

# Brentwood Ursuline Convent High School

Inspection report

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<b>Unique Reference Number</b>	115377
<b>Local Authority</b>	Essex
<b>Inspection number</b>	326194
<b>Inspection date</b>	25 March 2009
<b>Reporting inspector</b>	Stephen Abbott HMI

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

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<b>Type of school</b>	Comprehensive
<b>School category</b>	Voluntary aided
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	11–18
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Girls
<b>Number on roll</b>	
School (total)	1009
Sixth form	216
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	The governing body
<b>Chair</b>	Mrs A Bradley
<b>Headteacher</b>	Miss V Squirrell
<b>Date of previous school inspection</b>	21 February 2006
<b>School address</b>	Queen's Road Brentwood Essex CM14 4EX
<b>Telephone number</b>	01277 227156
<b>Fax number</b>	01277 229454

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## Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one Additional Inspector. Inspectors evaluated the overall effectiveness of the school and investigated the following issues: current standards and achievement, including the achievement of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and of 'gifted and talented' students; the impact of specialist status; aspects of students' personal development and well-being including their understanding of the diversity of faiths and cultures in modern Britain; the quality of care, guidance and support; participation in sixth form subjects; the effectiveness of long term strategic planning and development; the impact of equality schemes; and how well the school promotes community cohesion.

Evidence was gathered by a variety of means, including: discussions with students, teachers, senior leaders and representatives from the governing body; observation of parts of several lessons; analysis of current performance data, the school's lesson observation evidence and over 200 parental questionnaires; and scrutiny of the school's self evaluation and its improvement plan. 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.

The school's religious character will be the subject of a separate inspection.

## Description of the school

Brentwood Ursuline Convent High School is a specialist arts college. It is a voluntary aided girls' school in the Ursuline tradition catering mainly for Catholic and other Christian students from Brentwood and the surrounding area. The school holds the National Healthy Schools, Artsmark Gold and Sportsmark Awards.

The school's ethnic diversity is not typical of the nation as a whole. About 81% of pupils are of White British heritage and the remainder are drawn from a variety of different minority ethnic groups. Just under 3% of students are at an early stage of learning English as an additional language.

The school has a lower than average proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals. Students joining in Year 7 are, on average, about three months ahead of national expectations. The proportion of pupils aged 11 to 16 with recognised learning difficulties and/or disabilities is 6.5%, including 1% with statements of special educational needs. Among the 2.5% of pupils receiving higher levels of learning support, the most common reasons are: dyslexia; moderate learning difficulties; behavioural, emotional and social difficulties; and speech, language and communication difficulties.

The sixth form caters predominantly for pupils studying for AS and A levels, with very few taking intermediate-level courses. A few sixth formers transfer from other schools to join the sixth form.

## Key for inspection grades

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

## Overall effectiveness of the school

### Grade: 2

Brentwood Ursuline Convent High School is a good school. It has a number of outstanding features. It works exceptionally well in partnership with other agencies. The school's specialist arts college status contributes strongly to the school's impact in the community and has played a major role in improving provision. As a consequence, students achieve well academically and their personal development and well-being are outstanding. Academic standards have risen in each of the last three years and are now very high. This is because the girls make good progress in comparison to students in other schools who have similar backgrounds and prior attainment.

The school benefits from good leadership and management at all levels, including the work of its governors. The headteacher has a very clear vision for the school's development and for the all-round education of the students. The school's traditional Catholic ethos has been renewed and strengthened as the school has embraced its new duty to promote community cohesion. For example, the school regularly invites speakers from different faiths and backgrounds and this helps students to understand and respect the diversity of values and beliefs in modern Britain. The school includes students from a variety of different ethnic and social backgrounds, including some with disabilities, all of whom get on together well. Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding and their contribution to the community is exceptional. Students are involved in the school community through the school council, helping to interview prospective staff and duties, even collecting litter. Their support for the local and wider community includes the '20:20 Vision' art project for a local hospital, collections for a children's hospice and a women's refuge and involvement in the 'Make Poverty History' campaign.

