

Sycamore Hall Preparatory School

1 Hall Flat Lane, Balby, Doncaster, South Yorkshire, DN4 8PT

Inspection dates	12–13 June 2013	
Overall effectiveness	Good	2
Pupils' achievement	Good	2
Pupils' behaviour and personal development	Good	2
Quality of teaching	Good	2
Quality of curriculum	Good	2
Pupils' welfare, health and safety	Outstanding	1
Leadership and management	Good	2

Summary of key findings

This school is good because

- Pupils make good progress, achieve above average standards and are well prepared for secondary education.
- Good teaching ensures that pupils' skills in reading, writing and mathematics are well developed, and the curriculum provides well for the range of pupils' aptitudes and interests.
- Pupils' behaviour is excellent and their exemplary attitudes to learning greatly help pupils to make good progress.
- Parents and carers rightly have confidence that pupils are happy and feel secure in this family run school.
- Since the last inspection, leaders have improved the school by ensuring that all the government regulations are met and that teaching and pupils' progress are better.

It is not yet outstanding because

- Opportunities for pupils to use their computer skills across the curriculum to research and explore knowledge and understanding are limited.
- Pupils have few first hand opportunities to learn about contrasting cultures.
- There is not enough time given for pupils to write for different purposes and audiences.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school meets schedule 1 of The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2010, as amended by The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2012 ('the independent school standards') and associated requirements.

Information about this inspection

- This inspection took place at one day's notice.
- Inspectors observed six lessons taught by two different teachers.
- Discussions were held with staff and the headteacher/proprietor. Inspectors spoke to pupils during the inspection to listen to their views about the school. Also, inspectors met with four individual parents and carers. Additionally, inspectors read one letter written by a parent which was emailed to the inspection service provider and sent to the inspection team. There were an insufficient number of responses to the on-line questionnaire (Parent View) for inspectors to take into account.
- Inspectors read a range of documents, including the school's policies and safeguarding checks, and looked at pupils' work.

Inspection team

John Coleman, Lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Jane Millward

Her Majesty's Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- Sycamore Hall Preparatory School is a small, well-established independent school for boys and girls between the ages of three and 11 years. The school aims to offer pupils a 'unique educational experience in a caring family atmosphere'.
- The school is registered for up to 45 pupils aged three to 11 years. Currently, there are 15 pupils on roll. None of the pupils has a statement of special educational needs. Around one third of pupils are of minority ethnic heritage.
- The school offers before- and after-school care for pupils on roll which is managed by the school's proprietor.
- The school was last inspected in October 2010 which resulted in a published progress monitoring report.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Increase the opportunities for pupils to write for different purposes and audiences.
- Provide better first-hand opportunities for pupils to learn about contrasting cultures and communities.
- Enable pupils to use their information and communication technology (ICT) skills across the curriculum to research and explore knowledge and understanding.

Inspection judgements

Pupils' achievement

Good

Pupils' achievement is good. Overall, pupils join the school with a level of skills, knowledge and experience which is typical for their age. Due to effective teaching that has a strong focus on basic skills, all groups of pupils make good progress to reach standards which are generally above average by the age of 11 years. The standards reached by pupils in reading at age seven and 11 are above average. Standards of handwriting and grammar are high. Standardised test scores, administered by the school, show that a large majority of pupils attain above average scores in English, mathematics and verbal reasoning. Around half of the pupils in the last three years have attained high scores in these tests. As a result, most pupils are successful in gaining places at the secondary school of their choice. A good number of these are to selective independent schools and some pupils have been awarded scholarships. In science and in most non-core subjects pupils make good progress, with particular strengths in history and geography. Pupils' technical writing skills are well developed, but opportunities to write for a variety of purposes and audiences are limited. There are some examples of pupils writing poems, letters, play scripts and persuasive articles but not enough time is allocated to this type of writing. Also, while pupils learn the skills of using computers and how to use the internet in discrete lessons, they do not have opportunities to apply these skills across the curriculum in other subjects. This is a missed opportunity to extend and develop pupils' knowledge and understanding.

