

Maidstone Grammar School for Girls

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	118836
Local Authority	Kent
Inspection number	326906
Inspection dates	19–20 May 2009
Reporting inspector	Helen Hutchings

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

Type of school	Grammar (selective)
School category	Voluntary controlled
Age range of students	11–18
Gender of students	Girls
Number on roll	
School (total)	1172
Sixth form	304
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Molly Tipples
Headteacher	Mrs Mary Smith
Date of previous school inspection	31 January–1 February 2006
School address	Buckland Road Maidstone Kent ME16 0SF
Telephone number	01622 752103
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Age group	11–18
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by five additional inspectors.

Description of the school

For entry to this large school, girls are selected on the basis of a local authority ability test. A few boys join the sixth form. Most students are from a White British background but an increasing proportion come from a wide range of minority ethnic heritages. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is below average. Relatively few have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The school holds specialist status for science and the Investors in People, Healthy School and Quality in Study Support awards.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

Maidstone Grammar School for Girls is an outstanding school. Students are very well prepared for further study; not only are their academic standards high, but they also develop as confident articulate individuals ready to take full advantage of opportunities as they arise. Most parents are positive about all aspects of the school, summed up in comments such as, 'An excellent school', 'great pastoral support', 'fantastic opportunities', 'great start to life', 'friendly environment', 'a fun school to be a part of'. Sixth form students describe it as 'one big happy family' in which they feel able to express their views and beliefs without fear of intolerance.

Students thoroughly enjoy new learning and challenges, and their achievement is outstanding. Good quality teaching and an excellent curriculum foster high expectations and develop students' appreciation of a high level of academic challenge. Some teaching is outstanding, but there is some inconsistency across the school; not all lessons are sufficiently demanding for some groups of students, and not all teachers regularly give students clear guidance about how their work could be improved. Individual talent is fostered very well. For example, students enjoy success in an extremely wide range of extra-curricular activities which include many cultural, sporting and musical opportunities. Participation is high and these activities do much to encourage teamwork. Another aspect of students' outstanding personal development can be seen in the pride they also take in non-academic achievement.

At all times, students demonstrate respect for one another, for example in appreciating the performance of others in House Arts Week or seeing how others respond to issues such as the 'Big Questions' in Year 7. High quality care and guidance result in a strongly inclusive and caring atmosphere in the school, a place where students feel safe and valued, and contribute to their enjoyment of school. Students make a very strong contribution to the school and outside community, raising money for charities and through activities undertaken as part of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme.

Since taking up her post, the headteacher has brought stability to the school, and the strength of the leadership team is seen in the proactive way it has brought the school very successfully through a period of significant change. Staff morale is high and teamwork is strong, and staff work very effectively to minimise the impact of accommodation which does not adequately meet the needs of a 21st century education. Joint work with local primary schools, through the school's specialist science status, is having a positive impact, for example on the professional development of teachers within Maidstone Grammar and its partner schools, and thus on teaching and learning.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 1

Students take a real pride in the sixth form. They say they chose it because of its ethos for promoting academic excellence and encouragement for higher education, and have not been disappointed. They value the wide range of opportunities available to them, which help them to achieve outstandingly well. Nearly all secure university places of their choice. The increasingly wide range of academic and

applied learning courses, coupled with other qualifications such as Open University modules and flexible timetable arrangements, make it possible for students to mix and match courses at varying levels so that their needs and interests are catered for exceptionally well.

Standards are well above national averages and are improving year on year. For example, in 2008 over two thirds of all A-level grades were awarded at the highest A and B levels. Students' achievement reflects the hard work and enthusiasm they have for their courses. It was not possible for inspectors to observe much teaching because students were beginning external examinations, but students themselves and the school's self-evaluation indicate that it is first rate. Students appreciate the positive relationships they have with their teachers, and because they feel valued as individuals have a strong desire to do well. They recognise that they are encouraged by teachers to stretch themselves, saying 'We are not pushed by teachers but encouraged to push ourselves.' Students' learning is further enhanced through an exceptional number of study visits, such as to the Gower peninsula for geography and Milan for textile studies.