On average, students are a few months ahead academically when they join the school. They make better than expected progress so standards are very high by the time they leave. In 2008, more than 80% of students gained five or more GCSE passes at A\* to C, and 74% gained five or more GCSE passes including English and mathematics, at grade C or above. Comparing their best eight GCSE results with the national average, Ursuline students scored the equivalent of one grade higher in all eight subjects. Science results are improving and results in music and dance are very good. The school's own assessments suggest that the high standards are being maintained by current students. However, the school has not analysed its data in sufficient detail to know whether current students are making better progress than their predecessors.

Students' attendance is very high and their behaviour is excellent in lessons and around the school. They understand the need to behave safely in a building with so many narrow corridors and staircases. There are occasional instances of misbehaviour and bullying, but these are dealt with very well, and there are few exclusions. Pastoral care is outstanding. Every pupil is known well and the rewards and sanctions policy is well understood. As a result, students feel very safe and gain good enjoyment from school. Students' views are listened to, although it is not always possible to make the changes they would like. For example, some students and parents are unhappy that staffing problems have disrupted provision in one or two subjects, and believe that their concerns have not been addressed. The school has tried hard to find good quality replacements, but has sometimes had to rely on temporary appointments.

Despite these difficulties, the overall quality of teaching and learning is good. Teachers make increasingly good use of new technologies. The school has made teaching and learning one of its priorities for improvement, with a particular focus on the use of assessment and feedback.

For example, in a Year 8 dance lesson, students were involved well in assessing each other's work and suggesting improvements. The school is keen to develop students' ability to think for themselves and to take more responsibility for their own learning.

Teachers have been improving their questioning skills and ability to make rapid assessments during lessons so they can adapt their teaching as necessary. A good example was seen in a Year 12 mathematics lesson, where students wrote their responses on miniature whiteboards, allowing the teacher to check rapidly how well they understood geometric sequences. In a very good Year 7 lesson on resistant materials, the teacher had thought about each student's needs and planned work at different levels.

Inspectors observed several lessons alongside senior members of staff to confirm that they make accurate judgements when evaluating lessons. The school accepts that the quality of marking remains inconsistent and students are not always clear about what they need to do to improve their work. They also recognise some inconsistency in how well lessons are planned to meet the full range of learning need. Nevertheless, students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good progress because the quality of learning support is high.

The school has developed a good system for keeping track of students' progress and identifying those in need of support. Students are encouraged to aim for high standards and are supported in a variety of ways, including revision classes and an effective mentoring scheme. Year 11 pupils commented that such academic support has intensified since their mock examinations, and suggest it should be strengthened in Year 10.

Students benefit from a well-designed curriculum that includes a wide range of extra-curricular activities. All students have dance and physical education (PE) lessons and many gain additional exercise through sports teams and performances. They understand how to eat healthily and most lead very healthy lifestyles. The curriculum is enriched in various ways, including opportunities for theatre visits and trips abroad. The school's involvement in the Brentwood 14 to 19 partnership extends opportunities for vocational courses and there are alternative programmes for students who do not respond well to a traditional curriculum. In addition, students from a local special school use the school's specialist facilities and some Ursuline students benefit from a life skills course provided at the special school.

The school's specialist arts college status has strengthened provision in music, dance and drama. For example, in a Year 8 lesson in the new music technology room, students were using computers linked to keyboards to compose their own counter-melodies on the theme of 'Frere Jacques'. The technology meant that students were not restricted to instruments they could play themselves, and could therefore experiment with a variety of musical sounds.

Students are prepared well for their future working lives. They are learning work-related skills through the school's arts specialism as they aspire to professional standards of performance and technical presentation. Work-related learning opportunities are increasingly included in other subjects. Students learn about enterprise on days when normal lessons are replaced by special programmes. All students now take a GCSE short course in information and communication technology (ICT), though initial results have been disappointing. The school has recognised that students need more lesson time to meet the coursework and examination requirements, and the course is being modified to start in Year 9.

In summary, the school has improved in many respects since its last inspection three years ago. This has been due to the clear direction set by the senior managers, based on good self-evaluation that involves governors, staff, students and parents. Governors have effective

ways of informing themselves about the school's performance and hold the school to account well. Arrangements for safeguarding students and making safe appointments are robust. Leaders set challenging targets in each subject and for each student, giving a high priority to English, mathematics, science and modern foreign languages as well as the specialist subjects, resulting in a clear trend of improvement. Management capacity has been expanded through professional development and strategic appointments, improving the leadership of science, the arts specialism and the developing global-perspective. The school has demonstrated a good capacity for improvement and, despite the difficulties presented by its cramped accommodation and sloping site, it provides good value for money.

