

# School inspection report

10 to 12 February 2026

## **St Mary's School**

91 Lexden Road

Colchester

CO3 3RB

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 and governors prioritise pupils' wellbeing through their decision-making and ensure that the school meets the requirements of the Standards consistently. The governing board is appropriately experienced and committed, offering suitable challenge and oversight of leaders' work. Leaders work closely with all members of the school community to make sure that everyone has a clear understanding of the school's key values. This ensures a supportive environment of shared goals that promote pupils' suitably ambitious academic standards, strong personal development and a genuine respect for all.
2. Leaders have implemented a comprehensive framework for day-to-day risk assessment and risk management. This actively promotes pupils' safety and wellbeing, both on the school sites and during organised trips. However, the risk assessment did not fully identify the risk in one room. This was rectified during inspection.
3. Leaders ensure that there is a well-planned, broad curriculum in place from the early years to Year 11. This supports pupils' academic, personal, physical and creative development. Skilled teaching is encouraging and suitably challenging. Teachers have a clear understanding of pupils' needs as a result of thorough assessment and tracking across the school. Consequently, they provide lessons that enable pupils, including those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), to make good progress.
4. Pupils have the opportunity to take on positions of responsibility in both the lower and the senior schools. Leaders teach pupils to encourage collaboration and mutual respect as pupils plan and engage in house competitions, charitable giving and sporting events. This has a positive effect on pupils' self-esteem and self-confidence.
5. Leaders champion a culture where everyone is treated with thoughtfulness and respect. They ensure that there are plenty of ways for pupils to contribute to the school community. These include through surveys, school council and focused meetings. This enables pupils to grow in self-confidence and self-esteem, understanding that they are listened to and valued as individuals.
6. Early years leaders prioritise the wellbeing of the children as they develop physically, mentally and emotionally. They are cared for in a well-resourced, safe and encouraging environment. The children are looked after effectively because staff are appropriately trained and understand how to provide the appropriate learning pathway for each child. Early years staff monitor and evaluate their own practice regularly.
7. Leaders have put in place careers guidance for pupils of secondary age which gives them the opportunity to benefit from impartial careers advice. However, this programme is not fully developed. As a result, not all pupils are certain about the various alternatives open to them, nor the competencies they require, as they consider their futures.
8. Leaders ensure that staff are highly trained for their safeguarding responsibilities and execute the school's safeguarding procedures effectively. They take appropriate action in a timely manner when needed and liaise as necessary with local safeguarding partners. Safer recruitment procedures are followed meticulously to ensure the suitability of all employees and volunteers.

## 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:

- review the way in which individual rooms are risk assessed to ensure that all potential risks are identified
- strengthen careers education so that pupils of secondary age are able to make informed choices about a broad range of possible future pathways.

## Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

9. The proprietors, together with leaders and managers throughout the school, ensure that pupils receive a wide-ranging education which actively promotes their wellbeing so that they thrive. Leaders ensure that all required policies and protocols are in place and are effectively implemented. The school ethos encourages pupils to be ambitious, bold, compassionate, dynamic and enquiring and these values inform leaders' and governors' decisions.
10. Leaders are ambitious for the development of the school. They encourage a culture of continuous improvement to enhance pupil wellbeing. This arises from a reflective and collaborative approach to self-evaluation in all areas of school life. Leaders use regular surveys to gather the opinions of pupils and parents in order to consider their views as part of the decision-making process. Self-evaluation informs annual action plans targeting all areas of school life, resulting in improvements across the school, which include to premises as well as to academic and extra-curricular provision.
11. Governors have the appropriate knowledge and skills to fulfil their responsibilities effectively. Governors oversee the school's work across all areas of school life. They ensure that leaders have the capacity, skills and knowledge for regulations to be met and for pupils to thrive. Leaders report to governors regularly. Governors validate the accuracy of reports through monitoring leaders' work during on-site visits, discussions with staff and pupils, and focused committee meetings. Governors provide sufficient levels of support and challenge so that the school continues to meet the Standards.
12. Leaders manage risk effectively and maintain strategic oversight. They identify and assess risk through internal processes and external expertise. Leaders ensure that well-trained staff understand and review risk assessments regularly. They recognise that the safety of pupils on both school sites and on school trips is of primary importance. Arrangements and staff ratios are adapted to suit pupils' needs. However, risk assessment of one room had not recognised the potential hazard presented by a window with unrestricted opening. This was corrected during inspection.
13. The school's comprehensive accessibility plan is thorough and effectively implemented. The plan is reviewed regularly to make sure it remains relevant and enables pupils to access the curriculum and the school premises. Leaders ensure that the school fulfils its responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010. They aim to create a compassionate culture where every pupil is known, supported and understood. Leaders promote equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) successfully. In doing so they make sure that members of the community do not suffer from discrimination. Leaders ensure effective support in the classroom. Leaders and staff recognise the importance of cultural equity and celebrate difference in assemblies and form time, so that pupils throughout the school understand the importance of mutual respect for all.
14. Leaders provide the necessary information to parents, pupils, staff and to relevant external agencies in line with their statutory obligations. This is available directly from the school and through the school's website. Leaders report to the local authority when pupils join or leave the school at non-standard transition points. Leaders also understand their responsibility to provide the local authority with appropriate financial information relating to pupils who have an education, health and care plan (EHC plan).

