

# The Plume School and College

## Inspection report

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<b>Unique Reference Number</b>	115318
<b>Local Authority</b>	ESSEX LA
<b>Inspection number</b>	311912
<b>Inspection dates</b>	19–20 September 2007
<b>Reporting inspector</b>	Mark Phillips 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>	Foundation
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	11–18
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Number on roll</b>	
School	1471
6th form	347
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	The governing body
<b>Chair</b>	Mrs Joan Binder
<b>Headteacher</b>	Miss Sarah Dignasse
<b>Date of previous school inspection</b>	14 March 2005
<b>School address</b>	Fambridge Road Maldon Essex CM9 6AB
<b>Telephone number</b>	01621 854681
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<b>Age group</b>	11-18
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## Introduction

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

## Description of the school

The Plume School and College is a very large school, and is the only secondary school in the town of Maldon. It serves the town and its outlying villages, most students being from White British backgrounds and the great majority having English as their first language. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is below the national average; the social and economic background of students is above the national average, although fewer students come from homes where there is a tradition of higher education.

The Plume has been a specialist performing arts college since September 2003, with dance, drama, and music as lead subjects. The school holds both the Artsmark Gold and Sportsmark awards.

## Key for inspection grades

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

## Overall effectiveness of the school

### Grade: 2

Inspectors agree with the school's self-evaluation that the overall effectiveness of The Plume is good. As a parent wrote, echoing the views of many who responded to the inspectors' parental survey; 'my children have always been encouraged to make a positive contribution to school life and as a result of good teaching and guidance have become well-rounded young people with positive attitudes.'

The GCSE results of 2007 were the best in the school's history, building on good results at Key Stage 3. Work seen during this inspection shows that whilst standards are still broadly average overall, students are continuing to make good progress - particularly in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science, and the specialist arts subjects. Teaching is good overall. Students told inspectors that they particularly enjoy lessons in which they are involved actively - many of which are, not surprisingly, in the performing arts. There are a small number of lessons that are less active, and do not develop students' teamwork or independent learning as well.

The Plume is an important part of the Maldon local community. Adults contribute to the life of the school, not just by providing opportunities for students, but also by participating in activities themselves. In return, students play an active part in community projects, both in and out of school. There are particularly good links with primary schools. The school has developed an innovative programme where some teachers work in primary schools for part of their timetable, and this helps to ease students' transition when they move to The Plume.

Specialist status in the performing arts has given vibrancy to the life of the school. During the inspection, some of the very best teaching was observed in drama and dance lessons, and music is at the heart of school life through thriving exam groups, performances, and community work. Examination results in the visual arts are consistently good in both the school and the sixth form college. As importantly, arts subjects are important in raising levels of self-esteem, both for individual students and for the school as a whole.

Leadership and management are good, and this large split-site school operates well on a day-to-day basis. Students feel safe and well looked-after, their good personal development and well-being is underpinned by rigorous protection procedures, and they respond with good behaviour. Attendance is satisfactory. Parents are overwhelmingly supportive of the school's work, being particularly pleased with the range of opportunities and the strong leadership of the headteacher.

The school is proud of its successes but at the same time recognises that there is more to be achieved, particularly with furthering improvements in student progress, so that standards become consistently above average. Expectations have been raised, and more challenging targets are being set. As the school says in its self-evaluation, 'there is still potential to be unlocked.' The school's recent progress shows that there is good capacity for further improvement, and the school provides good value for money.

## Effectiveness of the sixth form

### Grade: 3

This inclusive sixth form provides a satisfactory education for its students, with particular strengths in the curriculum, and the personal development and well-being of students. The standards students attain are broadly average; compared with their starting points when they join the college from The Plume and other schools, this represents satisfactory achievement.

The best results are in Drama and in the visual arts subjects. Whilst the sixth form lessons seen during the inspection were all at least satisfactory, with outstanding examples in Drama and English, the results that students achieve show that the effectiveness of teaching, and particularly of learning, in meeting the needs of the full range of student abilities is satisfactory overall.

