

# Plymouth High School for Girls

Inspection report

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<b>Unique Reference Number</b>	113532
<b>Local Authority</b>	Plymouth
<b>Inspection number</b>	378726
<b>Inspection dates</b>	28–29 September 2011
<b>Reporting inspector</b>	Karl Sampson 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>	Grammar (selective)
<b>School category</b>	Community
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	11–18
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Girls
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	840
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	240
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	The governing body
<b>Chair</b>	Mr David Walters
<b>Headteacher</b>	Miss Mary Utton
<b>Date of previous school inspection</b>	28–29 January 2009
<b>School address</b>	St Lawrence Road Plymouth PL4 6HT
<b>Telephone number</b>	01752 208308
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<b>Age group</b>	11–18
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## Introduction

This inspection was carried out by two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and three additional inspectors. Inspectors carried out observations of 34 part lessons taught by 32 teachers as well as a Key Stage 4 assembly. Seven of the lessons were jointly observed with members of the school's leadership team. One inspector undertook a learning walk which comprised a number of short visits to lessons to look at provision for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Discussions were held with senior and middle leaders, staff, three members of the governing body and different groups of students. Inspectors observed the school's work and looked at the school's self-evaluation and planning documents, external evaluations of the school's work, policy documents and students' work. They analysed 261 questionnaires sent in by parents and carers, those completed by a sample of students from each year group and 39 completed by staff.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at a number of key areas.

- The extent to which teaching provides both support and challenge for all groups of students.
- The contribution to school improvement made by partnerships and technology and training school specialist status.
- The accuracy and demonstrable impact of self-evaluation by leaders and managers at all levels in driving up outcomes for all groups of learners.
- The quality of provision and leadership and management, and their impact on students' outcomes, in the sixth form.

## Information about the school

Plymouth High School for Girls is a smaller-than-average selective grammar school. Most students are of White British heritage and the vast majority speak English as their first language. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is well below the national average. The proportion with special educational needs and/or disabilities is well below the national figure. The proportion of students who have a statement of special educational needs is considerably lower than that found nationally. The school has held technology specialist status since 2004. The school was designated as a Training School in 2004 and works in partnership across a consortium of three other local schools to offer continuing professional development and initial teacher training opportunities. Up until this year the school worked as part of a local post-16 consortium. Although current Year 13 students are completing their sixth form study through the consortium offer, post-16 provision for current Year 12 students is provided by the school alone. The school was accredited as an International Baccalaureate World School in 2009 and is the designated International Baccalaureate (IB) school for the local authority. The school has gained several awards, including Healthy Schools and the International School awards.

**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?**

**2**

**The school's capacity for sustained improvement**

**2**

## Main findings

Plymouth High School for Girls is a good and improving school which enables students to achieve well and to develop into confident, articulate and thoughtful young adults. The headteacher and her team have been successful in establishing a culture and ethos that is increasingly one of high expectation and aspiration through striving for excellence. A key factor in the school's improvement since the last inspection has been the success of the headteacher in empowering her senior and middle leaders to drive improvement. They now demonstrate that they have the determination and passion required of leaders and managers in a successful school. Achievement is improving because of the sharper and more rigorous monitoring by school leaders, with a clear focus on tracking progress and raising attainment. Previous underperformance in the main school is being tackled effectively and there is a rising trend in students attaining the very highest grades in their GCSE examinations.

The school has made major strides forward in the three years since its last inspection and is working to ensure that the good progress seen in the main school is replicated in the sixth form. The work of sixth form leaders and managers and the performance of Year 12 students offer strong indications of improvement. However, the increased rigour of monitoring and evaluation seen in the main school has yet to extend fully into the sixth form, which is satisfactory overall. School leaders recognise that not enough time is allocated to sixth form leaders to drive improvement and enable the school and students to benefit in full from the considerable expertise seen. However, self-evaluation overall is effective and leads to good planning to drive further improvement. The school's capacity to sustain its overall improvement is good.

Although some initiatives to drive up the quality of teaching and learning are still relatively new, others are firmly embedded in practice. Most importantly, staff training is increasingly tailored to meet individual development needs and school priorities. As a result, the quality of teaching and learning has improved to be good overall. A sharp focus on teachers' use of assessment information has had a clear impact in raising attainment by the end of Key Stage 4. Consequently, learning activities are better planned to stretch and challenge students' thinking. There is some outstanding teaching, which engages students through incisive questioning and high quality dialogue that helps to foster a deeper understanding and extends thinking. These lessons involve students as partners in the learning process and encourage them to steer learning by developing ideas of their own or by learning independently. The most effective teaching uses assessment information deftly to

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ensure lessons meet the needs of the whole group and that students understand what they need to do to raise their attainment further. Where teaching is less effective, it is because teachers' use of assessment lacks accuracy and precision in tailoring provision effectively so that students are able to reach their challenging targets. This explains some remaining variation in achievement between subjects, particularly in the sixth form. While good assessment systems have a clear and demonstrable impact in raising attainment in Key Stages 3 and 4, outcomes in the sixth form remain satisfactory. Nevertheless, teachers are now increasingly using the good practice seen in the main school to raise achievement for sixth form students.

