 history lesson and the links made between algebra and geometry enhanced a Year 11 mathematics lesson on simultaneous equations.

The most important priority for this inspection was to investigate whether students are achieving well and making good progress, because the 2007 examination results indicated satisfactory rather than good achievement. Inspectors therefore challenged the school to support its case with hard evidence about current standards. The school's careful tracking of students' academic progress meant that it could demonstrate above average standards in Years 7 to 11, representing good progress from the average standards on entry to the school. Because Year 11 students have already taken their GCSE examination in English and some GCSE modules in science, the school could also provide external verification of higher standards. One reason why achievement had not been good in 2007 was the underachievement of a number of students. In most cases, the school could point to causes that were often outside its direct control. Nevertheless, it has acted to help such students by extending its 'enhanced support programme', which has played an important part in the recent improvement. It gives good support to help students to develop their study and revision skills and to complete their coursework. Students with learning difficulties or disabilities also receive good support that enables them to make good progress.

The school has a good capacity for improvement. It has taken firm action to eradicate inadequate teaching that impaired progress in ICT in previous years and has made a clear improvement in the provision for music and drama. It has also addressed most of the issues identified in the previous inspection. Accommodation remains problematic, but the school is working on a solution.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Many of the strengths reported above apply equally to the sixth form. Teaching is good and all students receive good care, guidance and support. Sixth formers make a strong contribution to the community. Leadership and management of the sixth form are good because they benefit from the school's strengths in self-evaluation and improvement planning. The sixth form curriculum has some good features, such as the opportunities offered in mathematics and ICT

and a consortium arrangement, which extends choice by allowing students from Mayflower School to attend courses at Billericay School and vice versa. A strong general studies programme helps to ensure that students' personal development and well-being are good. However, the curriculum is judged satisfactory because it does not offer enough courses to meet the needs of students who have passed the 'level 2' standard of five grade C GCSEs, but by a narrow margin. Its philosophy of open access allows some students to start A level courses that they later find quite difficult. The school's strong support means that they persevere with subjects even though their expected grade is quite low. In one sense, students' attainment is above average, because they gain more qualifications than average. This is partly due to good results in A level general studies. On the other hand, the standards in some subjects are below average, as is the average rate of progress across the sixth form. After conducting a close analysis of the impact of its open access policy on progress, the school reported that the effect was less than it had first thought, and therefore agreed with the judgement that standards and progress in the sixth form are satisfactory. However, the sixth form is judged effective overall because improvements to the curriculum are already planned to address the issue of course appropriateness and students already make good progress when they take appropriate courses.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise achievement in the sixth form, for example by ensuring that the range of courses includes some that meet the needs of students whose level 2 qualifications do not provide a strong background for A levels.
- Further enhance the curriculum links and the quality of teaching to help students to develop independent learning skills and to strengthen their understanding of the 'big picture' alongside their acquisition of knowledge.

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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?	1	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	3
The standards ¹ reached by learners	2	3
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	3
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	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
How well learners enjoy their education	2	
The attendance of learners	2	
The behaviour of learners	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	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	3
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	2	
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

6 March 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of The Billericay School, Billericay CM12 9LH

Dear Students

I am writing to tell you about your school's recent inspection. Before I do that, I would like to thank you, on behalf of the inspection team, for your helpfulness in answering our questions and guiding us around the school.

We found that The Billericay School is a good school that works outstandingly well in partnership with others for your benefit. It is well led and has an inclusive and caring nature. The core subjects are emphasised strongly. Teaching is good. Lessons are well planned, classrooms are well ordered and you respond positively. You usually know your current levels of work and what to do to improve. Teachers present information well and organise a variety of learning activities. As a result, most of you are making good progress in Key Stages 3 and 4, reaching above average standards. Standards and progress in the sixth form are satisfactory rather than good because a few students take A level courses that do not fully suit their needs. We agreed with the school that the sixth form needs a better range of courses to enable all students to achieve well.

The school prepares you exceptionally well for your future lives, teaching you about enterprise and the world of work. Lessons are enriched with some powerful elements such as a talk from a Holocaust survivor and a meeting with Tony Benn. As a result, your personal development and well-being are good. You show sympathetic consideration, tolerance and understanding for each other and make outstanding contributions to the school and wider community. You told us that you enjoy school, that behaviour has improved and that bullying is dealt with effectively. Nearly all of your parents agree that you make good progress, feel safe and enjoy school.

Recent improvements to the school include the 'enhanced support programme' and the new house system. Accommodation remains problematic, but the school is working on a solution. We agree with the school that lessons do not always give you the 'big picture' or get you to think and learn independently and that this should be the next focus for improvement.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Abbott Her Majesty's Inspector