

Marchbank Free School

Mowden Hall, Darlington, Couy Durham, DL3 9BL

Inspection dates 2–3 June 2015

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected as an academy	
	This inspection:	Good	2
Leadership and management	Good		2
Behaviour and safety of pupils	Good		2
Quality of teaching	Good		2
Achievement of pupils	Good		2

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school.

- Pupils thrive at Marchbank. The calm, caring atmosphere, high expectations, excellent relationships between staff and pupils and good teaching ensure all pupils settle in quickly and achieve well from their very low starting points.
- Leaders and governors live out their vision to transform pupils' experiences of school successfully. Pupils enjoy school, following very unsatisfactory previous experiences. Their rapidly improved attendance rates pay testament to this.
- Pupils who had been excluded from or regularly isolated from their peers in their previous schools, relish their lessons. They achieve and behave well, mixing with their friends at carefully supervised social times across the day.
- Leaders have created an atmosphere in school where all pupils are equally valued and supported to overcome significant barriers in their learning and behaviour well. The proud way pupils wear their uniform and talk about their school is a pleasure to witness.
- Teachers and teaching assistants are well trained and work closely together to ensure pupils generally get the best out of their lessons.
- The well-balanced curriculum develops pupils' basic skills and creativity well. Alongside the expert way pupils are helped to manage their own behaviour, this ensures they are being prepared successfully for next steps in their education.
- Leaders have developed strong partnerships with parents. Parents' responses to the Ofsted Survey are highly positive. They all consider their children are very safe, well cared for and are achieving well; often for the first time in their school lives.
- Leaders have an accurate understanding of what the school is doing well and what needs to be better. They tackle areas in need quickly and effectively.
- Recent changes to the leadership of the Trust and governing body have provided a stronger focus on holding school leaders to account for their work.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Occasionally, teachers do not use the information they have about pupils' current achievements to plan activities that move the most able pupils on rapidly from their individual starting points.
- The school's work to teach pupils about risks from social media and mobile phones is not represented well-enough in key policies.
- The Chief Executive of the Trust and Chair of the Governing Body accept procedures to monitor and evaluate the school's work need to be sharper so that they can check more robustly the impact of this work. Reports provided to the Trust sometimes focus on actions leaders have taken rather than the difference the actions have made.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed teaching and learning across the school. All teachers were visited at least twice. The headteacher joined the lead inspector in some of these observations.
- Meetings were held with the Principal and staff, representatives of the governing body and the Chair of the Local Governing Body. Inspectors also spoke to the Chief Executive of the Education Village Academy Trust and the Department for Education’s Education Adviser for the school.
- Inspectors spoke informally to pupils in lessons and at various times during each day. They also spoke formally to two groups of pupils on the second day of the inspection.
- The inspection team scrutinised pupils’ work books and information about pupils’ current progress in lessons. They also reviewed a number of documents including the school’s improvement plan, behaviour and attendance records and information relating to the work the school does to keep pupils safe.
- Ten parents and carers completed the Ofsted Parent View survey and inspectors took account of their views. They also considered outcomes from the school’s own recent survey.

