

Merstone School

Windward Way, Smith's Wood, Birmingham, B36 0UE

Inspection dates 4–5 February 2014

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Outstanding	1
	This inspection:	Outstanding	1
Achievement of pupils		Outstanding	1
Quality of teaching		Outstanding	1
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Outstanding	1
Leadership and management		Outstanding	1

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school.

- All groups of pupils achieve exceptionally well throughout the school because staff tailor activities to their widely differing needs.
- The staff work exceptionally well together. They are highly experienced and have a deep understanding of pupils' individual needs. As a result, all the pupils make rapid progress and thrive.
- Teaching is excellent because all the teachers are continually extending their understanding and skills through training.
- The experienced governing body supports the school's work and challenges senior leaders to improve it even more. Governors question leaders carefully about how they are improving teaching and raising pupils' achievement.
- The headteacher and her very strong leadership team are never content but are constantly striving to develop the school further.
- Pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties achieve exceptionally well but the school's assessment does not always show how much progress they have made within levels.
- The sixth form is outstanding. Students achieve extremely well because of the many opportunities they have to become more independent. They are proud of everything they achieve and they are very well prepared for the next stage in their lives.
- Behaviour and safety are excellent. Given their starting points, pupils develop very high levels of confidence, learn to take initiative and make their own choices. Relationships throughout the school are excellent.

Information about this inspection

- The inspectors observed teaching and learning in 19 lessons, all of which were joint observations with a senior leader. In addition, inspectors observed a music therapy session and a literacy support session. Inspectors looked at pupils' work and heard them read.
- Meetings were held with governors, a local authority representative and a range of staff, including key stage leaders and the head of the sixth form.
- The inspection team looked at a number of documents, including records relating to the school's self-evaluation, behaviour, safety, safeguarding, attendance, and checks on teaching and learning. Records of pupils' progress were also examined.
- Inspectors talked to pupils and parents to gain their views of the school in addition to reviewing the school's own parental survey. There were insufficient responses to the online questionnaire (Parent View) to be reported. Inspectors reviewed 32 questionnaires returned by staff.

Inspection team

Lynda Walker, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Carol Deakin

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- Merstone is a special school for pupils with severe learning difficulties and profound and multiple learning difficulties. About a third have severe medical needs and an increasing number have autistic spectrum disorders and/or behavioural, social and emotional difficulties. All the pupils have a statement of special educational needs.
- The large majority of pupils are of White British heritage. The rest of the pupils come from a wide range of European and Asian backgrounds, and a high proportion of these speak English as an additional language.
- The proportion of pupils eligible for the pupil premium is significantly above the national average. This additional government funding is provided to support pupils who are known to be eligible for free school meals and children looked after by the local authority.
- The Early Years Foundation Stage provision includes a child assessment unit for up to 20 children. These children are in the process of being assessed for a statement of special educational needs and often move on to mainstream or other special schools.
- The school was awarded specialist schools status (for communication and interaction) in September 2010 and maintains this status. It also has a number of other prestigious awards.
- The school shares its building with another special school, Forest Oak. The two schools form a federation and have the same Principal and governing body. They also share some specialist staff and resources. Smith's Wood Sports College, a mainstream school, is also on the same site.
- The school works closely with UNITY: a collaboration of mainstream and other special schools.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Refine assessment procedures for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties so that their progress over time within levels is recognised and celebrated.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils is outstanding