Pupils' behaviour and personal development

Good

Pupils' behaviour and personal development is good overall. Pupils' behaviour and attitudes to learning are first rate and this has a very beneficial effect on their learning. Teachers set high expectations and pupils respond politely, showing very good manners. Parents and carers say that behaviour is excellent and, for many, this is one of the main reasons that they chose the school. Pupils are taught a clear moral code based upon a good system of rewards and sanctions. Pupils say they enjoy school, are happy and feel safe. Attendance is good. Social development is very good giving pupils many opportunities to develop, as parents and carers say, into well-rounded individuals. For example, lunch is a family type occasion where conversation and table manners are important to everyone. Pupils enjoy opportunities to learn through local community involvement, such as by visiting the elderly people's home and giving their harvest festival gifts. Pupils develop their self-esteem and self-confidence well due to the constant positive praise and encouragement from staff. Cultural development is aided through regular teaching about other faiths and religions. Pupils show good understanding and develop tolerance of people of other backgrounds and beliefs. However, there are underdeveloped opportunities for pupils to visit places of worship, other than a Christian church, to listen to other leaders of faiths or to have first-hand contact with a school or community of contrasting characteristics in Britain or overseas. Visits from the mayor, the fire service, historical studies of Britain and trips to places of interest do much to increase pupils' general knowledge of public institutions and services in England.

Quality of teaching

Good

The quality of teaching is good. Teachers adopt a mostly formal and instructional approach to teaching, especially in the core subjects, which results in pupils showing very good concentration and making good progress in lessons. Most of the lessons seen by inspectors were judged as good. When pupils start at the school, they complete an assessment to identify what they know and can do. This is used well by teachers to match the level of challenge to pupils' ability in lessons. Teachers know the pupils very well and pay close attention to their individual needs. A strength of the teaching is the way that teachers respond quickly and effectively to any misunderstanding pupils show in lessons. This results in a good deal of one-to-one coaching which speeds up the

progress pupils make. Teachers mark pupils' work as it proceeds, providing mostly instant feedback and guidance on how well they are doing. This means that very little time is wasted or lost. Relationships between staff and pupils are first class and this significantly helps pupils to learn. Pupils produce a large amount of written work which is well presented. Handwriting skills develop quickly and many older pupils write in a mature cursive script. The non-core subjects are often taught using an approach with a greater emphasis on providing pupils with practical experience and knowledge gained from studying literature, the natural world or through additional resources, such as video clips. For example, older pupils were seen studying a topic on Britain during the Second World War. A visit had been made to the Eden Camp, pupils had read parts of 'The Diary of Anne Frank' and had looked at images of the blitz while learning about the blackout and evacuees. Such topics bring learning to life for pupils and many parents spoke of how interested their children were as a result. Teachers use computers and other technology to present parts of lessons, but miss opportunities to extend pupils' learning across many subjects through research and investigation aided by computers and the internet. The teaching of technical writing skills such as grammar, spelling, and handwriting are good and effective. However, opportunities for pupils to write for a full range of genre are limited, especially for younger pupils.

Quality of curriculum

Good

The quality of the curriculum is good. The range of subjects provides a well-planned and balanced diet of opportunities including history, geography, science, music, French and art. The basic skills curriculum is well provided, with the exception of the opportunities for pupils' wider writing and in the application of pupils' computer skills. It is highly structured and ensures that pupils reach above average standards overall. The school provides a variety of sporting opportunities for pupils and makes effective use of local facilities. For example, inspectors observed pupils walking to the local recreation centre where they were taught tennis and athletic skills. The school premises are used well to enrich the curriculum by making effective use of the garden, the pond and wildlife, including the pet guinea pigs. Extra-curricular activities are provided after school and are well attended. They include film club, computer club and gardening. Regular educational visits are made to extend pupils' experiences, such as to the local church, elderly people's home and the Mansion House. The curriculum prepares pupils well for the next stage of their education.