Inspection team

Margaret Farrow, Lead inspector

Her Majesty’s Inspector

Joan Hewitt

Senior, Her Majesty’s Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- Marchbank is a very small special school supporting 32 full-time primary-aged pupils with social, emotional and mental health difficulties and associated behavioural difficulties (SEMH). A small but increasing proportion has an autistic spectrum diagnosis. The school also provides short-term placements for children in significant need. At the time of the inspection there were three emergency placements for children accessing intensive sensory therapy and where their needs were being assessed.
- Pupils come to Marchbank following significant disruption to their learning. Well over half of those in school currently had been out of full-time education for significant periods before joining.
- The school opened in September 2013 and is one of five schools within the Darlington Education Village Academy Trust. This is its first inspection. The school currently has pupils placed by Darlington, Stockton-on-Tees, Middlesbrough, Durham and North Yorkshire local authorities.
- The school is based in the Grade 2 listed Mowden Hall; previously the Darlington offices for Department for Education. The building has undergone significant renovation and improvement. The extensive grounds have also been improved and include a Forest School.
- Marchbank was set up to cater for pupils from the age of four to eleven years. To date there have been no children admitted for whom the early years curriculum is appropriate. Most pupils are of White British heritage. The majority of pupils are boys.
- All pupils attending have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan. Marchbank is the named school within those statements or plans.
- Over half of the pupils are known to be eligible for pupil premium funding, which is additional government funding for pupils known to be eligible for free school meals or are who looked after by the local authority. This is much higher than average.
- This is a unique special school, for pupils with SEMH. Consequently, it has no national key stage performance data against which it can be effectively compared. Last year's end of key stage groups were very small and progress data suppressed in the national performance tables. None of the pupils had been in school a year before national tests and assessments were undertaken.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that teachers use the information they have about the most able pupils' current abilities to plan work that always stretches them to achieve their very best from these starting points.
- Review the e-safety policy to ensure it identifies the range of work carried out to help pupils understand the risk of social media and mobile phones more clearly; ensuring this links to other key policies such as the behaviour, anti-bullying and child protection policies appropriately.
- Further sharpen systems the Trust and governors use to hold the leaders to account for the impact of their work by focusing robustly on the impact of actions taken.

Inspection judgements

The leadership and management are good

- Leaders set up the school with a vision to ensure pupils, whose previous education has been fractured or disrupted, are given equal opportunity to thrive and achieve well; they are being successful in their endeavours. Pupils' books showcase the good and occasionally outstanding progress they are making from very low starting points. This is helping pupils to catch up and make up for time lost. Leaders know there is more to do to ensure pupils meet national expectations, but their tracking evidence shows gaps are closing effectively.
- The Principal and her deputy have successfully secured an infectious atmosphere of calm, mutual care and high expectations. Pupils quickly understand the school's values and expectations and settle in well. Previous negative attitudes to school melt away. This is seen in the review of behaviour logs where incidents reduce within days of arrival, in pupils' happy demeanour, and in their personal testimonies of how much better school is now and how much they appreciate the care and support from staff.
- A key to leaders' success is the way they have melded a strong team of staff who share their vision and values. They work together well to manage complex behaviours and enable pupils to focus on their learning, develop positive attitudes and become full and successful participants in the life of the school.
- Performance management of staff is secure. Staff are well trained and well supported. They are held to account effectively for their pupils' achievements through regular reviews of pupils' progress, scrutiny of pupils' work and lesson observations. Observations of learning both formally and informally are regular and recent improvements in arrangements ensure teachers are clear about what they are doing well and what needs to improve to ensure their teaching is the best it can be.
- Leaders ensure that they look outward to find the best practice available including schools across the north-east region. They have secured the services of Durham County's Education Development Service to continue to upskill staff in their areas of specialism, and leaders continue to develop teachers' skills in the teaching of literacy and numeracy.
- Close partnership with health, educational psychology, mental health, therapy and social care services ensures early intervention and support to children and their families in times of great need.
- Pupils' social and moral development is good and well promoted through the good curriculum, circle time, social times and the high-quality relationships developed between pupils and with staff. They are well taught about rights and responsibilities, rules and democracy; they learn to value the differences of others. They know that unkind words or discrimination of any kind is not tolerated. Pupils report that 'anyone is welcomed here'. Pupils' good spiritual and cultural development is enhanced well through the range of faiths studied and the raft of out-of-school visits pupils undertake. Pupils mix with other pupils well when they visit the Forest school. The school's own values of citizenship and respect contribute well to pupils' growing understanding of what it means to live in modern Britain.
- Leaders monitor the work of the school assiduously. They have a clear understanding of what is working well and what needs to be better. For example, they recognised the need to improve pupils' reading skills as the bedrock to learning and their actions are reaping rewards. Pupils are not only developing their reading skills well but gaining a new enjoyment of books; capturing extra moments across the day to read. Leaders provide regular progress reports to governors and directors of the Trust. However, these are too often descriptive, reporting on what actions have taken place, rather than the impact of those actions.
- The small allocation of government school sport funding is well used to develop pupils' skills in, and enjoyment of sport. The purchase of a wide range of equipment has also enabled pupils to be active in break and lunch times in well-supervised games.
- The Trust is developing skills in challenging and supporting leaders. The changes they have made in the leadership of the Trust are providing more clarity and direction but it is too early to see the full impact. Strong partnership with the special schools and mainstream primary schools across the Trust is helping to identify and share good practice and make sure teachers' assessments of pupils' work are accurate.
- This is a small school and there is no middle leadership team. Whilst all staff are well-trained and supported to carry out their roles, the Trust is aware that the Principal and deputy principal are very busy, with limited opportunities to jointly reflect on the impact of their work. Plans are in place to tackle this.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - Governors know the strengths and weaknesses of the school, the quality of teaching, pupils' attainment and progress and performance management arrangements of staff.
 - There have been some recent changes to the governing body and the new Chair of the Governing Body has instigated an audit of skills. This is paying dividends in helping governors to identify areas they