- All pupils, including those who have severe learning difficulties, profound and multiple learning difficulties, autistic spectrum disorders, minority ethnic pupils and those for whom English is a second language make outstanding progress. This is because of the outstanding teaching and exceptional training provided for teachers and teaching assistants. All pupils are very well supported to do the very best they can.
- From a wide range of starting points, the proportions of pupils in all groups making and exceeding expected levels of progress are extremely high. There are no significant differences between the achievement of different groups and the promotion of equal opportunities is outstanding.
- The more-able pupils make very good progress in developing their literacy and numeracy skills. Inspectors heard a number of them read fluently and with expression. All pupils observed were enthused and motivated by the activities they were doing and this made a significant contribution to the progress they were making.
- Pupils' progress is monitored very rigorously and this helps staff to set relevant targets for the pupils. Relevant and appropriate support programmes are put in place for pupils who need additional help to achieve their targets.
- The pupil premium is used highly effectively to fund additional staff and resources. This includes a speech and language therapist, music therapist, tablet computers and other communication devices to reduce barriers to learning. These enable pupils to achieve extremely well. Their progress is monitored carefully and is on a par with that of their classmates in English and mathematics.
- Additional funding for Year 7 pupils who need to catch up with their learning is used well on additional resources for English and mathematics. This contributes to these pupils' outstanding achievement, very positive attitudes and preparation for later life and learning.
- Pupils in all groups have excellent opportunities to take part in sport and to develop their skills in physical education as a result of the school's high quality resources, and those of Smith's Wood Sports College and Forest Oak School. These opportunities are being developed and extended further through the effective use of the primary school sport funding. Pupils spoken to were able to explain why it is important to exercise and to lead a healthy lifestyle.
- Children in the Early Years Foundation Stage make outstanding progress because they have such a wide range of opportunities for learning. They very quickly develop a growing awareness and use of symbols, pictures and print and are able to make and communicate choices.
- The highly effective and consistent use of symbols helps all pupils, including those with autistic spectrum disorders and other highly complex needs, to communicate preferences. Pupils quickly develop the basic skills of communication, English and mathematics through a very wide range of activities and the use of communication aids is a real strength of the school.
- Students in the sixth form achieve outstandingly well because they follow highly relevant, well-thought-out programmes and gain qualifications in life skills modules that prepare them extremely well for their next placement and for life within their local communities.

The quality of teaching is outstanding

- Teaching is outstanding, including in English and mathematics, and leaders have been unwavering in making sure that no teaching is less than good.
- Pupils develop very positive attitudes to life and learning because lessons and activities are interesting and relevant. Children in the Early Years Foundation Stage loved choosing from a range of activities, including trying new food, working with sand and with the interactive white board, which successfully spurred on their learning and development extremely well. Older pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties, including physical difficulties, developed their physical skills, language and scientific knowledge exceptionally well as they made scrambled eggs on toast.
- Teaching in the Early Years Foundation Stage is excellent. It includes highly effective activities inside and outside, some of which are directed by adults and others chosen by children.
- Teaching assistants make a very strong contribution to learning in lessons through the excellent support they provide for pupils' academic, medical and physical needs. Like teachers, they have excellent relationships with the pupils and are skilled at knowing when to give them additional help or where to wait and allow pupils extra time to think things out for themselves.
- There is a thorough and consistent approach in all lessons to the development of literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology. Teachers are alert to opportunities to develop these areas, even when they are teaching other subjects or topics, and these extra chances to practise make an effective contribution to pupils' excellent progress. Trained staff use visual prompt cards, signing and new technologies effectively to support pupils with autistic spectrum disorders and those with complex needs.
- Teaching is supported by a detailed understanding of pupils' current attainment, what they do well and what they need to learn next. School leaders check very carefully that the information collected about pupils' progress is accurate and used effectively by teachers to plan and adapt their lessons to each pupil's needs. The recording of the progress made by pupils with profound and multiple difficulties is not refined enough to reflect accurately the progress they make within a level.
- Teaching in the sixth form is outstanding because it is so well rooted in real life outside school. Activities are extremely motivating to students, and they were very keen to explain their work-experience placements and were pleased and proud of their achievements.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are outstanding

- The school's work to keep pupils safe and secure is outstanding. The health and safety governor carries out regular checks to ensure the building is well maintained and comprehensive risk assessments are carried out for activities taking place both in and out of school. Pupils say they feel safe in school because there are fobs for all of the doors and visitors on site wear a badge so they know it is safe to talk to them.
- Pupils are taught about how to keep themselves safe both at home and at school and they learn about how to stay safe when using computers as part of their lessons. They were able to tell the inspectors what might be an unsafe situation and what they would do.
- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding. They develop exceptionally good relationships, behaviour and attitudes. Parents and carers appreciate this and comment on how well their children

develop and thrive.

- Pupils are taught about appropriate and inappropriate behaviour as well as different forms of bullying. Pupils' understanding of this varies according to their starting point and level of need. Pupils spoken to during the inspection were adamant that no bullying takes place but knew that if they were upset for any reason, a teacher or adult would always help them.
- Staff use a range of communication techniques extremely well, very successfully helping pupils to remain or become calm, understand events and express their needs and preferences. Staff are extremely consistent in their approaches, adjusting activities and expectations to support and include pupils. Despite some challenging behaviour, there have been no exclusions.
- The behaviour of students in the sixth form is exemplary. They settle quickly to their lessons, are keen to improve and are proud to be part of the school. They are very proud of their role as mentors to younger children in the school.
- Excellent behaviour management and exceedingly good partnerships with other professionals enable all groups of pupils to remain in lessons and maximise their learning time. Some pupils with more complex medical needs have had to have extended periods of time out of school but the majority of pupils attend well. The overall rate of attendance is broadly average when compared with national figures for special schools.

