

Colchester County High School for Girls

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	115370
Local Authority	Essex
Inspection number	326192
Inspection date	21 January 2009
Reporting inspector	Deborah Vaughan-Jenkins HMI

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)	775
Sixth form	226
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Allan Blundell
Headteacher	Mrs E Ward
Date of previous school inspection	14 March 2006
School address	Norman Way Colchester Essex CO3 3US
Telephone number	01206 576973
Fax number	01206 769302

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Introduction

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

The inspector evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues: the progress students make in relation to their starting points, the quality of teaching and learning for all students, aspects of care, guidance and support, the impact of specialist status, community cohesion and the quality of leadership and management.

Evidence was gathered from the school's self-evaluation; achievement and attainment information; observation of lessons; scrutiny of documentation provided by the school; observation of the school at work; discussion with senior and middle managers; talking to staff and students and analysis of parents' questionnaires. Other aspects of the school's work were not investigated in detail, but 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

Colchester County High School for Girls is a smaller than average, selective grammar school for girls aged between 11 and 18. The school is heavily oversubscribed and recruits students from a wide geographical area. Socio-economic indicators are well above average and there are very few students entitled to free school meals. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is very small. The majority of students at the school are White British although there is an increasing number of students from minority ethnic groups, making up around 15% of the total cohort. The school has held specialist status for science since 2002. In 2006, it gained a second specialism, this time for languages, and in April 2007 it became a Leading Edge School. The school has also achieved the Healthy Schools, Artsmark and Sportmark Awards.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Colchester County High School for Girls is an outstanding school that continues to offer an exceptionally high quality of education. It continues to strive for, and achieves excellence in all that it does. The school provides outstanding value for money.

Students arrive in Year 7 with very high standards of attainment. The vast majority of students make excellent progress, particularly in mathematics and science. The standards reached by Year 11 are outstanding. In 2008, all students gained at least five A* to C grades including English and mathematics, with over 85% of students achieving A* or A grades. All groups of students achieve equally well. Students' personal development and well-being is equally impressive and ensures that, as well as achieving academic excellence, students develop as mature, articulate and confident individuals, well prepared for their next step in education and for their future lives. The school successfully promotes a culture of trust and respect that students greatly appreciate. Students demonstrate much enjoyment of their education through very high attendance, their positive attitudes to others and their desire to achieve their absolute best. Their behaviour is exemplary. Students speak highly of their canteen and the quality of healthy food available. They say they have healthy lifestyles, eat healthily and participate in sports regularly.

The school has put much effort into improving teaching and learning, to help ensure all lessons are engaging and of a consistently high quality. Teaching and learning were judged good at the time of the previous inspection. The school now judges them outstanding and inspectors agree. Teachers have excellent subject knowledge and high expectations of their students. In return, students have high expectations of themselves. Very good working relationships exist between students and teachers and students say they relish the independence teachers give them and appreciate the high levels of encouragement. Often in lessons, very good use is made of group work and discussion to help secure students' understanding and develop their independent thinking skills. There is rigorous monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning by managers to increase the high proportion of outstanding lessons even further. There are good opportunities to share best teaching practice across subjects, such as the school's annual 'Thinking Fair' event, which focuses on how to add zest to lessons. The school's specialisms for science and for languages has further improved access to and the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to support learning and led to a more widespread use of ICT in lessons across other subjects.

The curriculum is outstanding and well supported by a wide-ranging menu of extra-curricular activities. It is constantly under review by senior managers and evolves according to students' needs and interests. The increasing level of personalisation of the curriculum helps promote the excellent development of students as independent learners. Some initiatives are highly imaginative such as the creation and recent completion of the 'mschool', housing mathematics, music and the mind, in the form of creative and critical thinking. Students talk positively about the environment and facilities that this new building offers, particularly for music. Students have excellent opportunities to take on additional responsibility and make a positive contribution to the school community and beyond, for example, through the vocal school council, as mentors for their peers and through a range of extensive charity and volunteer work.

The school makes excellent use of its specialist designations to raise students' aspirations and achievement. For example, it has been successful in increasing markedly the number of girls

taking science subjects. In 2008, over 90% of students achieved an A or an A* grade in biology, chemistry and physics. In languages, student now have an expanding choice of subjects and language related enrichment. The school has been innovative in combining its specialisms such as organised international science trips to Germany and Japan.

