

Step By Step, School for Autistic Children Ltd

Neylands Farm, Grinstead Lane, Sharpthorne, East Sussex, RH19 4HP

Inspection dates 09–11 June 2015

Overall effectiveness	Good	2
Leadership and management	Good	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils	Good	2
Quality of teaching	Outstanding	1
Achievement of pupils	Outstanding	1
Early years provision	Outstanding	1

Summary of key findings

This is a good school

- Outstanding teaching ensures that pupils learn exceptionally well. A highly effective blend of one-to-one tutoring, group sessions and therapy leads to outstanding achievement.
- From their admission to the school, pupils make rapid progress which compares favourably not only with that found in other special schools, but also progress seen in mainstream schools.
- The pupils benefit from an excellent curriculum which includes self-help skills, experience of literature, physical activities and social opportunities. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is promoted exceptionally well.
- Senior school leaders have ensured that only the highest quality staff work with the pupils. Close scrutiny of pupils’ progress and a constant drive to improve are threaded through all of the school’s work.
- Pupils are happy and love coming to school. They attend well and make the most of all the opportunities they have. Their behaviour improves markedly over time and is outstanding.
- The Early Years Foundation Stage is outstanding. Children make excellent progress and are well prepared for the next stage of their education.
- Pupils are safe in school. Staff’s detailed knowledge of all pupils assures their well-being and minimises risk.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Until very recently, governors have not focused sharply enough on holding school leaders to account for the performance of the school.
- Although all statutory requirements for safeguarding meet regulations, some procedures are not best practice.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school meets the schedule to The Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 (‘the independent school standards’) and associated requirements.

Information about this inspection

- This inspection was carried out with one day’s notice.
- Inspectors observed teaching in all classes, accompanied by school leaders, including one-to-one tuition and group work. Every pupil present during the inspection was observed by inspectors.
- Meetings were held with school leaders, governors, a group of class leaders and tutors. Inspectors also spoke with a group of pupils.
- Inspectors scrutinised a range of documentation, including records related to safeguarding and child protection, information about pupils’ progress, lesson planning and samples of pupils’ work.
- The school’s records on staff performance management were evaluated, as was documentation related to governance and records of pupils’ annual reviews.
- Inspectors reviewed school policies, and took into account the 38 responses to the staff questionnaire. The lead inspector received three letters from parents and spoke to two parents on the telephone. There were 16 responses to the online questionnaire Parent View.

Inspection team

Janet Pearce, Lead inspector

Her Majesty’s Inspector

Matthew Barnes

Her Majesty’s Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- Step by Step is an independent special school, registered for up to 30 pupils from age four to 19, with autistic spectrum disorders. The school opened in 2004.
- All pupils have education and health care plans or statements of special educational needs.
- Six local authorities place pupils in the school. Some places at the school are privately funded.
- The school aims to 'help pupils develop the skills, understanding and confidence to reach their full potential and, as far as possible, lead full and independent lives'.
- The school is led by a director, who is responsible for the strategic direction, financial management, staff resources and promotion of the school. The deputy director and teacher in-charge take full responsibility for leading and managing education in the school.
- There are currently two children in the Early Years Foundation Stage who attend full time. Plans are in place to open a sixth form for pupils in September 2015.
- The majority of pupils are boys. Pupils come from a range of ethnic groups.
- Pupils are taught in primary and secondary groups of mixed age and ability. Each class is overseen by a class leader and each pupil is allocated a key worker who is responsible for the day-to-day organisation of his or her programme. Pupils receive one-to-one teaching from tutors and small group sessions delivered by teachers and therapists.
- There is one looked-after pupil, for whom the school receives additional funding from the pupil premium.
- One pupil attends alternative provision at St Piers School, for one afternoon a week.
- The school was previously inspected in April 2012, when the quality of education was judged to be outstanding.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve leadership and management to outstanding, by:
 - ensuring that governors implement the recommendations in the recent review of governance without delay in order to acquire secure and deep understanding of the quality of teaching and the rates of pupils' progress
 - making sure that school leaders, including governors, take specific action to ensure that all procedures related to safeguarding demonstrate best practice.