The leadership and management are outstanding

- The headteacher and senior leaders are exceptional in the way that they get the best out of everyone, staff and pupils alike. Leaders are rigorous in the way they check on how pupils are doing and how well lessons help each to learn. This ensures continuous progress for pupils through all key stages in the school. Staff are proud to work at the school and 'have flourished with consistent support from the headteacher and deputy headteacher who engage everyone in working towards common aims that are understood by all'.
- The federation between Forest Oak and Merstone School has enabled the staff of both schools to share resources and facilities and to work more closely together. Pupils from both schools also have numerous opportunities to work alongside each other which has had a positive impact on their confidence and self esteem.
- Teamwork and relationships amongst the staff are outstanding. Communication between different members of staff, as well as other professionals, is detailed and transparent. Leadership responsibilities are delegated and shared extremely well amongst teachers with responsibility for aspects of the school's work. Both the Early Years Foundation Stage and the sixth form are extremely well led and managed and all staff feel that their contributions to school improvement are truly valued and appreciated.
- Leaders' high levels of effectiveness are very apparent in the way they lead and manage teaching. They monitor lessons very frequently and rapidly identify and address any areas of relative weakness, for example through frequent and highly effective training. There are secure procedures in place for managing the performance of teachers and other staff.
- The stimulating curriculum is effectively matched to the needs of all groups of learners. At Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form, the curriculum builds on individual's strengths and interests and the emphasis is on enabling the students to achieve their goals to go to work or college. The school's effective partnerships with local businesses and colleges support students' progress to

further education and the world of work well.

- Pupils' personal development, including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is exceptional. Pupils have many opportunities to collaborate and work towards being independent and to take part in mainstream events. An excellent example of this is a dance festival that pupils take part in at Smith's Wood Sports College.
- Pupils' safety is paramount and the school fully meets safeguarding requirements. Procedures are followed meticulously. Excellent working with other agencies and parents and carers promote the safety, well-being and learning of all pupils exceptionally well.
- The school's engagement with parents is excellent and very much appreciated. Parents are particularly impressed by the gains their children make in learning to do things on their own and improving their confidence and self-esteem. Parents told the inspectors that their children are happy to come to school and they, themselves, feel welcomed in the school. They very much appreciate the way in which the staff keep them informed about what their children have been doing every day.
- Leaders and governors tackle discrimination and promote equality of opportunity for all of the pupils. Close working relationships with a range of health, medical, therapy and social care agencies help break down barriers to learning for the pupils.
- The school is making effective use of its primary sport funding. The employment of a sports teacher has had a positive impact on the progress pupils make and has contributed significantly to the professional development of other teachers. Leaders ensure that every child in the school takes part in a sporting activity and many have taken part in local and regional sporting events and competitions.
- Local authority officers have an accurate view of the school. They often visit the school and provide a good level of support. Through the work of UNITY, a collaboration of other local authority schools, they use Merstone as an example of outstanding practice to help and challenge others.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - Governance is good. The governing body is knowledgeable, well organised and has a wide range of skills. Its members ask challenging questions of the headteacher and senior staff.
 - Governors are linked to key members of staff to monitor aspects of the school's work. They visit the school frequently to attend assemblies, observe lessons and talk to the pupils and staff. They fully support the leadership team's drive for improvement and are clear that there is no complacency in the school because all the staff are always looking for ways in which they can improve. Governors know about the targets set for teachers and what the school is doing to reward good teaching and tackle underperformance. The governing body ensures that the school meets statutory requirements, including those for safeguarding, and that its finances are well managed.
 - Governors evaluate and keep under review the way the school uses its pupil premium funding and the impact it is having on pupils' achievements. As a result, the governing body is able to hold the school to account for any differences between the progress of these pupils and their classmates.

What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>

School details

Unique reference number	104133
Local authority	Solihull
Inspection number	431583

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Special
School Category	Community Special
Age range of pupils	2–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	87
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	13
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Brian Kendrick
Headteacher	Amanda Mordey
Date of previous school inspection	23 June 2011
Telephone number	0121 717 1040
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