

Columbus School and College

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	135768
Local Authority	Essex
Inspection number	341697
Inspection dates	24–25 February 2010
Reporting inspector	Judith Charlesworth

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

Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	3–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	215
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	50
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Bill Hallam
Headteacher	Malcolm Reeve
Date of previous school inspection	24 February 2010
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by three Additional Inspectors. They spent about half their time looking at learning in 14 lessons, led by some of the school's 38 teachers and 94 teaching assistants, and spent additional time looking at records of learning.

Meetings were held with parents and carers, pupils, governors, therapists and staff. The inspectors observed the school's work, and looked at various documents including the school's safeguarding policies and procedures, analyses of progress, systems for tracking and improving teaching and learning and other school documents. Thirty nine parents' and carers' questionnaires together with comments and supporting letters were read, and the analysis of staff and pupil questionnaires evaluated.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at the following:

- the effectiveness of provision for helping pupils to adopt healthy lifestyles, prepare for their future well-being and improve their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development
- the effectiveness of the management of teaching and learning and the school's duty to promote community cohesion
- how the needs of the higher attaining pupils and those with autistic spectrum disorders and profound and multiple learning difficulties are met
- the work of the safeguarding team.

Information about the school

Columbus is a larger than average special school that was formed in January 2009 from two existing special schools. These had been working together as a federation for a few years prior to the amalgamation. The school is on two sites situated about two miles from one another. College Campus provides for most of the 14-19 year olds, and School Campus for the younger pupils. A new building is to be provided for College Campus under the Building Schools for the Future initiative. This will be co-located with a secondary school opposite the Columbus School Campus which will also be extensively re-developed. This work is due to commence in June 2010.

Columbus school provides mainly for pupils with severe learning difficulties, profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) and autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). Some older pupils have moderate learning difficulties. Small numbers of pupils have other complex needs, such as multi-sensory impairment and communication difficulties. All pupils have statements of special educational needs, or if very young, are undergoing assessment to this end. There are nine children in the Early Years Foundation Stage and 50 in the sixth form. The great majority of pupils are of White British origin with very small numbers of pupils from ten other heritages. There are twice as many boys as girls at Columbus, which is typical for schools of this type.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?**1****The school's capacity for sustained improvement****1**

Main findings

Columbus is an outstanding school that puts pupils' learning and well-being at the heart of its work. This is set in the context of a highly positive, inclusive culture which reflects the school's community code 'show respect, take responsibility, consider others and believe in yourself'. All systems and practices are robust and aimed at assuring the highest quality. Consequently, pupils' outcomes are outstanding. They make excellent progress in their learning and personal development from the nursery through to the sixth form. The school pays great attention to pupils' transition from one key stage to the next in order to help them mature and become well prepared for adulthood. The curriculum, teaching, and support, care and guidance are all appropriately adapted to suit the differing age groups. High quality specialist provision is made for pupils with specific difficulties such as ASD and PMLD. Behaviour is outstanding and the pupils develop into confident, self-assured young adults, many with a high degree of independence. They make a great contribution to the local and wider communities, and help the school to 'fly the flag' for the rights of people with disabilities.

The outstanding quality of teaching is assured by a rigorous system of observation, support and guidance which allows staff to understand in detail what they need to do to improve their practice. Learning is rigorously monitored and any underachievement thoroughly investigated. Challenging targets are set for pupils using the school's outstanding, unique and well-established system designed around the seven key skills that support the development of life-long learning (Key Skills Index). This system is also used to assess and track pupils' progress. The curriculum, individual plans for pupils and lessons are designed to help pupils to work towards achieving them. Twice-yearly assessments are also made in five core subjects against national benchmarks. These are externally moderated and allow the school to compare pupils' performance with similar groups nationally and to set whole-school targets. The data shows that almost all pupils in any age group, subject or other group, such as ethnic heritage, make at least expected progress and often better. The school has not yet finalised a methodology to analyse the data produced by the Key Skills assessments in the same flexible way. However, individuals' records show that they make outstanding progress in establishing the key skills appropriate to their needs.