In this caring and supportive environment, students feel exceptionally safe and have very positive attitudes towards learning. They are polite, friendly and behave well. Students say how much they appreciate the range of opportunities that exist within school to take on extra responsibility in a pastoral or academic capacity. The school uses its specialist technology status and training school role effectively and works well with a range of partners both locally and globally to improve outcomes for all students. These aspects complement a good quality curriculum and have a positive effect on students' personal development. For example, students make an outstanding positive contribution to the life of the school and its wider community, and demonstrate excellent social, moral, spiritual and cultural understanding.

**What does the school need to do to improve further?**

- Raise attainment in the sixth form by:
  - eliminating the variability in achievement between subjects
  - strengthening the use of assessment so that monitoring of students' progress is informed by consistently accurate performance data and underachievement is identified more acutely
  - ensuring that adequate resources are directed to securing improved performance in the sixth form.
- Secure greater consistency in teachers' use of assessment across the school by:
  - ensuring that systems for monitoring and supporting teaching and learning result in the very best practice being seen more consistently across the curriculum
  - ensuring that teachers are equally effective in checking the progress of all learners during lessons and therefore able to reshape learning activities to meet individual needs and provide high levels of challenge for all
  - ensuring that marking and assessment are consistency effective in driving improvement and accelerating progress
  - extending the use of effective questioning and dialogue to stimulate students' active participation in all lessons, with more opportunities for students to contribute their ideas to drive the learning forward.

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

The quality of learning in classrooms has improved significantly since the last

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inspection. In the large majority of lessons observed, students made good progress, enjoyed their learning and achieved well. Students are attentive and engage enthusiastically with a wide range of activities, particularly those that enable them to extend their thinking and to drive learning forward in lessons. The school attained its best ever GCSE examination results this year and surpassed its challenging target for students attaining the highest grades, with the majority achieving five or more A\*/A grades. The standards seen in lessons and students’ books and the school’s latest analysis of current performance indicate that progress continues to accelerate. Consequently, current Key Stage 4 students are well placed to meet their challenging targets. In the past, the achievement of students in mathematics was below that in English, especially in terms of A\*/A performance. However, the recruitment of high quality subject leadership has led to improvements in the quality of teaching and learning, and a more sophisticated use of assessment which is helping to reduce the gap in achievement. The small numbers of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities make similar progress to their peers because of the high quality individual and personalised support programmes which are put in place.

Students have an extremely strong sense of right and wrong; they tolerate differences exceptionally well, and work and socialise extremely well together. They feel well cared for, knowing that any of the very few instances of bullying will be dealt with promptly. Their strong cultural and multicultural awareness is developed well through the arts curriculum, and the well-established links with Ghana and burgeoning links with China. Opportunities for students to contribute to the college and wider community are extensive and diverse, and participation rates are high. Students say how much they value their school and local community and demonstrate good engagement in a variety of ways; for example, through their roles as subject captains, Eco-champions, as members of the International Group, sports leaders, performing arts productions and charitable work. The Head Girl Team is becoming increasingly influential in supporting school evaluation and development.

*These are the grades for pupils’ outcomes*

<b>Pupils’ achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning</b>	<b>1</b>
Taking into account:	
Pupils’ attainment <sup>1</sup>	1
The quality of pupils’ learning and their progress	2
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	2
<b>The extent to which pupils feel safe</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Pupils’ behaviour</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community</b>	<b>1</b>

<sup>1</sup> The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low

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<b>The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being</b>	<b>2</b>
Taking into account: Pupils' attendance <sup>1</sup>	1
<b>The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development</b>	<b>1</b>

## How effective is the provision?

Well-organised arrangements for the care of all students contribute to their good personal development and well-being and support their learning effectively. Transition and induction arrangements are planned and implemented well and as a result, students settle into school quickly and confidently. Targeted and personalised support for groups of potentially vulnerable students has resulted in their good learning and progress, improved attendance and increased confidence in participating in the life of the school. Students are highly complimentary about the quality of support provided by staff in the student support base. It is a valuable aspect of provision in supporting achievement, and students say how much they appreciate that they are known well as individuals and that their different needs are catered for. School leaders recognise that changes to the tutorial system have yet to be embedded fully and that not all tutors are currently working at the level of the best.