15. The school has a suitable complaints policy. When complaints arise, leaders respond within appropriate time frames and record these methodically and in detail. Leaders and governors review complaints regularly to identify trends and address areas of concern as necessary.

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

**16. All the relevant Standards are met.**

## Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

17. Leaders ensure that pupils benefit from a curriculum that is suitably wide-ranging and covers the required areas of learning, including academic, creative and sports subjects. Leaders adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of pupils so that they can access a variety of academic options that reflect their abilities and interests. An appropriate choice of GCSE subjects is offered, as well as enrichment lessons which focus on non-examined topics such as engineering and digital discovery.
18. Leaders have introduced a robust system by which academic and pastoral leaders and leaders of learning support review pupils' progress. This is tracked via regular year-group assessments and academic target setting. This information is used to decide appropriate actions to support individuals as necessary. Consequently, pupils make good progress.
19. Teachers are knowledgeable in their subject specialisms. By the end of Year 6, most pupils meet, and many exceed, national expectations in reading, writing and mathematics. Pupils, including those who have SEND, attain results at GCSE in line with or beyond their starting points. Leaders and governors scrutinise examination results against national norms. This process informs decisions for academic improvement at a strategic level, such as a whole school focus on literacy skills.
20. Teachers deliver well-planned lessons that build on pupils' prior knowledge and attainment. As a result of this, pupils are well motivated and keen to progress. Teachers use a variety of effective resources that engage pupils. For example, teachers encourage pupils to use their information and communication technology (ICT) skills to research and deepen their understanding of literary texts. Senior pupils benefit from carefully constructed subject booklets which support skills acquisition alongside subject knowledge. Teaching is encouraging and supportive and most lessons challenge pupils suitably to apply their learning in increasingly complex ways. Younger pupils embed their scientific knowledge and understanding through practical sessions, for example experimenting with pepper, water and soap to explain the spread of germs. Older pupils progress from gathering textual evidence to using literacy analysis to support written arguments.
21. Teachers in the early years create an inclusive and welcoming environment. They make good use of the well-resourced indoor and outdoor areas to design activities that meet the needs of the children. Assessment of children's progress in all areas of learning, including social and physical development, is regular. Teachers provide suitable support and appropriate extension tasks to ensure that children make good progress. Children develop their communication and language skills alongside their early reading and writing and phonics understanding. Children in the kindergarten listen carefully, follow instructions, explain their ideas clearly and participate enthusiastically in imaginative play. Teaching in Reception encourages children to extend their vocabulary as they complete descriptive writing.
22. There is a well-developed system of individualised support for pupils who have SEND, including evaluation of its efficacy. Pupils are involved in setting plans for their support, including reviewing suggested methods for in-class support. The effectiveness of the support for pupils who have SEND is evidenced through pupils' good progress against their starting points in both lower and senior schools.
23. Helpful processes for identification, academic support and review of pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) are in place throughout the school. Pupils benefit from subject-specific

word banks, scaffolding, modelled answers and clear written feedback as well as one-to-one support as required. This results in swift progress in pupils' language use and cultural integration.