The school's success is a result of outstanding leadership and management that are focused on improving pupils' learning and well-being. This is reflected in the school's management structure, operational systems and the cohesive motivated staff team. An outstanding and innovative safeguarding team, for example, carries out far more than statutory requirements to a very high standard. There is a clear, corporate ambition for the pupils and their right to equal opportunities for their futures. The school has many

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links and mutually beneficial partnerships in the local, national and global communities. These support pupils' education and well-being and community cohesion very effectively. With the confidence of parents, carers and staff, the senior leaders and governors have worked hard and successfully to bring the school through a successful federation, the amalgamation and preparation for the new build. However, the intensity of this and other ongoing developments have resulted in a lapse in the rigour with which the governors evaluate the impact of some more routine areas of the school's work. School improvement is underpinned by frequent and rigorous self-evaluation of performance. Improvement planning is thoughtful and strategic, often aiming for provision years into the future. The school's track record to date and its many excellent features demonstrate that it has outstanding capacity for further improvement.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- The school should develop its analysis of the Key Skills Index data to provide a clear overview of the progress made by individuals and groups over time.
- The governors should ensure that the regular policy reviews include an evaluation of the impact of the associated practice on the school's work.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils**1**

Pupils' attainment on entry to the school varies very widely, but it is always below that expected for their age and usually very low due to their complex needs. Despite outstanding progress, pupils' attainment, understandably, remains low. Learning in lessons is outstanding. This is evident in the pupils' excellent behaviour, enjoyment, positive attitudes and immediate evidence of new learning. For example, younger pupils anticipate and very much enjoy activities such as the use of the interactive white board to track moving objects. Pupils with challenging behaviour are usually calm and attentive because of outstanding management. Higher attaining pupils make rapid gains in knowledge and understanding, for example on one occasion, listening with great enjoyment while they gave humorous similes about one another in an English lesson. Pupils say they feel safe in school. Higher attaining pupils are not afraid to ask staff for help if they have concerns. They have a good understanding of what constitutes safe behaviour, for example in relation to bullying and road safety. More vulnerable pupils show their trust in staff by their positive relationships. The pupils enjoy the school's provision to help them stay healthy. They participate in curricular and extra-curricular sporting activities, are enthusiastic about adventurous activities such as 'the snow experience' and make healthy food choices. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. The school's community code underpins the development of their self-confidence and self-esteem and pupils are respectful and take responsibility for their own actions. They understand the difference between right and wrong and the need to look after each other and those less fortunate than themselves. The youngest pupils learn not to interfere with each other's learning in the classroom, while older pupils genuinely care for one another, often demonstrated through gestures of

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spontaneous support and consideration. Pupils' cultural development is outstanding. The school does much to teach them about different cultures and faiths, and they benefit from many global links, such as writing to pen pals all over the world and participating in China week activities with Chinese visitors.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	1
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment ¹	*
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	1
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	1
The extent to which pupils feel safe	1
Pupils' behaviour	1
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	1
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attendance ¹	2
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1

How effective is the provision?

The provision has many outstanding attributes. Some significant features that contribute to the high quality teaching are: the outstanding contribution of teaching assistants in support of pupils' learning and behaviour; very well planned lessons designed to further individuals' subject and key skills; assiduous ongoing assessment of pupils' learning and the use made of the information in teachers' planning; the use of well made resources and new technology to support both teaching and learning, and excellent behaviour management. These make a strong contribution to pupils' positive attitudes and

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low.

* In some special schools inspectors do not make a judgement about attainment in relation to expectations of the pupils' age.

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motivation to learn and the calm productive classrooms.

From the nursery to the sixth form, the curriculum is very well planned to meet statutory requirements and expectations for each age group, and to provide fresh age-appropriate experiences for the pupils. The school has a constant focus on ensuring 'rites of passage' as pupils progress through the school. This is strongly reinforced by the curriculum which, for example, provides increasingly community-based learning as pupils mature. Hallow'een celebrations were held in school time for the younger pupils and in the evening for older pupils. Many opportunities are given for pupils to be included in activities with their mainstream partners. These range from support from local school pupils on the Columbus site, to individuals' inclusion in mainstream classes to follow GCSE courses.

