

School inspection report

30 April to 2 May 2024

Culford School

Culford

Bury St Edmunds

Suffolk

IP28 6TX

The Independent Schools Inspectorate is appointed by the Department for Education to inspect association independent schools in England. Our inspections report on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards and other applicable regulatory requirements are met, collectively referred to in this report as 'the Standards'.

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Summary of inspection findings

1. Leaders effectively promote their aims and ethos to provide a challenging, enriching, and fun educational experience which supports every pupil to fulfil their potential. Leaders provide opportunities for pupils to develop humility, compassion, and resilience. They ensure that pupils are well prepared to be successful in the next stages of their lives.
2. There is a challenging curriculum that meets the needs of the diverse cohort. All groups of pupils achieve well at both A level and GCSE. The recent introduction of additional subjects at both A Level and GCSE provides well for those pupils who require a broader offer such as sociology, computer science, digital media, and environmental science. All groups of pupils achieve well in their examinations.
3. The early years foundation stage (EYFS) and pre-prep school provides a nurturing, caring and supportive environment in which children develop well, making progress emotionally, socially and developmentally. This is due to a well-planned curriculum and the tailored provision the children receive.
4. There is a very extensive sports program to cater for the needs of every individual. The sports scholars' program is a significant strength, allowing a large cohort of pupils to learn and develop within their chosen sport. Pupils can compete at national and international level, while still ensuring the integrity of the pupils' academic program.
5. Behaviour management is effective. Relationships between pupils are built upon trust and mutual respect and staff know the pupils very well. Pupils are happy and make the most of the expansive facilities they have.
6. There are well established and effective pastoral systems in place. Pupils say they feel safe and well cared for. All staff are effectively trained and have a good understanding of the part they play in keeping pupils safe. The premises are located on a site with public access and, as such, there is an enhanced site security for pupils and staff.
7. Governors and leaders regularly review policies to ensure they are effectively implemented. Health and safety practice is secure and ensures that the boarding houses meet the required standards. However, in boarding, the process of handling boarders' complaints could be implemented more effectively, such as providing pupils opportunity to discuss their thoughts and have any complaints dealt with in the same way as in the day provision.
8. The quality of teaching is generally of a high quality and helps pupils to learn well. This is particularly evident in the pre-prep and prep school. In the senior school, in a small number of lessons some pupils are less engaged in their learning when resources are less stimulating and teaching is less inspiring.

The extent to which the school meets the Standards

- Standards relating to leadership and management, and governance are met.
- Standards relating to the quality of education, training and recreation are met.
- Standards relating to pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing are met.
- Standards relating to pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society are met.
- Standards relating to safeguarding are met.

Recommended next steps

Leaders should:

- give further consideration to the roles and responsibilities of house staff in order to support the implementation of policies such as the complaints process for boarders allowing pupils the opportunity to raise concerns.
- ensure that there is a consistent approach to classroom practice, building upon and sharing the effective professional development work that has already begun, making sure that in the senior school the focus on pupil outcomes is balanced with challenging and engaging teaching.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

9. Leaders and governors promote pupil wellbeing through comprehensive initiatives. This ensures accessibility, support, and safety for all pupils, enhancing their overall experience. Through effective communication and continual improvement strategies, the school prioritises the social, emotional, and physical development of every individual. Leaders are successful in meeting the aims of providing a challenging academic and co-curricular programme for all.
10. Governors and leaders have developed effective self-evaluation strategies and are clear in the direction of the school, including the enhancement of international boarding. Recent appointments to the leadership team are having a very positive impact on improving both academic standards and the wellbeing of pupils. This is through the introduction of tracking systems, quality assurance systems and feedback mechanisms for pupil voice.
11. Leaders foster a compliant and structured environment where most policies are effectively implemented. Leaders adhere to regulations and standards, promoting accountability and transparency. Leaders have a clear understanding of what is working well and what still needs to improve and develop. Leaders closely check the effectiveness of the boarding provision. Boarding staff are not implementing policies as effectively as they should to provide boarders with the opportunity to raise any concerns or complaints.
12. Leaders make appropriate information available to parents and staff through comprehensive handbooks which are available on the school website. The handbooks are reviewed annually by the senior leadership to ensure that they contain the most up-to-date information. Leaders encourage open communication with parents, and parents and guardians are frequently invited onsite. Details of pupils' academic performance in the previous school year are easily accessible.
13. Leaders and managers in the early years ensure that children are well cared for within a safe environment. Children have the best start to their educational journey learning in high-quality accommodation, with good quality resources and with staff that are highly qualified. Pupils are well supervised. All staff on site in the pre-prep are paediatric first aid trained, as well as food hygiene trained. Leaders are meticulous in ensuring the requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) are met.
14. Suitable risk assessments are in place. There is a deep understanding of the context of the school, and particularly the openness of the site. The culture of challenging visitors is well developed and the recent security enhancements, in the form of lanyards and the rolling programme for locks on buildings, safeguards pupils.
15. Leaders address complaints and follow the timescale set out in the school's complaints policy.
16. Leaders fulfil their responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010. The education and opportunities provided by the school do not discriminate and the school makes reasonable adjustments for those who have special needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The school has a suitable accessibility plan in place to ensure equal access.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to leadership and management, and governance

17. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

18. Leaders have designed a curriculum which, caters to the needs and interests of all pupils from early years through to sixth form. It encompasses a broad range of subjects. More recently leaders have introduced additional GCSE and A level subjects to meet the needs of pupils. Pupils can select subjects at GCSE and A Level that complement their academic and co-curricular pursuits and future aspirations, fostering a sense of ownership over their learning journey.
19. In the prep school, the curriculum is thoughtfully crafted to engage and inspire younger pupils, and this provides a solid foundation as they move up through the school. Building upon the principles established in the pre-prep stage, the curriculum continues to encompass a broad approach to learning, covering essential subjects such as language, mathematics, science, technology, and the arts. Lessons are designed to be experiential and interactive, encouraging pupils to collaborate, enquire, and explore. Pupils work well together in class, take pride in their work, and speak confidently in front of the class.
20. In most cases, lessons are carefully structured to align with curriculum objectives. Consideration is given to various pedagogical approaches, ensuring that teaching methods cater to different pupils' needs. This is particularly evident in the prep and pre-prep areas. Here, lessons incorporate opportunities for active participation, collaboration, and reflection, fostering a stimulating and supportive classroom environment. However, occasionally in the senior school, in a few subjects teaching is not sufficiently aspirational, and the resources used are less stimulating. When this is the case, pupils are not as engaged in their learning.
21. Pupils achieve well at GCSE and A Level. Pupils in the sixth form gain the grades they need to move on to university or higher education establishments as well as apprenticeships. Technology is used across the curriculum to enhance pupils' learning.
22. Leaders have ensured that there is a strong emphasis on inclusivity. Pupils with diverse backgrounds and those who speak English as an additional language (EAL) are supported well to make progress. This progress may be seen in academic achievements, personal growth, or extracurricular pursuits. Pupils who speak EAL make progress in line with their peers and are well supported through one-to-one sessions and small group work where necessary.
23. There is a commitment to meet the needs of pupils who have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). There are extensive systems for identifying pupils who have SEND upon entry to ensure that individual learning requirements are met. Leaders consider the use of tailored support where required either through additional staff or by adapting the learning activities to support individual needs.
24. The sports scholars' program provides well for pupils' development of knowledge, skills and understanding in their chosen sport. Leaders have provided a thorough and comprehensive program which enables pupils to access high-quality sports coaching while also providing a well-rounded approach. The use of technology is particularly effective for those pupils on the scholars' sport program, who can access lessons remotely when competing internationally.
25. The school offers a broad co-curricular program, providing pupils with enriching opportunities beyond the classroom to develop their skills, interests, and character. In the prep school, there are a wide range of activities such as wire modelling, clay sculpting and sporting activities, fostering

creativity, teamwork and physical wellbeing. In the senior school, the co-curricular program is expansive, offering an extensive range of activities to cater to varied interests and talents.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to the quality of education, training and recreation

26. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 3: Pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing

27. Leaders' approach to pastoral care extends beyond the classroom. All staff, including house staff, play a key role in creating a supportive and nurturing environment in the areas that they work. Boarders receive round-the-clock academic support and supervision, ensuring their needs are met. Regular communication between house staff, parents and external support services further enhances the effectiveness of the school's pastoral care provision.
28. In both the early years foundation stage (EYFS) and pre-prep sections, a strong emphasis is placed on fostering confidence and self-awareness in young pupils, laying the foundation for their future academic and personal development. In the EYFS, children are encouraged to explore the environment, and build their confidence through hands-on learning experiences and positive reinforcement from adults. For example, during outdoor play sessions, children are given the freedom to experiment and take risks, such as climbing structures or navigating obstacle courses, under the watchful eye of supportive adults. Through these experiences, children develop a sense of achievement and mastery, boosting their self-confidence and belief in their abilities.
29. The Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) programme is thoughtfully designed to provide pupils with comprehensive knowledge, skills and understanding to navigate the complexities of relationships, sexuality, and personal wellbeing. Embedded within the broader *Learning for Life* curriculum, the program covers a wide range of topics relevant to pupils' lives, including consent, healthy relationships, sexual health, and online safety.
30. Leaders foster a culture of inclusivity and acceptance, where differences are celebrated, and diversity is embraced. Through initiatives such as the school council and diversity-focused events, pupils promote inclusivity, challenge stereotypes and create a supportive community where everyone feels valued and respected. In subjects such as drama, pupils develop their self-knowledge, esteem and confidence, within a safe environment where they are comfortable to perform, make mistakes and seek advice in front of their peers.
31. The strategies that adults use to manage behaviour are implemented consistently. Clear expectations are set for pupils' appropriate conduct both inside and outside the classroom. Pupils are educated about expected behaviours and the consequences of their actions which helps to promote accountability and responsibility. Pupils are encouraged to demonstrate respect, kindness and empathy towards their peers and staff members. Positive reinforcement, praise and recognition of positive behaviour is very evident.
32. The premises are very well maintained and extensive. In the boarding houses, there is a rolling programme of refurbishment, and the houses are designed to offer pupils a comfortable and supportive home away from home. Well-furnished rooms, communal spaces for socialising and studying and round-the-clock supervision by dedicated house staff, create a nurturing and inclusive living environment. The school provides tailored support for pupils with specific dietary, medical or religious needs, ensuring that all individuals' requirements are met with care and sensitivity.
33. Leaders have planned a comprehensive physical education programme that spans across all year groups, promoting physical health, wellbeing, and personal development for every pupil. The

programme offers a diverse range of activities and opportunities for pupils to engage in regular exercise and develop fundamental movement skills. Through the sports scholars' program, pupils can specialise in sports such as golf and tennis, with many pupils participating at international level.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing

34. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 4: Pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society

35. Governors and leaders have created a culture which encourages respect for others. The community is diverse in terms of age range, for example. However, there is a real sense of belonging to one community. Pupils and staff speak warmly of the mutual respect they have for one another. Through celebrating religious festivals, educational visits, and trips abroad, pupils develop an appreciation of religious and cultural differences and similarities.
36. The Pre-prep Promises stand as guiding principles that encapsulate the values and expectations upheld within the pre-prep section. The promises serve as a framework, fostering a positive and supportive learning environment, where every individual feels valued, respected, and empowered to thrive. The promises encompass a range of ideals, including kindness, empathy, responsibility, and inclusivity.
37. Leaders provide opportunities for pupils to take on positions of responsibility such as prefects, house captains, sports captains and head of house in the boarding accommodation. Pupils enjoy these roles and appreciate the responsibilities they have. Prefects are confident and proud of the tangible differences they make around issues such as food and play equipment in the prep school.
38. Pupils' economic understanding is developed through the wider curriculum and the Learning for Life programme. Pupils are encouraged to make money through the Grow your Dough challenge, and through this they can develop skills such as budgeting and managing risk.
39. Pupils are well supported in developing career options. Through a series of engaging workshops and talks, featuring professionals from various industries, pupils gain valuable insights into potential career paths. There are some work experience opportunities which enable pupils to gain practical skills and make informed decisions about their futures. Additionally, pupils receive tailored support throughout the university application process, ensuring they are well equipped for success in higher education and beyond. Pupils successfully take up a variety of higher education courses in the UK and internationally.
40. Pupils are given many opportunities to express themselves and their opinions. Leaders use an array of tools to gather pupils' views. Pupils say that adults listen to them. Pupils take advantage of the effective informal and now formal systems in place in order to give feedback. Leaders act upon the feedback received. In boarding, boarders want further opportunities to provide their views and feedback. This is currently an area leaders are working on to improve further.
41. Leaders encourage and provide opportunities for pupils to support those less fortunate in society. Pupils take part in fundraising activities for local, national, and international charities. There are a number of fundraising initiatives, such as holding a pre-loved clothes sale to raise money for a local medical charity or where pupils raised over £3,000 recently for the Make a Wish charity. International charities are also supported. A group of staff and pupils travel annually to Malawi, where they link with a Christian foundation and take part in outreach work in the local villages.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society