24. A range of extra-curricular activities enables pupils of all ages to develop and expand their interests and skills. They extend their learning through opportunities such as The Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme (DofE), outdoor education, art, jewellery making, debating and chamber choir. Leaders encourage pupils to suggest and lead activities, resulting in, for example, a wider range of craft and drama clubs. This allows pupils to develop organisational, collaborative and time-management skills.

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

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

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

26. There is a comprehensive personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) programme in place. It is delivered effectively and promotes pupils' wellbeing. Teachers are well trained and incorporate regular opportunities to assess pupils' understanding. Feedback from pupils determines suitable adjustments to the programme as necessary. Pupils learn about a range of important topics such as how to travel safely, different types of family structures and safe internet communication.
27. Through PSHE lessons, pupils learn about healthy and unhealthy relationships, conflict resolution and how to be appropriately assertive when necessary. This allows pupils to develop self-knowledge as well as an understanding of the importance of mutual respect.
28. Leaders support pupils' moral and spiritual understanding through focused assemblies and religious studies (RS) lessons. Pupils learn about world faiths, religious freedom and the importance of respecting different cultures and beliefs. They visit different places of worship within the locality to broaden their understanding of others' beliefs. Pupils learn about Chinese New Year; they exhibit their Diwali activities and collect harvest festival goods for local charities. The outdoor education and Eco Schools activities encourage pupils to develop a sense of wonder as they learn about the natural environment and the importance of caring for it effectively.
29. Relationships and sex education (RSE) is taught as part of the PSHE programme. Pupils engage openly and respectfully with age-appropriate material, learning, for example, about conception and how to recognise and resist coercion and control. This provision ensures pupils have the necessary knowledge and understanding to make informed decisions.
30. Leaders promote the importance of considerate behaviour and model this as a matter of course. They have implemented a clear behaviour policy which includes rewards and sanctions, creating an environment where expectations and consequences are clearly known. When incidents do occur, staff work closely with pupils so that they learn to take responsibility for their actions. This approach ensures a consistent level of suitable behaviour throughout the school. Pupils actively challenge those whose behaviour is unkind. Bullying is rare and is dealt with swiftly and appropriately when it occurs.
31. Children in the early years develop their self-knowledge through a programme of activities which focus on learning about self and friendship. Through this, they learn to think about others' feelings and develop an understanding of and the ability to regulate their own feelings.
32. Leaders ensure that health and safety policies and procedures comply with legislative requirements across the school. Fire safety action plans are drawn up and implemented within an appropriate timeframe. The school complies with The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. Careful record-keeping and links with local agencies are part of an appropriate cycle of health and safety management. Issues of concern are addressed swiftly to ensure that pupils are protected from preventable harm.
33. Premises and accommodation on both sites are suitable and well maintained. Pupils and children in the lower school learn in spaces that are appropriate for their ages and activities. For example, a well-provisioned indoor play area in the early years encourages children to develop fine and gross

motor skills, and a larger natural outside area encourages messy play and exploration. On the senior site, leaders ensure effective separation between pupils and moving vehicles.

34. School buildings are secured from access by unauthorised people. Pupils are effectively supervised at all times, including social times. Leaders in the early years adhere to the specific supervision requirements relating to working with young children. Children are carefully observed when eating and drinking. They are closely supervised in the classroom and during outdoor play. All this ensures that children are secure, well cared for and effectively supported throughout the day.
35. There is an appropriate variety of curricular and extra-curricular physical education (PE) options for pupils to take part in, as well as opportunities for competition against other schools. This provision allows pupils to develop their physical abilities alongside communication, leadership, resilience and teamwork. Pupils participate in a range of sports, including football, gymnastics, netball and cricket, developing new physical and sporting skills as well as their overall levels of fitness. In the early years, children have many opportunities for physical development including ballet, riding tricycles and playing on log slides in their extensive outdoor area. Pupils of all ages understand the importance of physical exercise as part of a healthy lifestyle which also promotes positive mental and emotional wellbeing.
36. Across both sites, the school has appropriate spaces for pupils who are feeling unwell. Training for staff is suitable and includes paediatric first aid. Staff use clear systems to administer and record the administration of first aid, including medication, if required. They communicate effectively with parents, as necessary.
37. Attendance and admissions registers are correctly maintained in line with current statutory guidance. Leaders report to the local authority on pupil attendance as required. They understand the link between attendance and pupils' wellbeing. There are clear processes in place for the swift follow-up of any absence and arrangements to support pupils to attend school when facing particular challenges.