Students receive good care, guidance, and support. This helps ensure that they take courses that are suited to their needs and that the majority complete their courses. There is a well-structured careers programme and a growing proportion of students go on to higher education. Personal development is good; sixth form students provide good role models for younger pupils. They organise many charitable events that benefit the wider community. Students are very positive and say they enjoy their sixth form experience. Leadership and management are satisfactory. Day to day management is effective but there is insufficient use or understanding of assessment data to promote more consistently effective teaching and learning, leading to better student achievement.

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

- Continue improvements in student achievement by raising standards in the main school to be consistently above the national average, through improved grades at all levels.
- Ensure that all teaching promotes and develops students' independent learning skills, in class and through homework.
- Enable and empower all middle managers to make effective use of assessment information to challenge and promote further improvement, particularly in the sixth form.
- Review and develop the monitoring of teaching and learning in the sixth form, to raise the achievement of the increasing number of students choosing to study at the college.

## **Achievement and standards**

**Grade: 2**

**Grade for sixth form: 3**

The standards of students' work when they arrive at The Plume at the start of Year 7 are in line with national expectations. Following the 2006 GCSE results, the school acted swiftly to address underachievement by some groups of boys. Through active mentoring and support, the GCSE class of 2007 achieved results that were above national figures. There was strong performance in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science, where the school has a very inclusive entry policy. Achievement in Key Stage 3 is consistently good for boys and girls. Strategies that the school has used to raise the standard of boys' literacy are now having a beneficial impact on their progress in other subject areas. Detailed tracking of students currently in Year 11, results that they have already achieved and evidence observed in lessons show that all groups of students currently studying in the school, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, are making good progress in their work. However, there are no groups of students making very good progress at present, and standards are not yet consistently above average across the school.

The specialist performing arts subjects perform particularly well at GCSE, and students have opportunities to achieve additional qualifications such as the Arts Council's Arts Award.

## **Personal development and well-being**

**Grade: 2**

**Grade for sixth form: 2**

A significant reason for the success achieved by pupils in their personal development and well-being is the positive way that they engage with all aspects of school life, but in particular the personal education programme offered by the school. Most pupils show good attitudes to learning, behave well, and enjoy school. They communicate well with one another and with adults. With the support of their tutors and through opportunities such as the school council, they grow in their understanding of their rights and responsibilities. This in turn helps them to respond well and play an increasingly active role in school life and to become involved in the wider community. They also know what it means to live in a diverse society, with the Arts subjects playing a particularly effective role in broadening their cultural understanding.

Pupils feel safe and well supported in all aspects of their daily school lives. Most have a good understanding of healthy living and enjoy participating in sporting activities. Most make sensible lifestyle choices because of their raised awareness about the dangers of smoking, substance abuse and drugs. The good provision for numeracy and literacy, and the strong vocational programme helps students to face the realities of learning workplace skills or preparing themselves for further education courses or university. Attendance is satisfactory, although there are still too many occasions when parents take students out of school for holidays during term time.

## **Quality of provision**

### **Teaching and learning**

**Grade: 2**

**Grade for sixth form: 3**

The school has developed a consistent approach to planning lessons and this is having an increasingly positive impact on the quality of lessons. Many lessons begin with lively questioning that forces students to think and then proceed at a good pace. There is a high level of challenge in these lessons. Teachers use their subject expertise well to extend students' knowledge and understanding, ensuring that students are actively involved and share ideas. This promotes independence and encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning. There are a small number of lessons where students' interest and productivity wane because learning objectives are not clear and learning activities do not take account of students' different needs. In these lessons, teachers provide too much information or instruction and do not provide students with enough opportunities to develop their independent learning skills, either in class or through homework.

Throughout the school, effective use is made of teaching assistants to support the learning of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. There are rigorous procedures for assessing and recording students' attainment. The effective use of this information is contributing to the good progress that they are now making.

## **Curriculum and other activities**

**Grade: 2**

**Grade for sixth form: 2**

The curriculum is well suited to the needs and aspirations of students of all abilities. A comprehensive mix of academic and vocational courses is a particular strength of Key Stage 4. This provision is making a significant contribution to students' achievement and enjoyment, helping to promote positive attitudes to school in students less suited to the more traditional options. For all students, the curriculum is enhanced considerably by the school's specialist college status, and there is good take-up for the wide variety of performing arts courses. In Key Stage 3, the school has introduced a skills and application based information and communication technology (ICT) programme to support project planning and independent learning in other subjects. However, the use of ICT skills within and across subject areas is recognised by the school as an area for further development. All statutory requirements are met, including a good citizenship programme, although religious education for Key Stage 4 students following a vocational pathway is not taught in as much detail as it is for other students.