## **Effectiveness of the sixth form**

### **Grade: 2**

Sixth form students reach above average standards and achieve well because of the good teaching. The specialist subjects are popular and contribute well to the students' cultural experience. On average, A-level results are better than those achieved by students of similar ability elsewhere. However, there was some unevenness across subjects last year. Students achieved particularly well in English, music, performing arts, philosophy, photography and PE, but results in a few subjects were relatively disappointing. For students currently in the sixth form, there is less variability across subjects and a significant improvement in take-up of mathematics and the sciences. The sixth form recruits a small number of students for intermediate-level courses, catering for the minority who prefer to remain in school; most who study at this level do so at local colleges. The sixth form curriculum therefore caters well for students' needs.

Students' personal development continues to be outstanding in the sixth form. All sixth formers have the opportunity to visit a mosque, a Hindu temple and a Sikh gurdwara and also have had a speaker from a synagogue to help their understanding of other faiths. They play significant roles in the school, for example as prefects, in supporting younger girls with their reading and in providing strong role models for other students. The school has well-developed structures to involve sixth formers in contributing to the school and wider community. However, some students feel that a more flexible approach would allow them to show greater personal initiative and leadership.

The sixth form is well led and managed, based on good monitoring and evaluation. Students receive very good academic guidance and pastoral care, and satisfactory support in their applications for higher education. Year 13 students feel that earlier and more comprehensive guidance would ensure that all students know what to expect, and that this would particularly help those whose families have limited personal experience of higher education and the application process. The school agrees and is already planning changes.

## **What the school should do to improve further**

- Make better use of assessment information in order to ensure that: lessons are consistently well planned to meet the differing needs of the full range of students; students are consistently given useful feedback that guides them on how to improve their work; leaders can evaluate how well students are progressing in comparison to similar students in other schools.
- Raise standards in ICT at Key Stage 4.
- Improve the quality of guidance for sixth formers who intend to continue their studies in higher education.

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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	<b>School Overall</b>	<b>16-19</b>
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**Overall effectiveness**

<b>How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?</b>	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**

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

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<sup>1</sup>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.



## Personal development and well-being

<b>How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?</b>	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	2	
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	2	

## The quality of provision

<b>How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?</b>	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

## Leadership and management

<b>How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?</b>	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 eliminated	2	
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	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	

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

26 March 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Brentwood Ursuline Convent High School, CM14 4EX

Thank you for welcoming us to your school and helping us with the recent inspection. We were impressed by the confident way you spoke with us.

We judged that your school gives you a good overall education. The curriculum meets your needs well. The quality of teaching and learning is good, and you receive good academic guidance and pastoral care. As a consequence, you achieve well. Academic standards are now very high because you make better progress than similar students in other schools. Your personal development and well-being are outstanding. Your attendance and behaviour are outstanding and your contribution to the community is exceptional. You understand the need to behave safely in a building which rivals Hogwarts School in the byzantine complexity of its staircases. You feel very safe and gain good enjoyment from school and you are prepared well for your future working lives.

Miss Squirrell and her senior team have a very clear vision for your all-round education and your school's development. The traditional Catholic ethos has been renewed and strengthened as your school forges stronger links with the wider community. All sixth formers have the opportunity to visit a mosque, a temple and a gurdwara to help their understanding of other faiths. Specialist arts college status contributes strongly to your school's impact in the community and has played a major role in improving provision.

You told us about your school's many strengths. However, you are concerned that marking is inconsistent so that it is not always clear what you need to do to improve your work. Sixth formers would like more freedom to show personal initiative and leadership. They also feel that better guidance is needed for higher education and the application process. We think that your views are listened to but it is not always clear to you how they are acted upon. For example, your school realises that you need more lesson time in ICT so this course is being started in Year 9.

Miss Squirrell agreed with our suggested improvements, which are to: raise standards in ICT in Key Stage 4; improve the quality of guidance for higher education; and to make better use of assessment information in planning and guiding your progress.

I wish you all the best for the future.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Abbott

Her Majesty's Inspector