The levels of care, guidance and support are outstanding. The school has further enhanced its provision by an increasing focus on well-being. Students say they feel safe and supported, both by the school and by each other. A comprehensive and popular personal, social and health education programme helps students cope well with the demands and stress of schoolwork. Enhanced transition arrangements have further strengthened students' progression to the school and through Key Stages. Student performance is meticulously tracked and analysed. Any students with additional support requirements, or those identified as not on schedule to achieve their potential, receive swift support and achieve as well as their peers.

Communication with parents and carers is good. Parents and carers are overwhelmingly supportive of the school's work. A significant proportion who responded to the inspection parental questionnaire stated how the school had 'balanced study, social development and student happiness' extremely well. However, a small minority stated they would like both more and improved indoor sports facilities. The school recognises this issue and actions to improve resources in physical education feature in its development plan. The school is responsive to the views of its students. Students say their views are valued and their feedback is used effectively by the school to help further improve their educational experience.

Leadership and management at all levels of the school are outstanding. The headteacher provides exceptionally strong and visionary leadership. The senior leadership team has ensured that improvement since the last inspection is in place and is not complacent in wanting to push still further forward and meet new challenges. Governors remain highly supportive and actively involved in the strategic development of the school. The school's contribution to community cohesion is outstanding and supports students' personal development well. Assemblies, often delivered by students themselves, are used well to promote a diverse range of topics. Very strong partnerships exist with an array of local schools. Local primary schools commend highly the support the school provides to primary teachers, sharing its expertise in language and science subjects. Students are encouraged to enter a range of national competitions and international links have been developed to further broaden students' horizons. However, it is difficult to know how many student experiences are enhanced by the range of opportunities available. The school does not formally evaluate all the work it does under community cohesion to enable it to focus clearly on any gaps in provision or celebrate all its successes. The school's self-evaluation reflects an accurate view of its provision, particularly in the main school. The shared sense of purpose, consistently high standards and the proven record of continuous improvement demonstrate an outstanding capacity for improvement.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 1

The standards reached by students during their time at the sixth form are exceptionally high. In 2008, 86% of students gained A or B grades at A level. Students make excellent progress in most subjects. The positive influence and impact of the school's specialist subjects pervades the sixth form also. For example, in relation to science, over 45% of A-level leavers in 2008 progressed into science or mathematics based degree courses. In languages, the proportion of students studying a language has increased notably. The language curriculum has expanded with a recently introduced evening course in Mandarin and a short course in spoken Japanese

specifically aimed at sixth form students. The development of students' leadership and team working skills is excellent. Involvement in extra-curricular activities is high with many run by the sixth form students themselves, including clubs for younger students. The school rightly regards sixth form students as excellent ambassadors and role models. Virtually all students progress into higher education and most into their first choice of university.

What the school should do to improve further

- Formally evaluate work the school does under community cohesion so it can more clearly celebrate its successes and focus on any gaps in provision.

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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	

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	1	
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	2
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**

22 January 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Colchester County High School for Girls, Colchester, C03 0US

I would like to begin by thanking you all for welcoming me to your school on the 21 January 2009. Your courtesy and maturity were impressive from the outset. I was also impressed with the midday assembly that some of you led on topics such as how to be more eco-friendly. During the inspection, I visited your lessons, met with a number of you and talked at length to various members of school staff. This letter aims to outline to you my findings from the day.

I found that your school and sixth form continue to be outstanding. It is outstanding in all key aspects of its provision. Your standards of work are very high and many of you leave with superb GCSE and A-level grades. You develop an excellent understanding of science, mathematics and English that prepares you well for further education and life after school. I have left the school with one additional area to develop. You do a wide range of activities locally, national and internationally, to help promote your understanding of different cultures and communities, but I found the school could review this work better in regards to how many of you participate in these activities and evaluate how these opportunities contribute to your broader understanding of diversity. This way the school can more clearly celebrate its successes and focus on any aspects it could do better.

Your headteacher, along with her team is doing an excellent job in maintaining your high standards and moving your school further forward. Your school knows its students well and is committed to making your experience in education a happy and successful one.

You can of course help maintain your school's outstanding status by continuing to work as hard as you can to achieve your best. Also, continue to share your views through your school council. This way, the school will know what you think it does well or what you think it needs to improve further.

Thank you again for your help in this inspection and we would like to wish you all the very best in your studies and every success in the future.

Deborah Vaughan-Jenkins

Her Majesty's Inspector