The curriculum is broad and balanced and gives students the opportunity to achieve in ways appropriate to their individual strengths and interests. A wide range of partners is used effectively to extend and develop a flexible and increasingly personalised core and extra-curricular offer. Specialist status has been used to widen curriculum choice and provide greater stretch and challenge for students. For example, the range of science options has been increased to include astronomy and geology, along with adding the flexibility to start triple science GCSE courses earlier than Year 10. Developments at Key Stage 3 include a 'learning to learn' course for all Year 7 students and new opportunities from Year 8 to study Chinese and Spanish in addition to French and German. Students say how much these changes are having a positive impact on their engagement. Extra-curricular opportunities, enrichment activities and study visits are extensive and appreciated greatly by students. The opportunities available cover music and the arts, leadership, public speaking, sports and languages. They are well attended by all groups of students and give strong support to aspects of their personal development.

There is a clear and demonstrable track record of improvement in the quality of teaching and learning, and inspection evidence supports the views of the school, students and parents, that teaching is now good. Positive relationships and behaviour are a strong feature and help to establish an atmosphere conducive to learning. The best lessons use assessment information precisely to plan challenging lesson activities that draw students into learning and enable them to articulate ideas fluently and to influence and steer learning with confidence. Teachers use effective questioning to gauge students' understanding and, where necessary, reshape

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explanations and offer regular verbal and written guidance about how to improve further. As a result, students are better supported to reach the high standards of which they are capable. However, these skills are not yet apparent in all teaching across all key stages and lead to some variation in student and subject performance. Senior leaders recognise the need to continue the process of strengthening teaching and systematically disseminate the best practice more effectively, particularly in the use of assessment.

*These are the grades for the quality of provision*

<b>The quality of teaching</b>	<b>2</b>
Taking into account:	
The use of assessment to support learning	3
<b>The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils’ needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The effectiveness of care, guidance and support</b>	<b>2</b>

## How effective are leadership and management?

The headteacher and the senior leadership team have created a shared vision for improvement among staff and the governing body. Despite difficult financial constraints which necessitated some restructuring, staff morale remains high and all members of the school community share a strong belief in the school’s success. Expectations of students’ capabilities have been raised and there is a determined commitment to drive improvement and ensure that the best practice is shared and consistently applied. School leaders provide good support to middle leaders in order to secure greater accountability and sharpen improvement planning in the light of information gained from regular monitoring and evaluation. The technology specialism and the training school role are used effectively to promote further improvement. Good systems are in place to support the continuing professional development of all staff to improve their assessment practice further. It is complemented by a more sophisticated tracking system that is being used effectively to accelerate students’ progress. Although not yet fully embedded, this information is being used to help all staff identify where new teaching approaches need to be developed to improve learning.

The governing body knows the school well and supports and challenges the school in equal measure. Consequently, the issues from the last inspection have been addressed successfully. The school’s commitment to equality of opportunity is exemplified by its work to raise attainment and achievement at the highest levels. However, the school has rightly identified the need to drive up further the proportion of higher examination grades, especially in the sixth form, as a priority for improvement again this year. Safeguarding is afforded high priority and arrangements are good. Effective procedures and well-established training are in place to keep students safe. The school’s contribution to community cohesion is good. Its strengths are in strong international links, partnerships with primary



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schools and engagement with the local community through its specialist status.

*These are the grades for leadership and management*

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

## Sixth form

Sixth form students are highly supportive of the sixth form and the quality of education it provides. They feel well supported and benefit from an appropriate academic curriculum that generally meets their needs and interests well. The addition of a growing International Baccalaureate programme has strengthened this aspect of provision. The sixth form successfully ensures that the vast majority of students progress successfully to higher education, training or employment with the large majority securing their first choice university. Students make a significant and positive contribution to the school community through their leadership of house competitions and whole-school festivals. 'Student voice' is ably led by the Head Girl Team which plays a pivotal role in developing learning and the quality of provision for all students across the school.