Inspection judgements

The leadership and management are good

- The deputy director and teacher in-charge have ensured that teaching, achievement and behaviour are outstanding. Dedication to improving outcomes for all pupils shines through the school, underpinned by a deep understanding of autistic spectrum conditions. School leaders have created a highly qualified, skilled and ambitious workforce, all of whom share their energy and determination. Staff are rightly proud of their work and pupils' achievements.
- At middle leader level, class leaders are totally committed to monitoring their teams. They pay great attention to detail, conscientiously recording pupils' specific steps of progress. They ensure that planning for learning activities is explicitly focused on what each pupil needs to know, do and understand, with an unremitting emphasis on improving communication.
- The curriculum is a genuine strength of the school. Teachers and tutors base programmes of study on topics that interest pupils, but also devise activities designed to stimulate their consciousness of other people and the world around them. Pupils cultivate their self-awareness through a wide range of books, music, art and drama. They have excellent opportunities to follow outdoor pursuits, for example, growing plants in the greenhouse. Physical education is given a high priority to meet pupils' sensory needs and develop their motor control. Pupils are able to experience horse-riding, swimming and trampolining, which are definite favourites among many pupils. Older pupils have real-life opportunities to take part in work experience. Staff ensure that they make the most of opportunities to develop pupils' communication, literacy and numeracy skills. In this way, pupils are extremely well equipped for their future lives.
- Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, including their experience of British values, is outstanding. Regular events to celebrate the diversity of British culture are scheduled on the school calendar, including different religious celebrations. Pupils can join the school's scout group, which provides them with excellent opportunities to carry out community service. Morris dancing events highlight a specific aspect of British traditions. Making choices is rooted in all of the school's work, with formal examples of a 'choices board' where pupils may publicly place a vote. They then have to accept that their choice may not 'win', thus learning about democratic principles.
- Pupils have powerful opportunities to learn about right and wrong, because their tutors and teachers specifically praise good behaviour, such as waiting to take turns or walking sensibly. It is also heartening to see older pupils showing great sensitivity to each other's autism, showing that they reflect the school's commitment to tolerance and eradicating discrimination.
- The school makes excellent provision for pupils who are disadvantaged. For example, the purchase of specialist assistive technology to support communication has been highly effective and led to improved progress for individual pupils.
- The pupil attending alternative provision is supervised closely and is making excellent progress in addition to enjoying a wider range of social opportunities.
- Pupils receive imaginative and appropriate guidance about their next steps beyond school. They have many opportunities to take part in work-related learning, including a partnership with a local supermarket and hotel. Transition arrangements through the annual review process are rigorous and well managed.
- Senior school leaders and class leaders closely scrutinise the quality of teaching lesson by lesson. Only the best is good enough, so all staff benefit from a demanding cycle of training and development. Leaders insist that teachers and tutors have challenging targets to meet in order to progress through promotion and pay scales.
- Staff morale is extremely high and the majority of staff plan to stay and progress through the well-planned career ladder within the school, some with opportunities to study for a funded master's degree. However, the same rigorous attention to professional development is not reflected in governors' evaluation of the senior team. In particular, there have been missed opportunities to recognise school leaders' considerable achievements at classroom level, make the most of their outstanding skills and challenge them even further.
- Leadership and management are not outstanding because until recently governance did not reflect the same high standards demonstrated by leaders working in the school. Governors spent a disproportionate amount of time on operational and financial matters, rather than monitoring the quality of education provided. Following the review of governance, board members and school leaders are much clearer about their duties and there are clear signs that governors are acquiring greater skills and professionalism.
- The deputy director and teacher in-charge have made recent changes to the way they demonstrate and evaluate pupils' overall progress and the performance of staff. Although the changes are clearly enabling leaders to stand back and evaluate performance more objectively, it is too soon to gauge the impact of

these changes on pupils' achievement.

- Communication with parents is excellent. All parents who responded to the online survey Parent View believe that they receive helpful information about their children's progress. Parents who spoke with inspectors agreed. All parents who responded to the survey wholeheartedly believe that their children are taught well and would recommend the school to other parents.
- Safeguarding meets statutory requirements and staff carry out their duties diligently to ensure that pupils are safe. However, a very small number of administrative procedures related to safeguarding do not demonstrate outstanding practice. For example, at the start of the inspection, the reviewed and updated safeguarding policy was not on the school website. By the end of the inspection, this had been addressed and all statutory requirements had been met.
- School leaders have ensured that all of the independent school standards are met.
- **The governance of the school:**

