

Inspection of a good school: INSPIRE Free Special School

Churchill Avenue, Silverbank, Chatham, Kent ME5 0LB

Inspection dates:

13 and 14 December 2023

Outcome

INSPIRE Free Special School continues to be a good school.

The headteacher of this school is Mark Burgiss. This school is part of the Parallel Learning multi-academy trust, which means other people in the trust also have responsibility for running the school. The trust is run by the interim chief executive officer, Angela Barry, and overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by Jonathan Alvis.

What is it like to attend this school?

All pupils at this school have social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs and have often had a negative experience of school prior to joining INSPIRE. Staff work to build positive relationships with pupils and to help them feel welcome within the school community.

When pupils first join, they often struggle to attend regularly and, when at school, to regulate their emotions. The school works carefully with each pupil, and their family, to challenge their negative views of school and to establish regular attendance. For most pupils, this work has a highly positive impact on their achievement and engagement with education.

The school has established very clear expectations for pupils' behaviour. Pupils understand the systems in place, and how to access support when they need it. Over time, pupils learn to take ownership of their behaviour as they work towards their personalised 'social and independence' targets. Classrooms are generally settled and calm. Pupils are receptive to learning and recognise the value of the qualifications they are supported to achieve. They work hard to live up to the high expectations of the school.

Pupils with autism, and/or other SEND, learn in a mixed-age class called 'The Meadows'. Like pupils across the school, pupils in 'The Meadows' are supported to form positive friendships. They have learned that they can be themselves at school and will be accepted by their peers.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

Leaders at all levels have thought carefully about exactly what pupils need to learn in order to be ready academically, but also socially and emotionally, for their next steps. Pupils follow a broad curriculum that has been designed to ensure that they acquire the foundational knowledge and skills they need in reading, writing and mathematics.

Since the last inspection, leaders have redeveloped their reading programme and introduced a phonics approach for pupils. Pupils are successfully supported to catch up with their reading. Pupils across the school regularly read aloud, and with confidence, within lessons. Through the school's English curriculum, pupils engage with and respond to a range of high-quality texts. Leaders recognise, however, that they need to revisit how knowledge is organised in English, including the texts that pupils study, to ensure that pupils are able to read and comprehend increasingly complex texts.

Across the curriculum, pupils work towards appropriate and ambitious qualifications. In the strongest subjects, including mathematics, there is a clear and well sequenced curriculum in place that sets out the small steps of knowledge that pupils need to achieve as they build towards more complex skills and outcomes. The school ensures that teachers with less experience are well supported by expert teachers and leaders so that they can deliver the curriculum as leaders intend. The school ensures that pupils' progress through the curriculum is checked carefully, and any gaps in pupils' knowledge and understanding are addressed. Pupils are achieving well in these subjects.

In a small number of subjects, leaders recognise that there is more work to do on the underlying curriculum. In these subjects, staff sometimes focus too heavily on exam criteria from the start of key stage 3, and the way learning builds over time has been less carefully considered. Across the subjects, while spoken language is prioritised by staff, curriculum thinking in this area is underdeveloped. Opportunities for pupils to develop their proficiency in spoken language have not been planned carefully enough in English or across other subjects. Leaders have recently recruited additional teachers with expertise in curriculum development to address this.

Rightly, the school places a strong emphasis on pupils' personal, social and health education (PSHE) and relationships and sex education. Leaders have ensured that teachers are expert in the teaching of these subjects so that they can teach and explain complex issues confidently. There is a clear and well-sequenced curriculum in place, which is then adapted and supplemented based on the needs of each pupil. As a result, pupils can confidently explain their developing knowledge and understanding of issues such as consent. The school have developed a clear careers programme for all pupils.

Attendance is an ongoing focus for the school. Some pupils arrive having been out of school for a significant period. The school works systematically to bring about improvements in pupils' attendance. Their work is leading to clear improvements in the attendance of most pupils. For a small number of pupils, whose attendance has remained low over time, leaders need to sharpen their analysis so that they can tailor the support and intervention required more precisely.

Despite turbulence in trust leadership, school leaders have remained steadfast and focused, taking decisions in the best interests of pupils. Those responsible for governance have a clear understanding of their roles and provide effective support and challenge to leaders.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- In a few subjects, the small steps of learning from pupils' starting points to the curriculum's ambitious end points have not been considered carefully enough. Pupils are not learning as well in these subjects. Leaders need to ensure that, across the curriculum, small steps of learning have been carefully considered, and it is clear how pupils' knowledge and understanding will build over time.
- The school has not coherently planned how they will develop pupils' spoken language over time to ensure that pupils are supported to broaden their vocabularies and develop their ability to discuss, debate and express themselves with increasing ease over time. Leaders need to develop this strand of the curriculum in English and across the curriculum.
- The attendance of some pupils remains too low. These pupils are not fully benefiting from the education that the school provides. The school should continue to work with pupils and their families to ensure that pupils attend school frequently. The school should ensure their analysis of attendance patterns extends over time so that they can build a full picture of any barriers to high attendance and strategically plan how these will be overcome.

Background

When we have judged a school to be good, we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains good. This is called an ungraded inspection, and it is carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. We do not give graded judgements on an ungraded inspection. However, if we find evidence that a school would now receive a higher or lower grade, then the next inspection will be a graded inspection, which is carried out under section 5 of the Act. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the ungraded inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour or the quality of education, we will deem the ungraded inspection a graded inspection immediately.

This is the first ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be good in June 2018.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, 'disadvantaged pupils' is used to mean pupils with SEND; pupils who meet the [definition of children in need of help and protection](#); pupils receiving statutory local authority support from a social worker; and pupils who otherwise meet the criteria used for deciding the school's [pupil premium funding](#) (this includes pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years, looked after children (children in local authority care) and/or children who left care through adoption or another formal route).

School details

Unique reference number	141005
Local authority	Medway
Inspection number	10288041
Type of school	Special
School category	Free school special
Age range of pupils	11 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	71
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	0
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Jonathan Alvis
CEO of the trust	Angela Barry (interim)
Headteacher	Mark Burgiss
Website	www.inspireacademy.org.uk
Dates of previous inspection	5 and 6 June 2018, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The school is part of the Parallel Learning multi-academy trust.
- An interim CEO was appointed to the trust in September 2023.
- All pupils on roll have an education, health and care plan. The school caters for pupils whose predominant area of need is SEMH. Pupils have historically exhibited challenging behaviour, and many have been permanently excluded, or out of school before joining Inspire Free Special School.
- The school uses one unregistered alternative provider.
- The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 8 to 13 with information and engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.
- The school is registered for pupils up to the age of 18. However, at present, pupils typically leave the school at the end of Year 11.

Information about this inspection

Inspections are a point-in-time judgement about the quality of a school's education provision.

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors met with the headteacher and the deputy headteacher. The lead inspector met with the CEO of the multi-academy trust and spoke with a trustee.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: English, mathematics, physical education and PSHE. For each deep dive, inspectors held discussions about the curriculum, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, the inspectors: reviewed the single central record; took account of the views of leaders, staff and pupils; and considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils' interests first.

Inspection team

Alice Roberts, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

Caroline Clarke

Ofsted Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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Textphone: 0161 618 8524
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