

SKANSKA



Essex Schools

Inspiring, inside and out
at Columbus School and College



Overview

Arriving at either of Columbus School and College's sites in North Chelmsford, Essex, is impressive. Open, inviting places with massive, rooftop logos; architecturally interesting buildings designed with obvious care and built in high quality materials; intuitive way finding that draws you in.

Beyond reception, the story is even more inspiring.

Columbus has the capacity to provide education, therapy and care support for 240 children and young people with profound, severe, complex learning difficulties and Autism, many of whom have additional medical needs and physical impairments. Inside the school buildings, a remarkable group of teachers and support staff not only help students achieve their best, they also prepare them for life.

According to Principal Ginny Bellard, the new buildings, delivered in 2012 by a Skanska-led consortium, have created a completely new relationship between the school and its community. She says: *'The old campus was*

closed – hidden behind hedges and gates. It was a bit like the story of Charlie and the chocolate factory – no one ever seemed to go in or out. Now there's no missing us, and this new openness brings us great joy. There's a lot of official community use of our facilities, but local lads also come over to skateboard and the kids from the mainstream school even use our site as a short cut. We've managed to make Special Needs much less scary than it used to be.'

The buildings themselves are part of a broader journey in Special Needs provision that has transformed the discipline in Essex, creating a consistent approach across the country and enabling Columbus to provide world-class care of students with increasingly severe and complex learning difficulties.

Ginny Bellard takes up the story: *'We were originally two special schools. Hayward took students from 4-16 with moderate learning difficulties. Woodlands was for 3-19-year-olds with severe, complex and profound needs. A local council initiative to develop New Model Special Schools created a way of thinking that*

would be consistent across all special needs settings and drove the project to merge those schools into a single entity that could look after all kinds of students from 3-19. But the buildings were holding us back. Of course great teaching can happen anywhere but students like ours have additional needs caused by complex conditions which combine physical disabilities and learning difficulties, as well as the need for physical care and medical support.'

The program to transform Columbus from two schools, one which had originally been a 1950s nursing college and "a village" of portacabins to a world-class special school and college on twin sites has taken over ten years. A new, state-of-the-art early years suite provided the initial momentum for a complete refurbishment with funding from Building Schools for the Future (BSF). Under BSF, Skanska and its partner RM Plc won the contract to build four schools across Essex, as well as a 26-year-operating contract covering hard and soft FM* in three of the schools.

At Columbus, a £24m development budget provided the opportunity to change the lives of some of the most vulnerable young people in the East of England. The new campuses

* Facilities Management

offer 8,500m² of new space, including wider corridors and bigger rooms to accommodate wheelchairs, as well as swimming pools, a gym and spaces for art and music. FM provision includes energy and resource efficiency via a biomass boiler, Micro CHP and rainwater harvesting. Throughout the design process, the school's staff worked with the Skanska team and architects Haverstock to create solutions that would succeed in this unique environment.

'All young people are special,' says Ginny Bellard, 'but our students have additional needs that the new buildings are helping us to meet in several crucial ways.' Her list includes the following benefits:

- Greater levels of dignity for students
- Increased safety
- Better security in quality and sustainability of service
- More opportunities to provide individualized care in bespoke spaces
- Greater staff wellbeing compared to the portacabins the new build replaced.

'We want our youngsters to have everything a typically functioning young person or you and I could access in terms of facilities or technology. As a result of these new buildings, we can now provide a far broader curriculum which keeps





up with the mainstream secondaries and allows us to create bespoke pathways for even the most complex learners.'

In addition to their learning difficulties, mobility is an issue for many for these students, and the school supports them in a number of ways. State-of-the-art hoists in every room enable teachers and support staff to move even the least mobile around the buildings quickly and safely. Extensive soft play areas also allow the young people to experiment with their physical capabilities.

As part of the ICT provision throughout both campuses, innovative 'immersive' rooms allow students to hone both learning and physical skills by interacting with virtual games and topic-related environments. Technology also helps to give equality, choice and voice to everyone - even those who can't speak in the verbal sense.

As students grow up, the college becomes a hub of social and behavioral learning. A lunch club at the cafeteria and food preparation classes gives them experiences designed to help them live as independently as possible.

Despite the fact that some will always function at a developmental age of 12-18 months, none leave without having undergone important rites of passage into adulthood- social interaction and inclusion, experiences of independent living skills and community based learning.

Throughout both campuses, the warmth and moral purpose of the staff are compelling, and the bright, airy and open environment seems a fitting home for this most difficult and important work.

Ginny Bellard concludes: *'The measure of our society is how we treat the most needy in the community, and there's something both magical and tangible about what we're doing in this place to make difference the norm. The buildings really help.'*



“ I like coming to school. It is very big. I like swimming, P.D. (physical development), choir and going to the ball pool ”

— Archie

The project in brief

Columbus School and College in Chelmsford, Essex, provides special needs education to 240 children and young people. The School has children aged from Nursery to Year 10 and the College has students from Year 7 to Year 11. There is also a Further Education Department on College Campus which has students from Year 12 to Year 14.

- Floor area 8,502 m²
- % New build 81%
- % Refurb 7%
- % Retained 12%
- Construction start May 2010
- Construction end December 2011
- Capex £20,861k
- Total FM per annum £403k





“ I like Columbus school because they have nice lunches, my favorite room is soft play and I enjoy musical instruments ”

— Sarah



The Essex Building Schools for the Future program

Essex is northeast of London and is one of the UK's most populous counties. Skanska and our joint venture partner RM Plc hold the contract to redevelop schools in Essex as part of the former UK Government's Building Schools for the Future (BSF) program.

Essex Local Education Partnership (Essex LEP) is a special purpose company set up to deliver educational infrastructure projects in Essex. Shareholders in Essex LEP include Essex County Council (ECC), Skanska, RM and Amber Infrastructure.

A £73m contract for the development of the first four schools (three PFI, one Design & Build) was signed in May 2010 and the schools were handed over to the client in spring 2012.

Essex LEP are currently working with ECC to deliver a range of projects in Essex including primary and secondary schools and also special education needs schools. The strategic partnership agreement with ECC remains in place until 2020.

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