

Bury St Edmunds County Upper School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	124787
Local Authority	SUFFOLK LA
Inspection number	315059
Inspection dates	6-7 February 2008
Reporting inspector	John Mitcheson HMI

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	13-18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	934
Sixth Form	193
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Stephen Boor
Headteacher	Mrs Vicky Neale
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	Beetons Way Bury St Edmunds Suffolk IP32 6RF
Telephone number	01284754857
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Introduction

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

Description of the school

Bury St Edmunds County Upper school is an average sized 13-18 comprehensive school. The majority of students are White British; very few are from minority ethnic backgrounds. The proportion of students with learning difficulties and disabilities is above what is found nationally, although a smaller than average proportion has a statement of special educational need. The school serves an area of Bury St Edmunds where, in parts, the level of disadvantage is lower than what is found nationally. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is below average. Attainment on entry to the school in Year 9 is broadly average although the school can demonstrate that over half of all students arrive with below average reading skills. The school has been a specialist technology college since 1997. From September 2007, it has operated as a specialist science college. It has Investors in People, International Schools, Artsmark Gold and Healthy Schools awards.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

The parental comment that 'County Upper School has a strong, caring ethos built upon every child being known and valued', encapsulates what makes this an outstanding school. It provides an excellent level of pastoral care and support for every individual student so they feel safe, valued and very much part of school life. Students behave well and engage fully in their studies. An outstanding enrichment programme adds considerably to their personal development and well-being. The school is rightly proud of its caring, inclusive ethos. Students speak favourably of the school and parents' overwhelming support is summed up by a parent who comments that, 'this is an absolutely first rate school'.

Teachers focus on establishing the right conditions for learning and ensure that students acquire a clear understanding of what is expected of them. The positive attitudes, routines and good behaviour established in Year 9 allow students to thrive in Years 10 and 11 and attain standards that are consistently above the national average. A significantly higher than average proportion of students attains five or more good GCSE grades including English and mathematics. The school does exceptionally well in ensuring that almost every student achieves five or more GCSE passes and everyone leaves Year 11 with at least one qualification.

Achievement is outstanding in English and mathematics in Key Stage 4. Overall achievement is good, mainly because the quality of teaching and learning across all subjects is good rather than exemplary. Lessons observed by inspectors were mostly satisfactory or good and, on occasions, outstanding. However, there are some inconsistencies in teachers' planning and marking of students' work. Lesson observations by senior managers are improving the quality of teaching and learning but this is not done systematically to iron out all of these inconsistencies. The school's monitoring of students' progress is highly effective. For example, two thirds of last year's Year 11 students were boys, many of whom displayed significant shortfalls in reading. Senior leaders provided a wide range of intensive, personalised support for them in order to maximise their achievement. Overall results improved and 61% of boys attained five or more A* to C grades.

Students' personal development and well-being, including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural education, are outstanding. When asked why attendance is consistently higher than average students said, 'because we like being here'. They have a very good understanding of how to stay fit and healthy. Many students represent the school in sport, drama productions, music and public speaking; some adopt responsibility as team captains and school councillors. Students' charitable work and the opportunities they have to meet with people from a wide range of different cultures are exceptional.

An outstanding curriculum meets the needs and aspirations of students. All students study for a qualification in information and communication technology (ICT), providing them with the skills needed to secure their future economic well-being. Links with the local college allows students to pursue vocational interests. An outstanding programme of enrichment including sport, music, drama, off-site visits and visiting speakers complements the curriculum. There are established links with schools in other countries and students have the opportunity to study German, French, Spanish and Japanese, together with Italian in the sixth form.

Care, guidance and support for students are outstanding. All arrangements for safeguarding students are in place and students say they know who to talk to if they have concerns. They feel that teachers treat them as individuals and go out of their way to help them to resolve any personal or academic issues that arise. A weekly newsletter, a monthly publication, 'The Accolade' to celebrate success, and a termly magazine, coupled with a regularly updated website, are exemplary. These make an exceptional contribution to keeping parents informed.

Leadership and management of the school are outstanding. The headteacher has established a calm and productive climate for learning and set high expectations for staff and students alike. She sets a very clear direction for the school, ensuring that teachers remain focused on raising standards and achievement and students receive outstanding personal care. Senior and middle managers use well-established assessment procedures to monitor student progress and improve achievement. Their drive to make further improvements is shown in the school's successful and increasing specialist college activities. Governors play a full strategic role in guiding and supporting the school's work. Good progress has been made since the previous inspection. There is outstanding capacity to secure further improvements. Resources are well managed and the school provides excellent value for money.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 1

The effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form are outstanding. The school provides students with a very positive learning environment, including study areas, good access to ICT and a cafeteria for socialising. It works effectively with a partner school to increase the range of courses it can offer. The highly motivated students are set realistic but challenging targets that help them to achieve standards that are well above the national average. Notably, in 2007, 56% of all A-level grades were A or B and 30% were A. The students' personal development and well-being are outstanding. They enjoy their education and appreciate the excellent range of enrichment activities available to them. They make a significant contribution to the school and wider community by leading other students in, for example, charitable projects. One student said, 'The fact that we are not separate from the rest of the school and fully involved in all the school's activities makes the sixth form particularly enjoyable'. Leadership and management are outstanding. Students speak highly of the excellent support and guidance they receive both before entering and while in the sixth form. This guidance, together with a curriculum that matches their needs and aspirations, helps to ensure that virtually all students complete their courses of study. An exceptionally high proportion of students go onto university at the end of Year 13.

