

# The Unicorn School

20 Marcham Road, Abingdon, OX14 1AA

**Inspection dates** 28–30 April 2015

<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	<b>Requires improvement</b>	<b>3</b>
Leadership and management	Requires improvement	3
Behaviour and safety of pupils	Requires improvement	3
Quality of teaching	Requires improvement	3
Achievement of pupils	Requires improvement	3

## Summary of key findings

### This is a school that requires improvement. It is not good because

- During a recent period of change, the school leaders have not had a clear enough grasp of the school's strengths or the areas where development is needed. As a result, a number of the independent school standards are not met.
- Pupils' achievements, including in English and mathematics, are not effectively monitored. Where records are available they suggest that not enough pupils make expected progress or achieve as well as they could.
- The school is not making the best possible use of the specialist expertise of its teachers or therapists to enhance pupils' learning and progress.
- Although arrangements to ensure pupils' safety and well-being are adequately carried out, they are not thoroughly and systematically checked to make sure that they consistently comply with requirements.
- The school's strategy to help pupils to understand the dangers of bullying, and how to avoid being bullied, is not rigorous or systematic.
- The governors do not regularly receive the detailed information they need to hold leaders to account for the quality of pupils' achievement or of teachers' performance.

### The school has the following strengths

- Pupils behave very well in lessons and around the school. They are keen to learn, enjoy good relationships with teachers, and support one another well.
- One-to-one teaching for all pupils gives them valuable chances to overcome the specific difficulties they experience with learning.
- The broad and appropriate curriculum provides suitable opportunities for pupils to extend their knowledge and skills and to prepare them for life in modern Britain.

### Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school must take action to meet the schedule to The Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 ('the independent school standards') and associated requirements. The details are listed in the full report.

## Information about this inspection

- This inspection was carried out with a day's notice. The inspector observed eight lessons and visited six sessions where pupils received individual one-to-one support from specialist teachers. Almost all lessons were jointly observed with the headteacher or the deputy headteacher.
- The inspector looked at pupils' work and spoke to pupils about it. He held meetings with the governors, the senior leaders, staff members and pupils.
- He looked at documentation including policy statements, schemes of work, teachers' planning and records of pupils' progress and of staff training.
- The inspector considered the response of 21 parents and carers who had completed Ofsted's Parent View online questionnaire. The inspector also met with the parents or carers of three pupils and held telephone conversations with a representative of one of the local authorities who place pupils at the school. Thirty two questionnaire responses from members of staff members were taken into consideration.

## Inspection team

John Gush, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

## Full report

### Information about this school

- The Unicorn School, located near central Abingdon, is a co-educational special school for pupils aged six to 13 years who have specific learning difficulties. This includes pupils with dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia, whilst others have speech and language difficulties.
- The school opened in 1991 and moved to different premises in 2008. Currently there are 67 boys and girls on roll aged between six and 14, and all have special educational needs. Nine pupils have education, health and care plans. The school draws pupils from Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Gloucestershire.
- On average, pupils spend two or three years at the school.
- Following a governors' decision to review the headteacher's role, a new headteacher was appointed in December 2014. He took up his position the week before the inspection. In the interim, the school's deputy headteacher has been acting headteacher.
- The school does not use any alternative provision for off-site training.
- The school aim is 'for every child to flourish at the Unicorn leaving with the confidence to learn, the appetite for study and the desire to succeed at secondary school and beyond'.
- The last inspection of the school took place in February 2012.

### What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality and impact of leadership and management by:
  - developing a more rigorous approach to monitoring and improving the quality of teaching, so that pupils achieve their best
  - sharpening the school's procedures for checking all aspects of the school's operation
  - ensuring the independent school standards are met.
- Improve the quality of teaching in order to raise pupils' achievement by:
  - ensuring that all teachers use their knowledge of pupils' abilities to help each pupil to learn as well as they can
  - ensuring that class teachers and specialist one-to-one teachers share knowledge and plans effectively to enhance pupils' opportunities to make good progress.
- Improve the impact of the school's work to promote pupils' safety by:
  - extending the strategy to counter bullying and enhancing pupils' knowledge and awareness of the dangers of the inappropriate use of social media and text messaging
  - ensuring that pupils have additional opportunities to develop awareness of the differences between people and the impact of discrimination.
- **The school must meet the following independent school standards:**
  - ensure that pupils who receive secondary school education have access to up-to-date, impartial careers information that will help them to make informed choices and encourage them to fulfil their potential (paragraphs 2(2)(e), (i), (ii) and (iii))
  - ensure that changing and showering facilities are available for secondary school age pupils who have their physical education and games lessons at school (paragraph 23(1)(c))
  - ensure that suitable arrangements are made for the medical treatment and care of pupils who are unwell while they are at school (paragraphs 24(1), (a) and (b))
  - ensure that the name and contact address of the school's proprietor is shown on the school's brochure and website (paragraph 32(1)(a))
  - ensure that financial information is made available to the local authorities of those pupils for whom the school receives public funds (paragraph 32(1)(h))
  - ensure that the school's leaders and managers fulfil their responsibilities effectively so that all the independent school standards are met (paragraph 34(1)(b)).