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

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

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

39. Pupils develop a clear understanding of the rule of law, democracy, individual liberty and mutual respect through assemblies, the curriculum, school trips and PSHE. They experience democracy in action when voting for pupil leadership positions. Leaders organise visits from the police and the fire brigade enabling pupils to understand the importance of such organisations in society. Pupils in the lower school visit the Houses of Parliament and learn about a range of political ideologies.
40. Leaders teach pupils to advocate for equality, to respect diversity and to be inclusive through the PSHE programme. Teaching encourages pupils to consider carefully the differences between personal views and discrimination, as well as how to promote diversity. Pupils develop their understanding of race, gender and disability through a variety of curriculum opportunities including the celebration of Black History Month annually. Pupils learn, for example, about the experience of the Windrush generation. In history and religious studies lessons, pupils reflect on how social intolerance can have devastating consequences, an understanding supported by a trip to Auschwitz.
41. Pupil-led assemblies on different aspects of neurodiversity promote inclusion. Pupil voice has led to the inclusion of trousers as part of an inclusive school uniform. Leaders ensure that pupils respect and celebrate cultural differences through curricular and extra-curricular opportunities. These include learning about African masks and the work of Frida Kahlo in art and recommended age-appropriate reading lists which include stories from around the world.
42. Pupils of all ages have a clear understanding of right and wrong. The youngest children in the early years are taught about essential social skills such as taking turns, listening and being encouraging and kind. Staff model these requirements consistently. Pupils throughout the school are respectful of the rules in place to keep them safe and promote mutual consideration. They understand the importance of respect for the law to promote a cohesive, respectful community.
43. Leaders provide pupils with opportunities to develop their self-confidence through a wide variety of leadership roles for all ages. These include being eco, subject and wellbeing representatives, as well as house captains and school council spokeswomen. Pupil leaders receive helpful guidance which underlines the benefits of supporting others and being effective role models within school. Suitable training is given to those who become peer mentors. Pupils know that their opinions are valued. They learn to argue persuasively and see change for the better arising from their suggestions. For example, a new path which benefits movement round the school has been established on the senior site. Consequently, pupils grow in self-confidence whilst developing new personal and inter-personal skills.
44. The careers guidance programme gives senior pupils access to current impartial careers guidance. Leaders provide a range of opportunities for older pupils to learn about careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and AI through visits to local universities. Leaders also organise an annual careers fair open to pupils from Year 4 onwards. Subject options evenings, alongside presentations from those who have opted for specific subjects, help pupils in Year 9 to make informed choices at GCSE. However, the careers programme is not structured to ensure that pupils build a clear understanding of the full range of opportunities open to them, including apprenticeships, and the skills and knowledge needed to access these, as they consider possible future pathways.

45. There is an appropriate programme of economic education for pupils of all ages. This is delivered through PSHE lessons and the wider curriculum. Pupils learn about topics including personal finance, budgeting and investing. Pupils of all ages organise money-raising events for charitable causes such as the local hospice and cancer charities. The youngest children develop an economic understanding through role plays such as buying and selling at an ice cream kiosk or a café.
46. Leaders encourage pupils to think about the needs of the local community through charity collections for homeless shelters, creating Christmas cards for care homes and hosting events for the elderly. Through the sports leaders programme, pupils act as umpire at local primary schools. Pupils keenly support events such as a sponsored whole-school walk for a children's hospital. These activities help pupils to develop an awareness of the needs of others, alongside social and organisational skills.
47. Leaders ensure that pupils have a well-developed understanding of global issues through a variety of opportunities which look further afield. These include participation in Model United Nations (MUN) activities, Round Square events, including international conferences, and fundraising for a partnership school in Namibia.