Staff and students are rightly proud of the open door policy to deal with students' problems, whether academic or social. Improvements in monitoring students' progress and taking action at an early stage when a student begins to experience difficulty are increasing overall progress rates. Students enjoy and participate fully in all aspects of school life, with mentoring younger students, film club, music ensembles, and producing a weekly news bulletin being only a few of the wide range of activities they support. As a result of outstanding leadership and management, improvements since the last inspection are reflected in the increasing numbers continuing into the sixth form and a significant growth in applications to join from elsewhere.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that lessons consistently challenge all groups of students, and all marking gives students good advice on how their work could be improved further.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Students achieve outstandingly well throughout their time in the school, and as a result overall standards in external texts and examinations are exceptionally high. Since the last inspection, examination results have improved and results compare very favourably with those for other grammar schools. Virtually all students attain more than five GCSE grades at A* to C including English and mathematics, and the percentage at the highest A* and A grades has increased since the last inspection. In 2008, half of the grades awarded were at this level, and the proportion is on track to rise significantly again this year. Students of all abilities and ethnic backgrounds, as well as those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, achieve exceptionally well because suitable arrangements are in place to ensure that they follow programmes which are closely matched to their needs. There has been some variation in the performance across different subjects, and the robust action taken by senior leaders to remedy this has been effective. Performance in science and mathematics, the

school's specialist subjects, is improving and it is meeting targets and national expectations for high ability students.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Students enjoy excellent relationships with one another and with adults, and have an exceptionally mature and positive attitude to their learning. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. Students' personal development is fostered very well through open and frank discussion and, because they feel valued, students are able to express their views and explore their feelings within a supportive environment. For example, they develop spiritual awareness in discussions about sensitive issues such as dealing with matters of life and death. Parents express their confidence that students feel safe in school. Students know who to go to if they need help. Students have a well-developed understanding of the challenges involved in living in a modern multicultural society. They also have a strong awareness of why it is important to have a healthy lifestyle, and participate in a very wide range of sporting activities. Students greatly enjoy all aspects of school life, and this is reflected in their exemplary behaviour and well above average levels of attendance.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Students are highly motivated, want to do well, and appreciate that their teachers plan interesting and engaging lessons. A strong whole-school focus to help students to be actively involved in their learning has been successful. Most lessons are good, and some are outstanding. Teachers have excellent subject knowledge, and use this effectively to plan lessons with clear structure and purpose. Many activities are imaginative and creative, keeping students focused and engaged. Students are confident to ask when there is something they do not understand. Teachers question students effectively, and this helps students to deepen their understanding by having to talk about what they know or by justifying their views and opinions. Good opportunities to assess their own and others' work encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning, giving them a sense of achievement and progression. There are, however, some inconsistencies across the school. A few lessons lack pace and work is not demanding enough to enable all students to make as much progress as they do in other lessons. In a few cases, teachers do not give enough feedback about ongoing work in books.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The curriculum is outstandingly well geared to students' academic needs and provides exceptionally well for their future studies. Curricular breadth is seen in the strong promotion of the arts, music and sport. The school's intention to develop students' learning through 'enquiry, extension and enrichment' is exemplified well in the Year 7 'Big Questions', and is proving highly successful in developing personal initiative and thinking skills. These programmes enrich students' experiences, giving them opportunities for creative development by following their own lines of

exploration and enquiry. Investigating issues such as 'What is happiness?' has led students to broaden their academic knowledge well beyond the requirements of the National Curriculum and makes an exceptionally strong contribution to their personal development by considering moral and ethical dilemmas. The school's science specialism is embedded across the school, seen in broadened provision, for example in new sixth form courses and by linking scientific understanding to other subjects, as in the study of light in art. The programme for gifted and talented students, including international competitions, adds further breadth to their study, as does additional accreditation such as GCSE psychology and astronomy, or some students beginning advanced study before the sixth form. Focus days with themes such as a Year 10 mini-enterprise day, developing problem-solving and teamworking skills, and building confidence and self-esteem are greatly valued by students throughout the school and make an excellent contribution to their future economic well-being.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