What the school should do to improve further

Make lesson monitoring and evaluation more systematic to eradicate the remaining inconsistencies in teaching and learning and raise standards even further.

Achievement and standards

In the short time available in Year 9, students make satisfactory progress and attain average standards. Results fell slightly in 2007 to below average in English, but remained broadly average in mathematics and above average in science and ICT. In Key Stage 4 the majority of students, including those with learning difficulties and disabilities, make good and in some subjects, outstanding progress. It is exceptional in English and mathematics. Overall standards are above the national average and have been for the past three years. In 2007, over two-thirds of students attained five or more A* to C grades and more than half achieved at least five grade C's including English and mathematics, exceeding the school's targets. Significantly, over 21% of all grades achieved by students were A* or A. Virtually all students attained five or more GCSE passes. Specialist college targets were met in design and technology, mathematics and science. Girls and boys attain above average standards but similar to the national trend, girls outperform boys. The work done to improve the performance of boys in last year's GCSE examinations shows that the school is not complacent about this and is actively seeking ways to maximise achievement. The school's current assessment data shows that progress is good and the majority of boys and girls are on track to meet the challenging targets set for them this year.

Personal development and well-being

Participation in a rich range of sporting activities, healthy eating at lunchtimes and high quality advice on personal health ensures that students lead healthy lifestyles. Students thoroughly enjoy school, attend regularly and feel safe. Almost every student acquires the literacy, numeracy and ICT skills needed to secure their future economic well-being. Behaviour is good; it is rare for lessons to be disturbed and movement around the school and at lunchtime is orderly. Students say that bullying is not an issue and that there is a very effective support if they are ever worried or upset. The youngest students say that when they first join the school the older ones may look 'a bit scary' but that it soon becomes obvious how well mannered and polite they are, which helps them to settle into their new school quickly.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Teachers know their students well. Relations between students and staff are very good. They use assessment data very effectively to track the progress of all students against the challenging minimum target grades set for them. This contributes directly to the above average standards achieved by the end of Key Stage 4. Teachers display good subject knowledge and make good use of the time and resources including ICT to enhance learning. In the most effective lessons, more-able students are challenged by extension activities and teachers' incisive questioning. Students know what is expected of them, and they respond with confidence and enthusiasm. Students' work is regularly marked, often with constructive comments that will help students to improve their work, but this varies across subjects. A few teachers accept a low standard of presentation and at times, students' work is left unfinished. Parents comment favourably about the support provided for students who have a statement of special educational need.

Curriculum and other activities

All statutory requirements are met and are enhanced by an outstanding enrichment programme of sport, music, and drama in which the vast majority of students participate. Students in Year 9 benefit from two hours of physical education, additional drama and more able students study German. In Key Stage 4, students access a wide range of GCSE qualifications, including three sciences. A number of less able students follow a modified programme of study that combines mathematics and English in school with vocational learning at a nearby college. The school is actively engaged with other local providers to develop vocational learning for 14 to 19 year-olds. Citizenship is included in the personal, social and health education programme and is supported by extensive opportunities for involvement in the community. Careers education, a two-week work experience and growing links with the local business community ensures that students are suitably prepared for their future working lives.

Care, guidance and support

The needs of every individual student are fully met and *very few* students are excluded from school. The school prides itself in meeting the needs of a small but increasing number of looked-after children. Safeguarding arrangements are in place and students know who to talk to if they have concerns. Advice when selecting GCSE options at the end of Year 9 is good. The school's detailed procedures to monitor attendance contribute directly to lower than average absence rates. Students appreciate that teachers tell them how well they are doing and how to attain a higher standard of work. They are engaged in evaluating their own progress and discussing this with staff. Students who need extra help with their learning, or those who are particularly gifted, get the right support to ensure they achieve well.

Leadership and management

The headteacher, with the support of senior teachers and governors demonstrates outstanding leadership. She has acted decisively to improve the quality of provision and is constantly seeking further improvement. Her effective partnership working with the local authority has led to enhanced facilities including a new library and performing arts centre, which opened this year. She has been instrumental in forging international links with schools in Japan and in Germany. Parents really appreciate that she knows each individual student by name. There is no complacency amongst staff or students. Self-evaluation is largely accurate and informs development planning, but views on the quality of teaching and learning are a little too generous. Detailed analyses of examination performance means senior staff have a thorough understanding of the school's strengths and areas where improvement is needed. Training to develop the skills of middle managers has been effective, but there is some variability in the monitoring of lessons. Links with other schools, colleges, businesses and the community are excellent.