

The Rochester Grammar School for Girls

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	118917
Local Authority	Medway
Inspection number	313147
Inspection date	26 November 2008
Reporting inspector	Clare Gillies

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

Type of school	Grammar (selective)
School category	Foundation
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Girls
Number on roll	
School (total)	1073
Sixth form	278
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Peter Martin
Headteacher	Denise Shepherd
Date of previous school inspection	17 November 2003
School address	Maidstone Road Rochester ME1 3BY
Telephone number	01634 843049
Fax number	01634 818340

Age group	11–18
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors. The inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues: initiatives in the curriculum and teaching and learning, and students' care, guidance and support. Evidence was gathered from: examination of documents, lesson observations and meetings with staff, students and governors. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but the inspectors found no evidence to suggest that the school's own assessments, as given in its self-evaluation, were not justified and these have been included where appropriate in this report.

Description of the school

The school is slightly larger than average. Students enter the school with well above average standards. In 2004 it acquired combined specialist status in mathematics/information and communication technology (ICT) and music. The school offers places to students with musical aptitude who have passed the selection test and is the hub for many of Kent's musical activities. It has full International Schools and Investors in Careers awards, Healthy Schools status and is an International Baccalaureate Organisation World School. The school is part of the Rochester–Walderslade Partnership, a consortium of five secondary schools and Mid Kent College that collaborate for post-16 studies.

The percentage of students from minority ethnic groups is just below the national average although it is above this in Year 12. The main ethnic group is Indian. Approximately one in twenty students does not speak English as their first language. No students have a statement of special educational needs and the percentage with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is very low. The catchment area is large and students come from a wide range of social and economic backgrounds.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

The overall effectiveness of the school is outstanding. Since the previous inspection, when many aspects of school life were excellent, there have been significant improvements. Standards are higher, the curriculum is more stimulating, teaching and learning are outstanding in all years and support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is excellent. The headteacher continues to lead with determination and enthusiasm and the governors, senior leadership team and middle managers are equally dedicated and effective.

When students leave the school, they have not only the qualifications they need to proceed to higher education but also the maturity and independent learning skills that serve them well in their chosen careers and futures. Parents of the small number of boys and girls who join the school in the sixth form observe how quickly they feel welcome and settle in. Many other parents write about how pleased they are with their daughters' progress, being 'constantly impressed by every aspect of the school'.

Standards are far above the national averages because all students make excellent progress in all years. For the first time in 2006, the school entered Year 8 girls for the National Curriculum tests normally taken by students at the end of Year 9. The results were almost as high as those attained by Year 9 students the year before. In mathematics, a specialist subject, nine out of ten girls attained extremely high levels in 2008 and results in English and science were also excellent.

Practically all students attain well over five GCSE grades A* to C including English, mathematics and an ICT qualification. The percentage of GCSE A* and A grades increased to at least 60% in 2007 and 2008. A-level results are just as strong as those in the main school. These results represent exceptionally high standards.

The school celebrates students' non-academic achievement, knowing that this contributes to the development of girls' enjoyment of school life and to their individual personalities and maturity. Students represent the county, South East England or even Great Britain in a range of sports, from sailing to synchronised swimming, skiing and gymnastics.

The school is rightly recognised by leading professional musicians as a centre of excellence for choral work and the provision for music, one of the school's specialisms, is outstanding. A large number of different musical groups meet regularly. Recently, a young person won an award as a young musician helping gifted, younger students.

In service to the community, mainly linked to the school's specialisms, students develop an understanding of the needs of others. This might be helping primary pupils with mathematics, or working in a local special school, helping children with autism to enjoy music and dance. Many teachers, not just in the specialist subjects, share their expertise with local primary and secondary schools or adults, for example running successful ICT classes or courses for teachers. The school's contribution to the local and wider community is excellent.