School leaders rightly identified that governance was not demonstrating outstanding leadership and management and wisely commissioned a review in October 2014. The review makes a number of sensible and appropriate recommendations, most of which are now in hand. Governors can now demonstrate a deeper understanding of the performance of the school. They know that teaching is strong and that pupils make excellent progress, including those eligible for pupil premium funding. However, it is too soon to measure the impact of some aspects of their duties. Governors rightly have great confidence in the abilities of school leaders, and until recently left arrangements for staff's professional development and performance management for school leaders to lead and manage. The review of governance correctly noted that more needed to be done to hold leaders to account for such arrangements. Recently, changes to the governing body, including the appointment of members with a background in education and an experienced clerk, have strengthened the work of governors. Governors are aware of where teaching is strongest and ensure that pay awards link directly to performance. There are clear signs that governance has increased its capacity to improve to outstanding.

The behaviour and safety of pupils

are good

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding.
- Pupils are not capable of deliberate misbehaviour or bullying. Many pupils exhibit challenging behaviour because of their anxieties. During their time at the school, pupils quickly develop greater control and ability to manage their emotions and responses. There is a marked improvement in pupils' behaviour and well-being over time.
- The school is an incredibly joyous and exuberant place for pupils and staff alike. Pupils love coming to school, attend well and make the most of what is on offer. They work extremely hard at all activities and demonstrate impressive resilience, considering the demands made on them. Pupils know that school is important and that they need to learn. Staff use rewards as key motivators and over time, pupils rely less and less on specific rewards but enjoy learning for its own sake.
- When out on visits, outstanding behaviour is assured, including to local work places and in the alternative provision.
- Relationships between pupils and their tutors and teachers are genuinely warm. It is clearly evident that pupils are secure, but challenged by the work of their teachers and tutors. They respect and appreciate what is done to support them.
- As a result of the improvements in behaviour and self-awareness, pupils become more comfortable working with each other in groups. They are actively taught to communicate with each other, take turns and form bonds. Pupils quickly develop interest in their peers and look out for each other.

Safety

- The school's work to keep pupils safe and secure is good.
- Staff are highly vigilant, know pupils extremely well and are scrupulous about reporting any change in their demeanour. Risk assessments are carried out meticulously.
- The school's work to keep pupils safe and secure is not outstanding because a few procedural matters did not demonstrate best practice at the start of the inspection. By the end of the inspection, these had been addressed.
- The school ensures that it effectively meets the independent school standards relating to behaviour and safety.

The quality of teaching is outstanding

- Pupils benefit from a carefully planned and varied programme of intensive one-to-one sessions with tutors and inspiring small group sessions led by teachers and therapists. All staff are highly qualified and have excellent subject knowledge. As a result, pupils make outstanding progress. Pupils' programmes of study build on the targets set at the annual reviews of their education, health and care plans and are reviewed regularly. All independent school standards relating to the quality and impact of teaching are successfully met.
- Teaching is dynamic, energetic and sensitive to pupils' responses and behaviour. Teachers and tutors push pupils to challenge them more and minimise the use of prompts or reminders. Staff make sure that key learning is repeated and checked to ensure that achievements are consolidated and completely secure. As pupils gain confidence, their teachers or tutors extend the time between rewards or modify the type of rewards and motivators offered. In this way, pupils are stretched and develop intrinsic motivation to learn.
- Carefully selected resources, including up-to-date assistive technology, are used effectively to strengthen learning and stimulate pupils' interests. Class leaders have rightly identified that more-able or higher functioning pupils benefit from greater challenges and more independent choices about activities and rewards.
- Teachers, tutors and therapists are expressive and skilled in their use of tools to aid communication, such as pictures, sounds, symbols and signing. Throughout sessions, no opportunities are missed to ensure that pupils practise and develop their communication, reading, writing and mathematics skills. Pupils are encouraged to apply their verbal knowledge to more unfamiliar situations. Their vocabulary is extended and builds on repeating and echoing sentences and words or responding using assistive technology. Pupils are encouraged to express their feelings, ask each other questions and participate in conversations where appropriate.
- Pupils are encouraged to read and experience books as part of their programme of study. For example, in a highly successful session based on a story about a whale and a snail, the teacher made excellent use of models of the animals to support learning and introduce new skills. In a very short time, pupils had experienced the sensation of looking through the book, developing an understanding of the story, the relationship between the characters and their natural habitat. Some pupils practised reading aloud and others worked successfully on repeating and pronouncing key words accurately. Pupils experienced sensory stimulation with the use of water and different textures of the model animals. Pupils also developed empathy through pretending to be one of the characters.
- Classrooms are appropriately organised according to the age of pupils, with methodically planned work stations for pupils of different ages and abilities. Older pupils responsibly carry out duties such as preparing the room for circle time and some are encouraged to lead short discussion sessions. It is remarkable to see how pupils develop their concentration and enjoy the sense of belonging in a group.