Outstanding consideration for the well-being of each pupil underpins the provision. The school has clear ideas about how to improve its good provision for pupils' healthy lifestyles and makes outstanding provision for keeping pupils safe. Child protection is robust and the safeguarding team has a very wide remit. It additionally addresses the learning, personal development and well-being of different groups of pupils and well-written, helpful 'Unified Plans' address each pupil's current and future needs. Outstanding partnerships with external agencies support pupils and parents and carers. For example, the school has recently begun to jointly commission therapy services with the local health authority which has improved the provision. Extended provision means that pupils can attend after-school, weekend and holiday clubs almost all year round. Families are very well supported, for example by the family link workers and the efforts of school staff in times of need. Many parents and carers commented appreciatively about the support given by the school.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	1
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	1
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	1
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

How effective are leadership and management?

Governors and staff at all levels have high ambitions for the pupils. They relentlessly seek to improve the provision so that pupils have the best possible outcomes while at school and in their adult lives. A focus on continuous professional development empowers staff and spreads expertise, for example enabling support staff to take the lead in aspects such as communication teaching, and as therapy assistants and family link workers. It allows the school to identify and grow its own leaders and plan strategically for succession so pupils are not disadvantaged when individual staff

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members leave. The management and evaluation of teaching and learning are exceptionally rigorous. Extensive tracking data show clearly that both aspects improve as a result of this approach. Governance is good and excellent in many respects. Examples include their involvement in the development of the new school and prospective new build, and the appropriate, strategic use of resources for the maximum benefit of pupils. Improvement planning is strategic, clearly outlined and linked closely with the national children's agenda outcomes.

The school is influential in the local, national and international communities. For example, its Key Skills Index is published and freely available, and it is developing a close partnership with Chong An special school in Wuxi, China. The headteacher has recently conducted training for teachers from special schools in Wuxi and a delegation from Wuxi have paid a reciprocal visit to Columbus. Information and communication technology is used very well to underpin the school's systems and to maintain an eco-friendly, sustainable environment. Financial resources are very well used and managed by competent administrative staff, and the school offers outstanding value for money.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	1
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	1
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	2
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	1
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	1
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	1
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	1

Early Years Foundation Stage

The provision gives children an excellent start to school and this is reflected in their outstanding outcomes. High quality care, teaching, therapy and learning support combine to meet each child's unique needs very effectively. The children enjoy school and benefit greatly from the stimulating experience and the staff's cherishing approach.

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Relationships are outstanding. Close, supportive partnerships are established with parents and carers, and these are continued right through the school. Outstanding leadership and management ensure that practice follows the high quality guidance, policies and procedures of the main school, while also fully incorporating the statutory learning, development and welfare requirements for the age group. Stringent arrangements are in place to assure that children are safeguarded at all times. The curriculum takes its educational content from the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum, adapted skilfully to suit the children's needs. This provides the context for teaching the important key skills that each child needs in order to make progress in their learning and development. Very good use is made of the school's resources and throughout the day, many opportunities are given for the children to develop their autonomy as far as possible. Assessment is based on observation and numerous professional assessments, in keeping with the school's practice. These underpin detailed records which show outstanding progress in the areas of prime importance, such as personal development and communication, with the majority of children exceeding the targets set for them. The children leave the Early Years Foundation Stage very well prepared for the next stage in their educational journey.