## Inspection judgements

### The leadership and management

### require improvement

- The school's leaders have not made sure that all the standards for independent schools are met. The school does not provide careers information to the secondary age pupils. The information made available for parents, carers and others does not provide the name and address of the proprietors. Also, the school does not routinely provide the required financial information to the local authorities that pay for pupils' places at the school. The school's arrangements for the medical treatment and care of pupils who are unwell do not meet the standards required. In addition, pupils do not have access to changing facilities and showers for their games and physical education lessons.
- School leaders' knowledge of the school's strengths and areas for development is broad but insufficiently thorough. In particular, there is no systematic approach to tracking and monitoring pupils' progress. Because of this, the school leaders cannot be sure that the school is doing everything possible to help pupils to achieve as well as they are able. In addition, they have not set up a procedure to make sure that policies are always rigorously checked and adhered to. As a result, they are unable to ensure that the school is consistently providing the best possible opportunities for pupils' safety or for their learning and personal development.
- Arrangements to gauge the effectiveness of teaching through regular visits to classrooms from senior leaders have recently been introduced. However, these are not yet carried out systematically. Because of this, teachers do not always get the help they need to improve pupils' learning and achievement.
- The newly appointed headteacher has built on the work of the recent acting headteacher and has set high expectations for respect, hard work and cooperation from pupils and teachers alike. This has enhanced the positive atmosphere for learning and behaviour that exists across the school, promoting pupils' progress and achievement well.
- In addition to individual specialist support, pupils study a broad range of subjects, based on the requirements of the National Curriculum. As a result, they have opportunities to develop well in a broad range of areas including their literacy and numeracy skills. The school is committed to promoting pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Pupils are strongly encouraged to value fairness and to be tolerant of peoples' difference. As a result, pupils receive useful preparation for life in modern Britain.
- Appropriate arrangements make sure that pupils are kept safe. The school's designated lead person for safeguarding has received the required advanced level training in child protection. In addition, all staff undertake child protection training regularly. The required checks to make sure that all staff members are suitable to work with children are carried out in a way that meets requirements.
- **The governance of the school:**

The school governors meet regularly and show a strong commitment to the development of the school. This has been demonstrated in their awareness of the need to enhance leadership capability and the subsequent appointment of a new headteacher.

The quality of the information that governors receive about pupils' achievement and the effectiveness of teaching is not sufficiently detailed and requires improvement. Because of this, they are not able to hold leaders to account for the level of progress pupils make, or to reward good teaching or tackle underperformance.

### The behaviour and safety of pupils

### require improvement

#### Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good. They attend school regularly and are almost always on time for their lessons and ready to start work.
- Pupils are keen to learn and their behaviour in lessons helps them to do so. They respond quickly to requests from teachers and they support one another well in the tasks they are set. They get on well together, irrespective of age, gender or background. They say that they appreciate the small classes and the one-to-one lessons. They enjoy the warm, but respectful, relationships they build with teachers and other staff members. This leads to a good atmosphere in the school that supports learning and personal development well.
- Staff promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development well. As a result, pupils develop self-confidence and can express their thoughts and opinions with clarity. Lessons in history, religious education and personal, social and health education help them gain an understanding of their own and other cultures. This helps them to develop tolerance and understanding between different sections of the

community effectively.

- Pupils are active in raising funds for good causes. These include supporting a school in Tanzania and making weekly contributions to a local food bank. In history, English and other lessons they develop useful knowledge and understanding of British values, including the rule of law and democratic principles. Some of these principles are put into practice when each class nominates and votes for members of the school council.
- The school has a clearly stated policy that requires all staff members to ensure partisan political views are never promoted.

### Safety

- The school's work to keep pupils safe and secure requires improvement. This is because the school's approach to ensuring that pupils do not experience bullying or discrimination is not sufficiently rigorous. Many pupils say that bullying is uncommon and that when it occurs staff deal it with quickly and effectively. However, some pupils are not confident that they would receive the support they would like. Pupils have some knowledge of the dangers of bullying through mobile phones and social media. Discriminatory language is infrequently heard at the school, and most pupils know the reasons why it is to be avoided. However, the school's strategy for raising pupils' awareness of the causes of discrimination is not sufficiently developed.
- Most pupils say that they feel safe in school. They appreciate the school's emphasis on openness and tolerance, and the fact that they are able to gain confidence in themselves and their abilities. Parents and carers appreciate the school's efforts to ensure that pupils are safe and enjoy their education.
- Security arrangements are robust. The identity of all visitors to the school is carefully checked and they are signed in and out. The independent school standards regarding the welfare, health and safety of pupils, and the suitability of staff to work with children, are met.
- Careful arrangements make sure that pupils are safe when they go on educational outings and visits. Staff are trained in first aid and the procedures necessary to ensure pupils' health and safety and their safety in the event of fire are correctly carried out.