The achievement of pupils is outstanding

- Pupils' starting points are considerably lower than expected for their age, as a result of their autism and associated additional needs. A few pupils have had periods of time outside education before entry to the school and some have not been successful in mainstream or other special schools. Most pupils experience high levels of anxiety and varying degrees of difficulty with verbal communication. All pupils make outstanding gains in their learning. They demonstrate exceptional progress with communication, reading, writing, mathematics and understanding of themselves and the wider world. All independent school standards relating to academic and personal development are met.
- School leaders make sure that the admission process is thorough and searching, including careful assessments during the first few weeks at school. In this way, staff can be certain about each pupil's needs and abilities.
- Pupils make especially rapid progress in all areas, including communication, literacy and mathematics on entry to the school. They quickly establish a range of skills and habits to give them a flying start. Thereafter, pupils make steady excellent progress, irrespective of their ethnic group, starting points or gender. For those pupils who are disadvantaged, or in the care of the local authority, similar outstanding rates of progress are made, comparing well with those of pupils in mainstream schools.
- Pupils are assessed on a daily, weekly and termly basis. School leaders have shrewdly ensured that their schemes of assessment also include national benchmarked data. Throughout the one-to-one and group sessions, teachers and tutors diligently note pupils' steps of progress and whether they are meeting their targets.
- Staff react quickly and effectively to pupils' responses. For example, if a pupil is repeatedly struggling to

meet an academic or behavioural target, staff implement new approaches. Sometimes targets are sensibly put 'on hold' while other steps are tackled, and then revisited. School leaders can point to significant successes from this approach. Where pupils quickly acquire skills and meet targets, staff ensure that further challenge and consolidation are readily offered. In this way, high expectations are sustained and pupils continually improve.

- Teachers, tutors and leaders track progress and gather evidence of pupils' achievements through a range of methods. Photographs and films clearly demonstrate pupils' achievements and growth in independence, which also provide a compelling record of progress to share with parents.
- School leaders and staff have ensured that the most able are challenged. Those pupils with more developed communication, literacy and mathematics skills are stretched to achieve more, without losing sight of important behavioural targets.
- The pupil attending alternative provision at the partner school has made great gains with social, communication, confidence and practical skills.
- Parents are helped to support their children's learning at home. The school provides regular homework and useful advice about different approaches and motivators to build on pupils' successes. Parents are often surprised by what their children are capable of.

The early years provision

is outstanding

- Children achieve exceptionally well in the early years, making excellent progress in their behaviour, communication and self-help skills. School leaders have ensured that all the independent school standards and statutory requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage are met. Children are safe and secure in the Reception Year.
- Well-planned activities and carefully chosen age-appropriate resources help children to thrive. Expectations of behaviour and participation are high. Children are stimulated by activities and quickly increase their interest in the world around them. Their curiosity is developed, their imaginations stimulated and their experience of different toys, activities and materials enriches their learning.
- Teaching takes excellent account of children's interests and responses to activities. Staff ensure that children take part in a range of directed tasks in addition to exploring materials, toys and games of their own choice. Children are encouraged to move freely from indoor activities to outdoor play and learning.
- Children are extremely well prepared for the next stage in their education. Teachers assess children's progress closely and track all their targets meticulously, providing increased challenge when targets are achieved. For example, a more-able child in the early years spends some time working in the primary class in order to extend his experiences and socialisation.

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.

School details

Unique reference number	134634
Inspection number	463916
DfE registration number	845/6045

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.

Type of school	Special
School status	Independent school
Age range of pupils	4–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	27
Number of part time pupils	0
Proprietor	Step by Step, School for Autistic Children Ltd
Chair	Stuart King
Director	Donna Fidler
Date of previous school inspection	25–26 April 2012
Annual fees	
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Secondary	£61,449
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