A particular strength of the school is the way in which students are enabled to feel very safe and well supported, as both they and their parents testify. The procedures to safeguard students are robust. Vulnerable students are quickly identified, and the school gives them considerable support to ensure that they progress as well as other students. There are extensive systems to monitor and track students' progress. Staff analyse regular assessments, and the outcomes result in personalised targets for students. The school mentors students identified as needing additional support, so that these students increase their confidence and rate of progress. Many parents commented particularly on the excellent transition arrangements which ensure that students move smoothly from primary school into Year 7. Both students and their parents also value the extensive advice and careers guidance higher up the school. Students enthuse about the support they receive from sixth form students.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

The headteacher and leadership team have been outstandingly successful in recreating a shared vision and ethos across all levels in the school, following a prolonged period of change and uncertainty. They have given clear strategic direction for school improvement. This is evident in the school development plan, which wisely limits itself to three key issues that have measurable targets for success. Most have already been achieved which, together with the school's success in improving standards, gives it an excellent capacity for further improvement. Middle leaders are growing in confidence and becoming increasingly accountable for standards in their own subjects. The cycle of examination analysis, departmental reviews and action plans have led them to be more critical of the performance of their teams. A number of middle leaders are new in post, but they are applying the range of agreed monitoring procedures very effectively to improve practice across their areas. Their line managers and a targeted programme of professional development support them well. Unrealistically high staffing costs a few years ago have been reduced, and the school now provides outstandingly good value for money.

Members of the leadership team have an accurate evaluation of key areas such as learning, teaching and assessment. They have also accurately analysed the impact on standards of strategies such as the thinking skills programme, which is an integral part of specialist status activity, so as to ensure that improvement measures are sustained. The school makes an excellent contribution to community cohesion. Students participate in a wide range of charity and community service activities, such as the fund-raising Rag Week and the Duke of Edinburgh's Award. Through their increasingly varied curriculum, students have a good understanding of global challenges.

Governance is outstanding. Governors know the school well and are actively involved in many aspects of school life. They critically challenge each other in meetings and hold the headteacher to account for standards achieved. They give a strong financial steer to the school development plan and encourage the school to set challenging targets for improvement.

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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	

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	
How well 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?	2	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

¹ 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.

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	1
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



21 May 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Maidstone Grammar School for Girls, Maidstone ME16 0SF

I would like to thank you for the part you played in the inspection and for the warm welcome you gave us. I am writing on behalf of the team to share some of the main findings in the report and hope that you will take the time to read the full report too.

MGGs is an outstanding and popular school that is always striving to improve further, and deserves its good reputation. These are some of the features that particularly impressed us.

- The school's very safe and welcoming atmosphere helps you to really enjoy your learning together, and everyone works hard to promote equal opportunities and to combat discrimination.
- You told us that you really appreciate the support of staff and other students, including those in the sixth form.
- Recent improvements made to the curriculum, for example the 'Big Questions' in Key Stage 3 and more sixth form subjects, give you excellent opportunities to study subjects and issues that interest you.
- Results in examinations are very high, enabling most of you to go to universities of your choice, but you also achieve success in a wide variety of sporting and cultural activities.
- Your behaviour is exemplary and you make a real contribution to the school and wider community.
- Teaching is good, and your teachers are well qualified and enjoy sharing their expertise with you.

The headteacher and senior managers provide excellent leadership for the school, and we recognise that everyone in the school works very hard to make sure that you have the best possible opportunities. However, we agree with staff that there is always room for further improvement, so we have asked them to make sure that all lessons are demanding enough for you and that all marking gives you good advice on how to improve the quality of your work further.

Please thank your parents for returning the questionnaires. It was really helpful to read their comments.

Yours faithfully

Helen Hutchings
Lead inspector