There is a wide range of enrichment opportunities. Students of all abilities take advantage of the many performing arts groups, sporting activities, clubs, and residential visits and these opportunities are greatly appreciated by students and their parents.

## **Care, guidance and support**

**Grade: 2**

**Grade for sixth form: 2**

The school's extensive system to support students' welfare succeeds through the effective use of committed tutors and mentors. There is good attention to all aspects of health and safety across the school's split site. There are robust procedures in place for safeguarding pupils. Staff training in child protection procedures is updated regularly. Vulnerable students and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are identified, and they are given appropriate support.

There is good cooperation and liaison with a wide range of other agencies, professionals, and local partnerships that help to give effective support to students and families. There are effective procedures in place to monitor and encourage the attendance of students, although the school is still working to build effective arrangements with the education welfare service to help improve attendance. Behaviour management and reward systems are effective in the classroom as well as in influencing behaviour around the school. Exclusions are used effectively to reduce unacceptable behaviour and are seen by parents and students as being fair. The school student performance tracking system and data analysis promotes good learning and progress.

## **Leadership and management**

**Grade: 2**

**Grade for sixth form: 3**

The effective leadership of the headteacher and her deputies, with strong support from other members of the senior leadership team, is taking the school through a period of good improvement. There is a strong commitment to equality and inclusion. Ongoing reviews of

performance and systematic evaluation provide an accurate view of the school's effectiveness. These have underpinned the improvement seen in the school's performance and, in particular, the improvement in GCSE examination results in 2007. The overall quality of middle management is good, with examples of particularly effective management in some areas. However, not all middle managers make the best use of assessment information to bring about improvements in student learning, especially in the sixth form. The morale of staff is noticeably positive and this contributes well to the strong collaborative atmosphere that benefits students' learning and well-being. Well-planned professional development activities are having a positive impact on teaching and learning.

Governors are strong contributors to the school's work and success. They are well organised and they have a good grasp of the school's strengths and areas for development. They hold the school to account well and achieve a very good balance of challenge and support. Financial management is good and resources are managed well.

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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?	2	3
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?	2	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	3

### Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2	3
The standards <sup>1</sup> reached by learners	3	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	2	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2	

### The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	2	3
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

<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.

## Annex A

**Leadership and management**

<b>How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?</b>	2	3
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	3
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

21 September 2007

Dear Students,

Inspection of The Plume School and College, Maldon, Essex, CM9 6AB

I am writing to thank you all very much for the part that you played in the recent inspection of your school. My colleagues and I enjoyed meeting you very much, and we're particularly grateful to those of you who gave up your time to meet with us and give us your views about what it is like to be a student at The Plume.

You told us, as did your parents and your teachers, that The Plume is a good school to work and learn in. We agree. The positive behaviour that we saw during our visit, the improvements in test examination results that you have earned last year, and your work in class, showed us that you are progressing well. You enjoy the opportunities that the school gives you whether it is through the varied courses that you can take or the many extra-curricular activities on offer, particularly in the performing arts.

The school believes that even more can be achieved over the coming years, and again we agree. Miss Dignasse and I have identified three things for you all to work towards.

- Improve your test and exam grades further so that they are firmly above the national average in all of your subjects and courses.
- Your teachers should give you even more opportunities to work independently in all of your lessons, including setting you more homework that involves independent research and study. Of course, this will require you to be self-disciplined, develop your study skills, and spend good time on your homework too.
- Heads of subject should have even greater expectation and set even more challenge about what you and your teachers can achieve.

It is clear that you and your parents are supportive of your school, and you know that the school's present and future success depends on strong teamwork between yourselves, your parents, and your teachers. Well done for what you have achieved so far, and good luck with your future studies and plans.

Yours sincerely

Mark Phillips

Her Majesty's Inspector