The fact that attendance is well above average confirms that students are happy at school and enjoy the rich education they receive. Students feel very safe and well cared for and know that the school will not tolerate bullying in any form; there are very few incidents. This view is confirmed by practically all parents. Students' behaviour is excellent so that fixed-term exclusions are very rare and only given out when students overstep the mark, for example addressing each other inappropriately.

Students have strong views on the food they eat and the student council has worked with the school to ensure the canteen offers a range of healthy menus. Students understand that diet is just as important as exercise for a healthy lifestyle. However, the amount of time allocated for physical education lessons is below the government's recommended two hours per week and, inevitably, there are girls who do not participate in extra-curricular sporting activities. Sex and relationships, safety and drugs education form part of the new, well-balanced programme which all students follow. This programme includes teaching about citizenship and students, particularly sixth formers, enjoy debates about topical issues. In one tutor session a week, students study 'Habits of Excellence' based on an American programme which focuses on habits of mind such as 'listening with understanding and empathy'. The school is therefore broadening students' understanding of social, moral and cultural issues through tutor time, a range of lessons and assemblies – often prepared and presented by students. As well as religious education lessons, assemblies and a 'Thought for the Week' extend students' spiritual awareness.

Racial harmony is very evident and, particularly with the new vertical tutor groups, students of different ages get on very well together and enjoy helping each other with work or any problems. Older students were apprehensive about the new house and tutor arrangements but now admit they are good, although some of them miss having lunch with their friends.

Students have a very good appreciation of the world of work and enterprise, through work shadowing, 'Take Your Daughters to Work' and an excellent two-day course called Miniconomy. Parents contribute to this and Year 10 students thoroughly enjoy the teamwork involved in this simulation of running a business. All students have high levels of literacy, numeracy and ICT skills to equip them for their future studies and work.

The excellent curriculum, enriched by the diverse specialisms, evolves each year as the school is determined to make it stimulating and matching students' abilities, interests and aspirations. In Years 9 to 11, students are studying GCSE courses and some are studying one or more AS courses, for example in mathematics, philosophy or business and economics. Activities for highly gifted and talented students are well considered and stimulating. In addition to the many musical and other extra-curricular activities, ranging from chess to kick boxing, the school organises numerous enrichment activities and trips in the United Kingdom and overseas. These extend students' horizons and understanding of the wider world. Many girls follow the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme and experience adventurous travelling.

Students' learning is excellent because they are taught by enthusiastic, knowledgeable, innovative and committed teachers, described by one parent as 'inspiring, amiable staff'. Teachers often use pictures as a stimulus to learning and ask questions such as 'Is that strictly true?', to make students think and to extend their answers. Lessons are dynamic and students are well motivated and concentrate hard to keep up, often being given a specific amount of time to complete tasks. Quick reminders of work covered and how the structure of a lesson is evolving help students to stay focused. Teachers use interactive whiteboards and students work on computers efficiently and effectively. A virtual learning environment is developing well with course details, assessment information, resources and exemplars of good work easily accessible by students. The school is enthusiastically embracing modern technology for the benefit of students and parents.

Students often write comments on their own and each other's work and learn to evaluate the difference between levels of work. When teachers mark work, they write helpful comments on how students could improve. Whilst practically all parents are confident that their daughters are making good progress, a small minority feel that the school does not seek and take account

of their and their children's suggestions, concerns and views. In recent years, the school has increased its contact with parents and the number of parent forums it runs to discuss particular issues. Occasionally, senior council members do not share council minutes effectively with all students.

The school has provided students with tools to help them to learn and to work independently. A combination of approaches has been introduced including several types of 'Thinking Maps', 'Thinkers' Keys' and 'Habits of Excellence' (described earlier). A few staff and students have felt a little overwhelmed at the pace of initiatives but the school is aware of this. It is adapting and developing this work in response to feedback. The benefits are emerging and students regularly and confidently debate and discuss work in groups.