### The quality of teaching

### requires improvement

- All the independent school standards that relate to the quality of teaching are met. Because of this, pupils have suitable opportunities to extend their skills, knowledge and understanding, especially in literacy, reading and mathematics. However, teaching requires improvement overall because not enough is done to ensure that all pupils achieve as well as they can.
- What pupils know and can do are assessed when they join the school, and regularly thereafter. These assessments are carried out by the specialist one-to-one teachers who work daily with each pupil and also by their class teachers. The resulting valuable individual targets guide the work of all teachers to help pupils improve their abilities. However, links between the one-to-one teachers and class teachers are insufficient to ensure that pupils derive maximum benefit from the specialism available. As a result, pupils' individual targets are not connected to their overall level of educational progress and, because of this, pupils are not always clear about what they need to do to improve.
- Nonetheless, teachers are skilful and effective in helping pupils build their self-confidence as learners. Pupils and their parents and carers are positive about their experience at school, comparing it favourably with that at their previous school. In lessons and assemblies, pupils speak with assurance about what they have learned.
- The warm, but respectful, learning atmosphere that pervades the school supports pupils well. In many lessons teachers' careful planning and their good humour provide varied activities that keep pupils interested and busy with their learning. In a few of the lessons, teachers use questioning very well to draw pupils into increasing their understanding and thinking hard about the subject matter. In too many other lessons, however, questions are not so well targeted and, as a result, pupils are not challenged well enough to extend their abilities.
- Occupational therapy and speech and language therapy provide valuable additional input for some pupils, helping them to overcome some of the difficulties they experience with learning. However, the lack of regular, formal and systematic links to the class teachers' planning mean that these are not well enough used to promote overall improvement of pupils' achievements.

**The achievement of pupils****requires improvement**

- The school's arrangements to monitor and report on pupils' achievement are not well developed and do not reflect the learning of pupils who have only been at the school for a limited period of time. Because of this, it is not possible to compare pupils' progress with their peers nationally.
- Pupils' achievements are judged to require improvement because, where the school has information about pupils' progress, not enough pupils are making the progress that would be expected, given their individual starting points. In English, just over half make expected progress, and in mathematics less than half do so. Some pupils improve their reading and spelling ability, but test results suggest that too many are not making progress or sustaining the progress they have made.
- The pupils with education, health and care plans receive specialist additional support, as do all the pupils in the school. Their achievements are broadly in line with other pupils. Where there is enough information to tell, about half of them make the progress that would be expected from their starting points, in English and mathematics.
- The school does not monitor the progress of its most able pupils separately from that of other pupils. Available records suggest that very few make consistently more progress than that which would be expected, given their starting points.
- In lessons, pupils work hard. They show interest and willingly take part in all the tasks they are set. They make good use of the opportunities provided to use information and communication technology to extend their learning and produce some well-designed work in their books. Although some develop useful skills in touch typing, this is not systematically promoted and not all pupils learn the necessary skills adequately.
- Sport and physical education is strongly promoted. Pupils enjoy the challenges and are aware that this is good for their health. They benefit from the wide range of visits and educational trips which helps to extend their understanding of the world. Older pupils, however, are not provided with the early information and guidance that would help them begin the process of thinking about future options and careers.
- Pupils who have left the school in recent years move on successfully to independent or state funded schools, some of which are special schools.

## What inspection judgements mean

School	
Grade	Judgement
Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Requires improvement
Grade 4	Inadequate

Detailed grade characteristics can be viewed in the *Non-association independent school inspection handbook* which is published on the Ofsted website: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/non-association-independent-school-inspection-handbook](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/non-association-independent-school-inspection-handbook).

## School details

<b>Unique reference number</b>	123322
<b>Inspection number</b>	462870
<b>DfE registration number</b>	931/6109

This inspection was carried out under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008, 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.

<b>Type of school</b>	Independent day special school for pupils with specific learning difficulties
<b>School status</b>	Independent school
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	6–14
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	67
<b>Number of part time pupils</b>	0
<b>Proprietor</b>	The Unicorn School for the Dyslexic Child
<b>Chair</b>	Mark Chambers
<b>Headteacher</b>	Andrew Day
<b>Date of previous school inspection</b>	7–8 February 2012
<b>Annual fees (day pupils)</b>	£18,000
<b>Telephone number</b>	01235 530222
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