

Inspection of an outstanding school: Mulberry Bush School

Abingdon Road, Standlake, Witney, Oxfordshire OX29 7RW

Inspection dates:

28 and 29 March 2023

Outcome

There has been no change to this school's overall judgement of outstanding as a result of this ungraded (section 8) inspection. However, the evidence gathered suggests that the inspection grade might not be as high if a graded (section 5) inspection were carried out now. The next inspection will therefore be a graded inspection.

What is it like to attend this school?

Most pupils love attending this school, though some agree that they would like the environment to be calmer on occasion. Staff have high expectations of behaviour and engagement in learning but understand when pupils find it hard to contain their anxieties. They have good strategies in place when pupils need additional time. Often this will include one-to-one support in or out of the classroom. Staff also understand that sometimes just a kind and reassuring word is all that is needed to ensure that pupils focus on the tasks set for them.

Pupils feel that staff care for them. They feel safe at the school, including from bullying. Two pupils explained to the lead inspector that the reason for this is partly to do with the work that has been done in school around racist and homophobic bullying and abuse, which has given them a good insight into equality and the lives of others.

The school provides a unique curriculum offer linked to pupils' personal needs. It prioritises their social and emotional development and rebuilding self-belief and self-esteem. Extra-curricular activities feature highly on pupils' list of 'positives'. These include camping trips, visits to a local aqua park and boating trips on the Thames.

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

Leaders have a clear rationale for the curriculum and how it supports pupils to learn. Staff understand this. They know what leaders' priorities are and appreciate the support leaders give them, in and out of the classroom. Teachers use their own knowledge and experience to design learning that interests and engages pupils. They are equally knowledgeable about pupils' complex needs and the additional barriers to learning that many arrive with. The result of this is a bespoke curriculum which is fit for purpose and meets the needs of pupils well.

Most pupils attend the school for time-limited programmes. Although most stay for three years, staff know that there is a lot of ground that needs to be covered in that time. This is all the more important when pupils' starting points are taken into account. Many have been out of education for long periods before joining. All have significant gaps in their knowledge and understanding. As pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities, most find concentrating for long periods challenging. Despite this, staff are patient and make timely adjustments to their classroom practice, often in the moment. The positive impact on learning this makes is clear to see. This is particularly the case for pupils who have been at the school for longer periods of time who are more settled.

Leaders prioritise the core subjects of mathematics and English. They know that if pupils cannot read, write or are not numerate, learning in other subjects will suffer. Teaching pupils to read and enjoy the written word is given a high priority. The school's phonics programme is delivered well by knowledgeable staff. One older pupil talked with pride about how he could not read when he arrived. He doggedly named the key staff who had persevered and helped him over time, ensuring that the lead inspector noted each name in his records.

Despite the strengths apparent in some subjects, others are less developed. Leaders have valid reasons for why some aspects of the curriculum are given higher priority than others. Though the curriculum has adequate breadth, leaders are constantly assessing what needs to be taught and when. Because of their monitoring, they know that in some subjects, staff are not as clear about the key knowledge that pupils should learn as they could be.

Pupils access a wide range of extra-curricular activities on and off the school site. They talk enthusiastically about sewing, cooking and taking part in drama or different sports clubs. Pupils learn about diversity, equality and different faiths as part of the personal, social and health education (PSHE) programme. They enjoy the opportunities the lunch club allows them when exploring food from other countries and cultures.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

The culture to protect the welfare, health and safety of all at the school is strong. Leaders and staff are very aware of their duties to keep pupils safe in and out of school. Training for all staff and trustees is ongoing and relevant. It enables them to be proactive in their approach to safeguarding. Work with professionals outside of school, including members of the local safeguarding partnership, enables leaders to ensure that concerns are addressed appropriately. Staff recruitment checks are vigorous and cover all statutory requirements.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- In some subjects, teachers are not aware of the key component knowledge that pupils

need to learn. This means that opportunities to build on prior learning as pupils move through the school's curriculum are not as effective as they might be. Leaders are aware of this. They have started to review some subject overviews. Some of this work is complete, but in subjects such as history and geography, this work still needs to be finalised.

Background

When we have judged a school to be outstanding, we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains outstanding. 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 second ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be outstanding in November 2012.

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](#)' refers to those pupils who attract government pupil premium funding: pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years and pupils in care or who left care through adoption or another formal route.

School details

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| Unique reference number | 123330 |
| Local authority | Oxfordshire |
| Inspection number | 10256566 |
| Type of school | Special |
| School category | Non-maintained special |
| Age range of pupils | 5 to 12 |
| Gender of pupils | Mixed |
| Number of pupils on the school roll | 21 |
| Appropriate authority | Board of trustees |
| Chair of trust | Zoe Lattimer |
| Headteacher | Jessica Hooper |
| Website | www.mulberrybush.org.uk |
| Date of previous inspection | 16 January 2018, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 |

Information about this school

- This is a special school for pupils in the age range five to 12. At the time of the inspection, there were no pupils in Years 1 to 3.
- The school caters for pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs. Most pupils have education, health and care plans.
- Many pupils who attend the school have been out of school-based education for extended periods before joining the school.
- Most pupils attend the school for set three-year programmes.
- The school is governed by the board of trustees.
- The school does not use alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors held meetings with senior leaders, members of the school's wider leadership

team, curriculum leaders and teaching and support staff.

- The lead inspector met with the chair and vice-chair of the board of trustees. He also held telephone conversations with officers from two local authorities who place pupils at the school.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: early reading, mathematics and PSHE. Deep dives included visiting lessons, looking at pupils' work and talking to leaders, teachers and pupils. Inspectors also considered elements of other curriculum subjects when considering the quality of education the school provides.
- The lead inspector heard pupils read to their peers and members of staff.
- Inspectors checked a range of policies and documents, including the school's single central record. They also reviewed the school's website and other records regarding the welfare, health and safety of pupils and staff.
- Inspectors gathered evidence to explore the impact of pupils' behaviour, the school's wider curriculum offer and how leaders support staff with their workload.
- Pupils were talked to throughout the inspection to gain their views about the school. The lead inspector also met formally with pupils on day two of the inspection.
- Inspectors considered the views of parents submitted through Ofsted Parent View. The views of staff were also considered through Ofsted's confidential staff survey.

Inspection team

Clive Close, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Christine Bulmer

Ofsted Inspector

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