need to develop in order to maintain a sharp challenge and effective support for the school.

- Statutory duties with regard to safeguarding pupils are met. The governing body and the Trust are reviewing key policies but this has been slow at times. For example, the policies for pupils' behaviour, safeguarding and e-safety are not referenced to each other to ensure a cohesive approach.
- Governors and the members of the Trust have strong systems to make sure leaders are held accountable for the quality of their work and how well the school is doing. Plans are closely monitored to make sure appropriate actions are taken, however, evaluations are not always sharp enough to help them assess how successful actions have been in driving improvements.
- Governors have spent the pupil premium funding wisely on a variety of tailored activities. As a result, there is no discernible gap in the attendance, behaviour or achievement between disadvantaged pupils and their peers.

The behaviour and safety of pupils

are good

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- Pupils behave well both in class and around the site at break and lunchtimes. Pupils, who have experienced significant disruption to their education prior to coming to Marchbank, make good and sometimes outstanding progress in managing their behaviour. There have been no permanent or temporary exclusions at Marchbank and pupils are not placed in isolation. This is something pupils are proud of, as they had been used to such experiences in previous schools.
- Insightful, careful nurturing and guidance from staff help pupils become increasingly aware of the needs of other children and adults. Teachers and other adults show great skill in heading off potential conflicts and making effective use of praise and reward to keep pupils on track. Consequently, pupils are able to concentrate on their work and this has a big impact on how quickly they are catching up on the work they have missed previously.
- Pupils are kind and caring to each other. They embrace the opportunity to offer praise to other pupils who have made progress with their work and behaviour. For example, each day, they nominate another pupil for a 'thumbs up' point and link the improvement to the school's values of respect, achievement, citizenship and hard work.
- Pupils attend well and the school is successfully reducing the small number of pupils who struggle to attend school regularly. Attendance rates are well above that of special schools nationally and similar to the average for all primary schools.
- Pupils report that behaviour is generally good and that teachers manage any outbursts sensitively with respect and care. Younger and older pupils take on responsibilities willingly, for example, each class takes responsibility for cleaning up the canteen after meals.
- Pupils say that bullying is rare and on the odd occasions when it does happen, it takes the form of name-calling. All parents reported that pupils behave well and bullying is well tackled. Pupils are clear that teachers and other adults will take effective action should any child experience difficulties. Pupils know about the different forms of bullying and understand the harm it can cause.