Students receive excellent guidance about how to improve their work and how well they are working towards their targets. They are encouraged to consider career options early and the advice has improved in quality and quantity since the last inspection. Year 7 students observe that the staff are 'really approachable' and they appreciated being helped by older student mentors in their first few weeks. Support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities was raised as an area for improvement in the previous inspection. New staffing, including a learning mentor, better procedures, appropriate resources and a welcoming room mean that students now have excellent, enjoyable support to overcome anything that prevents them from learning well.

Senior leaders probe the reasons for, and make changes to, staffing and/or the curriculum if students have not achieved as well as predicted. Following the 2008 results, new curriculum leaders were appointed in a few subjects, language teaching was restructured and coursework reviewed in an A-level subject. The school knows itself well and has excellent capacity to improve further.

The headteacher's outstanding leadership is reflected in the strength of the senior leaders, the curriculum leaders and the support staff. The school manages its finances particularly skilfully. The extremely supportive governors, who describe themselves as 'Critical Champions', bring a breadth of experience to their work in well-organised committees. It is good that each term the Every Child Committee meets the head girl to hear about the work of the student council.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 1

The sixth form is outstandingly effective. Students reached extremely high standards and gained 70% A/B grades at A level in 2008. In the same year, AS results were the highest the school has achieved so it predicts a higher A-level A/B percentage in 2009. In the specialist subjects, mathematics and ICT attained 65% A grades and music 70% A/B grades. Exceptionally high standards were reached in many other subjects.

Through the well-organised consortium, sixth form students can choose almost any combination of subjects they want. Over 20 of them study one of their AS- or A-level subjects at the neighbouring grammar school for boys. In the specialist subjects the choice is wide, for example music or music technology, and several vocational options are also available. The impact of the International Baccalaureate diploma has further strengthened students' understanding of global citizenship as well as their appreciation of world cultures.

The quality of teaching and learning, students' personal development and the care provided is as excellent in the sixth form as in the main school. Students use study periods sensibly and,

despite waiting for a larger social area, they appreciate the large, quiet room in which they can work silently. They have confidence in the leadership of the sixth form and thoroughly enjoy their time at the school.

The names of the school houses, women who are famous for their work in music, mathematics, ICT or interesting combinations of all three, were chosen to inspire girls to aim high. Over 90% of students proceed to higher education and many gain places at universities.

What the school should do to improve further

- Increase the amount of time for physical education lessons.

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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	1	1

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/or disabilities make progress	1	1

¹Grade 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.

Personal development and well-being

How good are 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	
The extent to which 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 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?	1	1

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	1	
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	1	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1	1
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	1	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	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	

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

27 November 2008

Dear Students

Inspection of Rochester Grammar School for Girls, Rochester ME1 3BY

Thank you so much for your welcome when we visited you for a day. We wish we had had more time to meet more of you and to observe more lessons and activities though we did manage to hear some wonderful music. You will not be surprised that we think your school is outstandingly effective because practically all of you that we met described all the wonderful teaching you receive and how well you feel supported in everything you do. We agree that the headteacher and staff do their very best for you.

Most of you in Years 7 to 10 now feel that the vertical tutor groups are a good thing as you get to know students of different ages. You cope well with the learning ideas that the school introduces, such as Habits of Excellence, and appreciate that the school responds to your views on them; you have constructive ideas on how they could be used more effectively. Some of you were unsure when teachers started using Thinking Maps but you appreciate how useful they are. We were impressed with how skilfully you use them and, particularly in the sixth form, how well you work independently – a valuable tool for university and working life.

Many of you benefit from curriculum developments such as AS-level courses in Years 9 to 11 or the International Baccalaureate in the sixth form and it is excellent that you have such a wide range of subjects to choose from. We are concerned, however, that you have less than the government's recommended two hours of physical education a week; we have asked the school to increase the time, which is important for those of you who do not do any sport after school.

We hope you will have an excellent Christmas, which is not that far away, and that you will all have happy and successful futures.

Yours faithfully

Clare Gillies

Lead inspector