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

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

## Safeguarding

49. Leaders have created a robust safeguarding culture throughout the school. The safeguarding policy is suitable and regularly reviewed by governors. Safeguarding procedures are understood well by leaders, staff and governors so that statutory safeguarding guidance is implemented effectively throughout the school. Regular safeguarding and pastoral meetings ensure that concerns are identified quickly and acted upon consistently. The school's clear commitment to protecting and supporting pupils is firmly established in daily practice.
50. Safeguarding leaders receive the necessary training to carry out their roles appropriately. Leaders ensure that all staff and governors receive comprehensive, effective training when they join the school. This is updated regularly, including the 'Prevent' duty training, so that staff and governors remain knowledgeable. Staff understand how to support pupils' online safety and the risks posed by radicalisation and extremism, including in the context of their community.
51. Records show that any reported safeguarding concerns are acted upon appropriately and in a timely manner, with rationales for decisions taken. Incidents that arise inform ongoing safeguarding training. Leaders work effectively with external agencies, making referrals to children's services, the local authority and the police when appropriate. Records are reviewed regularly so that pupils have well-considered ongoing support. As a result, pupils' wellbeing is effectively supported.
52. Pupils are well educated in how to keep themselves safe, including when working online. Pupils of all ages know who to go to if they are concerned for their own or others' safety. Arrangements are in place for them to report anonymously if they so wish. Pupils feel secure and are confident that any concerns they have will be taken seriously.
53. Governors maintain an effective oversight of safeguarding. Leaders report on safeguarding matters to governors termly. Governors discuss termly and annual safeguarding reports with those responsible for safeguarding in the school, so that trends or patterns can be identified and outcomes understood.
54. Leaders have in place a robust internet filtering and monitoring system. Alerts are appropriately investigated and recorded by senior staff and reported to governors. Leaders discuss infringements of the school's acceptable use policy with pupils so that they learn about the possibility of unwanted consequences. Leaders also provide families with advice on use of parental controls as required. The well-designed PSHE course includes specific online safety units and is supplemented by outside providers where appropriate.
55. Recruitment records and the single central record of appointments (SCR) show that all required checks on new staff, governors and volunteers are made in a timely manner. Governors and leaders provide systematic oversight of the SCR and ensure that safer recruitment practice supports the safeguarding of pupils.

### The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

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

## School details

<b>School</b>	St Mary's School
<b>Department for Education number</b>	881/6008
<b>Registered charity number</b>	309266
<b>Address</b>	St Mary's School 91 Lexden Road Colchester Essex CO3 3RB
<b>Phone number</b>	01206 572544
<b>Email address</b>	seniorschool@stmaryscolchester.org.uk
<b>Website</b>	stmaryscolchester.org.uk
<b>Proprietor</b>	St Mary's School (Colchester) Ltd
<b>Chair</b>	Mr Anthony Bell
<b>Headteacher</b>	Mrs Nicola Griffiths
<b>Age range</b>	2 to 17
<b>Number of pupils</b>	428
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	31 January to 2 February 2023

## Information about the school

57. St Mary's School is an independent day school for female pupils in Colchester, Essex. It is located on two sites some three miles apart. The lower school site, for pupils aged 2 to 11 years, includes a co-educational nursery known as the Kindergarten. Education for pupils aged 11 to 17 takes place on the senior school site. The school is a member of Round Square, an organisation devoted to the educational philosophy of Kurt Hahn. It is a registered charity administered by a board of governors. A new chair of governors has been appointed since the previous inspection.
58. The early years provision is made up of four Nursery classes with a total of 48 children, and one Reception class of 16 children.
59. The school has identified 68 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities. No pupils in the school have an education, health and care plan.
60. The school has identified English as an additional language for 69 pupils.
61. The school states its aims are to provide an ambitious, girl-centred education that empowers every pupil to develop high aspirations and a bold, confident attitude to learning and life. It is committed to creating a compassionate and inclusive culture in which every girl is known, supported and understood. Through promoting intellectual curiosity and an enquiring mindset, the school aims to develop pupils' understanding of the world, so that they become dynamic, engaged and responsible global citizens.

## Inspection details

### Inspection dates

10 to 12 February 2026

62. A team of five inspectors visited the school for two and a half days.

63. Inspection activities included:

- observation of lessons, some in conjunction with school leaders
- observation of registration periods and form time
- observation of a sample of extra-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection
- discussions with governors
- discussions with the headteacher, school leaders, managers and other members of staff
- discussions with pupils
- visits to the learning support area and facilities for physical education
- scrutiny of samples of pupils' work
- scrutiny of a range of policies, documentation and records provided by the school.

64. 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](http://www.isi.net)**.

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