These are the grades for the Early Years Foundation Stage

Overall effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage	1
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage	1
The quality of provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage	1
The effectiveness of leadership and management of the Early Years Foundation Stage	1

Sixth form

The sixth form provides an outstanding, vibrant, inclusive adult environment for this last stage of education at Columbus. Outstanding leadership and management assure the high quality teaching, support, care and guidance. Motivated and experienced practitioners continually strive to improve the provision, for example by securing additional therapy time and increasing community partnerships. The students' behaviour is outstanding, and they develop into polite, confident, caring young people, keen to meet visitors and explain how much they enjoy school. For example, students speak freely about their aspirations for the future and had a strong voice in the development of the plans for their new school. The curriculum emphasises individuals' independence and personal development. It aims to provide as many real life experiences as possible and most of the education takes place in the community. There is a strong emphasis on physical activity and helping students make safe and healthy choices. The continued use of the Key Skills Index for target setting supports students' outstanding progress in academic skills and personal development. Students' abilities are very diverse and they

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have personalised timetables and follow courses and subjects that suit their needs. Regular reviews of progress ensure that work and targets are appropriate and challenging. New Foundation Tier courses are currently being developed in collaboration with the local colleges which will shortly give the students improved options for accreditation. Work related learning forms an important part of the students' education, and the work experience programme is well established and developing rapidly. Students are very well prepared for their future well-being and the next stage in their lives, and where able to, are keen to say so.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	1
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	1
The quality of provision in the sixth form	1
Leadership and management of the sixth form	1

Views of parents and carers

About one fifth of the parents and carers responded to the inspection questionnaire. A very small number had concerns about certain aspects of the school's work, but the great majority were very positive. Many parents and carers made additional positive comments about the school on the questionnaires, in letters and directly to inspectors. Almost all questionnaires showed that parents and carers are happy with their children's experience at the school. Typical comments received include 'the school seems to have an endless commitment to every child' and 'my son has received the highest rate of care and education available to him'. The inspection findings support the parents' and carers' positive comments.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Columbus School and College to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school. The inspection team received 39 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 215 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	28	72	10	26	0	0	1	3
The school keeps my child safe	31	79	5	13	2	5	0	0
The school informs me about my child's progress	25	64	13	33	1	3	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	20	51	16	41	2	5	1	3
The teaching is good at this school	23	59	13	33	0	0	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	23	59	13	33	3	8	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	15	38	23	59	0	0	0	0
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	14	36	20	51	2	5	1	3
The school meets my child's particular needs	24	62	13	33	1	3	0	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	19	49	18	46	2	5	0	0
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	22	58	14	37	1	3	1	3
The school is led and managed effectively	23	59	14	36	0	0	1	3
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	23	59	14	36	1	3	0	0

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools inspected between September 2007 and July 2008

	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
Type of school	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	39	58	3	0
Primary schools	13	50	33	4
Secondary schools	17	40	34	9
Sixth forms	18	43	37	2
Special schools	26	54	18	2
Pupil referral units	7	55	30	7
All schools	15	49	32	5

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above were reported in The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2007/08.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100. Secondary school figures include those that have sixth forms, and sixth form figures include only the data specifically for sixth form inspection judgements.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement.■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils.■ The quality of teaching.■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupil's needs, including where relevant, through partnerships.■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



26 February 2010

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Columbus School and College, Chelmsford, CM1 4BX

Thank you for making us so welcome when we visited your school earlier this week. We very much enjoyed talking to you and visiting some of your lessons. We were very impressed with what we saw and I am pleased to tell you that you go to an outstanding school. Your questionnaires and conversations tell us that you know that already, and almost all of your parents and carers agree too.

These are the things that are particularly good about your school:

- you learn really well and make outstanding progress throughout the school
- your personal development is excellent
- you enjoy school and behave and concentrate very well in lessons
- you are very kind to one another
- the staff care very well for you and do everything they can to keep you safe
- teaching is really good, and you get excellent support from all the staff
- the staff give you lots of interesting things to do and we particularly like the way this changes as you get older
- the therapists help you a great deal
- the school is very well led and managed
- all the staff are keen to make the school even better than it already is.

I have asked the school to do two things to improve. These are to analyse your progress in the Key Skills more closely and to check regularly on how well the school's policies are working in practice.

I wish you all the best for your future lives.

Yours sincerely

Judith Charlesworth

Lead inspector

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