Pupils' welfare, health and safety

Outstanding

Pupils' welfare, health and safety are outstanding. All the independent school standards are met. Risk assessments for fire, educational visits and for lessons in general are rigorous and very thorough. Fire drills and the servicing of equipment are carried out regularly. Staff place a very high importance on keeping pupils safe and, as a result, pupils, parents and carers have confidence that they are safe. Pupils know about internet safety and the curriculum includes teaching about the dangers of drugs and alcohol. The school places a very high priority on safeguarding pupils. All the required checks on staff and volunteers are made and recorded appropriately on a single central register. Training for the designated safeguarding person is up-to-date and to the required level. All staff have received suitable training for safeguarding. First aid training is also to the required level and is up-to-date, including for paediatric first aid. All teachers have first aid training. Supervision is vigilant. Pupils, parents and carers say there is no bullying. Pupils understand the different types of bullying and are confident of adult help if it was needed.

Leadership and management

Good

Leadership and management are good. All the independent school standards are met. Leaders have an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses, though the formal recording of this is at an early stage. The two teachers are sisters; together they provide passionate and committed leadership and teaching to the school which they view as their family.

They form a strong partnership which shares the responsibilities for every aspect of school life. Parents and carers enthused about the approachability of staff and the family atmosphere which they admire and appreciate. There is unanimous praise for the level of care and the quality of education provided by the school.

The two teachers are ably supported by a team of volunteers, some of who are ex-employees of the school. They share the teachers' enthusiasm for improving the school and provide additional skills and experience to benefit the pupils. For example, one ex-teacher and one ex-teaching assistant continue to provide teaching assistance. They know the pupils well and provide very good guidance and support to pupils. Additionally, the school cook is a volunteer helper, long associated with the school. She also provides extra supervision and acts as a receptionist. All volunteers are included in the school's rigorous safeguarding checks and they form a valuable part of the staff team. Under the leadership of the headteacher, they are united in their drive to provide the very best education for pupils.

The quality of teaching is good due to the impact of the headteacher's actions and the staff's commitment. Leading by example, the headteacher provides opportunities for others to learn by observing her teaching. She ensures that the policies and procedures of the school are consistently implemented by all staff. The achievements of pupils, for example in the standardised tests, are carefully recorded but they are not fully analysed to track pupils' progress. The school development plan outlines the main areas for improvement, but it does not contain any details of the timescales or how the success of actions will be measured.

Information for parents and carers is of good quality, including twice yearly written reports. Parents and carers are made aware of the range of policies which they may access, including the school's complaints procedures which meet all the requirements.

The school premises make a very good contribution to pupils' learning. They provide a good quality environment in which to learn. The headteacher/proprietor, staff and volunteers ensure that the building is extremely well maintained. Resources are well matched to pupils' learning needs. The outdoor learning environment is equally well resourced.

What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	A school which provides an exceptional quality of education and significantly exceeds minimum requirements.
Grade 2	Good	A school which provides a high quality of education that exceeds minimum requirements.
Grade 3	Adequate	A school which meets minimum requirements but needs to improve the quality of education it provides.
Grade 4	Inadequate	A school where minimum requirements are not met and/or the quality of education has serious weaknesses.

School details

Unique reference number	106816
Inspection number	420202
DfE registration number	371/6010

This inspection was carried out under section 162A of the Education Act 2002, as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005, the purpose of which is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

Type of school	Preparatory
School status	Independent School
Age range of pupils	3–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	15
Number of part time pupils	0
Proprietor	Miss J Spencer
Headteacher	Miss J Spencer
Date of previous school inspection	October 2010
Annual fees (day pupils)	£4,752
Telephone number	01302 856800
Email address	sycamorehall@tiscali.co.uk

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