42. All the relevant Standards are met.

Safeguarding

43. There are suitable arrangements in place to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils, including those in the early years, boarding and sixth form. Leaders work effectively with external agencies when necessary. The school ensures they make referrals that are timely to the local authority designated officer.
44. The school collaborates closely with outside agencies when necessary and has developed comprehensive systems across the schools to ensure the sharing of information. The safeguarding lead and deputies meet frequently, and training is robust. The Methodist Independent Schools Trust audits the school's safeguarding procedures on an annual basis, further supporting their effectiveness.
45. Staff regularly undertake safeguarding training appropriate to their role. They have a clear understanding how to respond to any safeguarding concern. They follow procedures and maintain safe practices. Those staff with safeguarding responsibility fulfil their duties effectively. Due regard is given to the Prevent duty and staff are alert to the risk of extremism and radicalisation.
46. Leaders ensure that the appropriate safer recruitment checks are completed for all staff, volunteers, and governors.
47. Pupils overwhelmingly say they feel safe, as evidenced by survey results and direct conversations with pupils. This sense of safety is fostered by a culture where staff are vigilant and approachable, and pupils know who to turn to for support if they are worried or concerned.
48. Robust risk assessment systems are in place, regularly reviewed to ensure continued pupil safety. Safeguarding concerns are responded to swiftly and there are robust monitoring procedures in place to safeguard pupils' wellbeing.
49. The school prioritises online safety, implementing comprehensive measures to protect pupils from online risks and promote positive digital behaviour among the school community.
50. Governors maintain suitable oversight of the school's safeguarding policies and procedures. They make regular checks and ensure the policies are effectively implemented.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

- 51. All the relevant Standards are met.**

School details

School	Culford School
Department for Education number	935/6053
Registered charity number	310486
Address	Culford School Culford Bury St Edmunds Suffolk IP28 6TX
Phone number	01284 728615
Email address	hmpa@culford.co.uk
Website	Culford.co.uk
Proprietor	Methodist Independent Schools Trust
Chair	Mr Mark Donougher
Headteacher	Mrs Claire Bentley
Age range	1 to 19
Number of pupils	867
Number of boarding pupils	245
Number of children in the early years registered setting	88
Date of previous inspection	27 February 2020

Information about the school

52. Culford School is a co-educational day and boarding school, located near Bury St Edmunds. The school is owned by the Methodist Independent Schools Trust, whose trustees are represented on the local designated governing body. The school consists of two nurseries for children aged 1 to 3 and 3 to 4 years; the pre-preparatory school for pupils aged 4 to 7 years; the preparatory for pupils aged 7 to 13 years; and the senior school for pupils aged 13 to 18 years.
53. The school has five boarding houses. Four are single-sex and one mixed boarding house
54. The school has two nurseries with 104 pupils. The EYFS has two Reception classes.
55. The school has identified 154 pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). No pupils in the school have an education, health and care (EHC) plan.
56. English is an additional language for 144 pupils.
57. As a Christian school with a Methodist tradition, the school aims to provide a challenging, enriching and fun educational experience which supports every pupil to fulfil their full potential. The aim is that pupils will leave the school with excellent honesty, humility, compassion and resilience, well prepared for the adult world, and to be successful in the next stages of their lives.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

30 April to 2 May

58. A team of 9 inspectors visited the school for two and a half days.

59. Inspection activities included:

- observation of lessons, some in conjunction with school leaders
- observation of registration periods and assemblies
- observation of a sample of co-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection
- discussions with the chair of governors
- discussions with the head, school leaders, managers and other members of staff
- discussions with pupils
- tours of the school premises
- visits to the learning support area and facilities for physical education
- visits to boarding houses, accompanied by pupils and staff
- scrutiny of samples of pupils' work
- scrutiny of a range of policies, documentation and records provided by the school.

60. The inspection team considered the views of pupils, members of staff and parents who responded to ISI's pre-inspection surveys.

How are association independent schools in England inspected?

- The Department for Education is the regulator for independent schools in England.
- ISI is approved by the Secretary of State for Education to inspect independent schools in England, which are members of associations in membership of the Independent Schools Council.
- ISI inspections report to the Department for Education on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards, the EYFS statutory framework requirements, the National Minimum Standards for boarding schools and any other relevant standards are met.
- For more information, please visit **www.isi.net**.

Independent Schools Inspectorate

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For more information, please visit isi.net