However, improvements in achievement by the end of Key Stage 4 have not yet been fully matched in the sixth form. Some significant variation remains across subjects and, while students make satisfactory progress overall, and some make good progress, the proportion attaining the highest grades of A\* to B is not high enough given students' starting points. Good teaching is now being matched by better use of assessment, with teachers and students much more aware of examination criteria than before. As a result, students are increasingly making good progress, although it is too early for the impact of these improvements to be seen fully in public examinations. Although they are improving, outcomes for students in the sixth form are no more than satisfactory. In the past, inaccurate subject data have, on some occasions, meant that underperforming students have not been

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identified quickly enough. This is being addressed as a matter of high priority and systems for monitoring the performance of students and subjects have been strengthened. The result is that more accurate assessment is used effectively to target additional support and challenge underperformance. However, while these arrangements are beginning to have a stronger impact than before on raising attainment, capacity for sustained improvement is being hindered because timetabling constraints mean that sixth form leaders are restricted in their deployment to secure more rapid progress.

*These are the grades for the sixth form*

<b>Overall effectiveness of the sixth form</b>	<b>3</b>
Taking into account:	3
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	3
The quality of provision in the sixth form	3
Leadership and management of the sixth form	3

## Views of parents and carers

A higher-than-average proportion of parents and carers responded to the Ofsted questionnaire. The very large majority were overwhelmingly positive about almost all aspects of the school’s work. A small minority of parents and carers raised concerns about how well the school helps students to have a healthy lifestyle. The inspection team judged that this aspect of the school’s provision was good, reflecting the range of health-related activities available and the high participation rates across the year groups. Students who were interviewed were very knowledgeable about how to lead a healthy lifestyle but expressed their dissatisfaction with the range and cost of healthy food options at lunchtime. Inspectors were satisfied that the school development plan has clear and detailed strategies in place to develop this area. Most parents and carers who responded are extremely happy with their children’s experience and enjoyment at the school and believe that it is led and managed very effectively.

## Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Plymouth High School for Girls 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 261 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 840 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	136	52	113	43	10	4	1	0
The school keeps my child safe	123	47	129	49	3	1	3	1
The school informs me about my child's progress	94	36	142	54	12	5	2	1
My child is making enough progress at this school	129	49	117	45	4	2	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	115	44	133	51	4	2	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	98	38	123	47	26	10	2	1
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	46	18	147	56	46	18	10	4
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)	112	43	110	42	17	7	3	1
The school meets my child's particular needs	114	44	127	49	12	5	1	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	82	31	133	51	23	9	1	0
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	64	25	147	56	22	8	2	1
The school is led and managed effectively	111	43	125	48	11	4	1	0
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	147	56	103	39	5	2	1	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 all 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

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	43	47	10	0
Primary schools	6	46	42	6
Secondary schools	14	36	41	9
Sixth forms	15	42	41	3
Special schools	30	48	19	3
Pupil referral units	14	50	31	5
All schools	10	44	39	6

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 are for the period 1 September 2010 to 08 April 2011 and are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)).

The sample of schools inspected during 2010/11 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100.

Sixth form figures reflect the judgements made for the overall effectiveness of the sixth form in secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units.

## 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"><li>■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement.</li><li>■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils.</li><li>■ The quality of teaching.</li><li>■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships.</li><li>■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.</li></ul>
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.**

30 September 2011

Dear Students



### **Inspection of Plymouth High School for Girls, Plymouth PL4 6HT**

Thank you for your help and for taking the time to talk to us during the recent inspection. I am writing to tell you about our findings. We judged the school to be good. It has worked really hard since the last inspection to improve your achievement. Your headteacher leads the school very well, and is ably supported by other staff and the governors. They are all determined that you should have the opportunity to succeed, and their work enables you to achieve some outstanding outcomes. You told us how much you appreciate the work of your teachers.

You enjoy coming to school, are well cared for, have a good range of curricular opportunities and are well taught. You particularly appreciate the good range of curricular options, their impact on your achievement and in developing your excellent social, moral, spiritual and cultural understanding. You told us you feel exceptionally safe, and we think your behaviour in and around the school is good. You are able to make an excellent contribution to the life of the school and the wider community through its specialist status and the good partnerships that the school has developed, particularly at a local and global level.

We have asked the headteacher and her team to concentrate in particular on:

- raising achievement and the quality of provision across all subjects in the sixth form so that these are in line with the rest of the school
- enabling teachers to share their best ideas across all subjects and learn from each other so that assessment information is used with precision and accuracy to help you attain the very highest grades
- ensuring that teachers consistently give you high quality feedback in lessons and on your work to stretch and challenge your thinking and so that you know how to improve in each subject
- using dialogue and questions in lessons to deepen your understanding, allowing you enough time to steer learning by developing and explaining your ideas fully.

You can certainly help your teachers by responding to their comments and using the feedback that they give, so you improve your learning and the quality of your work.

Yours sincerely

Karl Sampson  
Her Majesty's Inspector

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