Safety

- The school's work to keep pupils safe and secure is good.
- Supervision provided by the school is of a good quality. Adults support pupils in learning to play together and to resolve any arguments well.
- The school provides a warm, welcoming and safe environment. The school's site is secure and pupils report they feel very safe. They learn to keep themselves safe in a variety of ways, including learning about the emergency services. Equally, the Forest School helps them to assess risks outdoors and in using tools in a safe environment. Pupils thoroughly enjoy demonstrating how to carry tools safely.
- Pupils have a sound understanding of how to keep themselves safe but work to develop their understanding of the risks through the use of mobile devices and associated applications outside school is not well coordinated in policies and plans.

The quality of teaching

is good

- Observations of learning, pupils' workbooks, and the school's regular assessments of pupils' abilities show that pupils are making good and occasionally exceptional progress in their learning from very low starting points. This is because well-trained teachers and teaching assistants work closely together to identify and then tackle the barriers pupils face in their learning. Pupils' progress in reading, writing and mathematics hastens well as a result of this work and the high expectations teachers usually have about what pupils can achieve. This builds pupils' confidence and raises their expectations. They too believe they can achieve, often for the first time in their school lives.
- Consistent strengths in teaching are teachers' high expectations, the excellent relationships developed between adults and pupils and the calm way teachers manage pupils' behaviour so they can quickly settle down to their learning. Pupils display positive attitudes in lessons and are keen to share what they have learned with adults.
- Skilful and helpful teacher' notes or photographs in books helps pupils understand what they have learned when they are unable to make their own marks. Pupils look back proudly on where they started and what they are doing now. They talk confidently about how they have improved their work over time.
- Books are well presented and well marked; they show that pupils are productive in lessons and proud of their books. Pupils are developing their skills in responding to teachers' feedback when there are things they need to improve on and relish the positive comments teachers make about their work.
- Teachers use the detailed assessments they have about pupils' current abilities to plan work to help them move on quickly from these starting points. Occasionally, this information is not used well enough to challenge the most able so their progress slows a little. This is because work for the most able is occasionally planned as extension work when they have completed the main task rather than having work designed to stretch them from the outset.
- Teaching assistants are well deployed by teachers and close working between them ensures they know what pupils need to learn and how to support their learning. The higher-level teaching assistant supports other assistants well in developing their skills and competencies. This is helping to ensure good use is made of this additional resource.

The achievement of pupils

is good

- Pupils with differing special educational needs and different groups make equally good progress as their classmates. There is also no discernible difference in the achievements of disadvantaged pupils and other pupils. This is because carefully planned interventions and support are put in place for any pupil at risk of falling behind their aspirational targets in class. This helps them catch up quickly. Achievement remains below average but gaps are narrowing effectively. Occasionally, teachers do not make sure that the most able do work to stretch them as soon as they get into lessons and when this happens their progress wanes a little.
- The school is small, new and national comparisons are hard to draw. However, leaders use national benchmarks to measure and then compare the achievement and progress their pupils make to that of other pupils in primary schools, rather than special schools. There is compelling evidence from books and assessments that pupils who left in Year 6 last year made good progress from their very low starting points.
- The teaching of phonics (the sounds that letters make) is helping to drive improvement in pupils' achievements in reading. Coupled with the daily focus on writing, changes in the way reading is taught and the huge investment in books that are interesting for boys and girls alike, pupils' reading and writing skills are developing well. One writing book showed how a pupil had gone from making marks, to letters and then several sentences in two months.
- Mathematics teaching is usually well matched to pupils' individual learning needs and abilities and pupils make good progress in their understanding and application of concepts taught. Occasionally, development of their times tables slows because they rely too much on prompts around the room, rather than mastery of these. Leaders know this and are taking action to develop deeper understanding and mastery through training for staff and the implementation of a new curriculum and assessment process in September.

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	139691
Local authority	Darlington
Inspection number	450036

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

Type of school	Primary
School category	Academy free school
Age range of pupils	4–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	32
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Janet Penman
Headteacher	Mandy Southwick
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected as an academy
Telephone number	01325 254670
Fax number	Not applicable
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