

Abbot's Lea School

Beaconsfield Road, Woolton, Liverpool, Merseyside L25 6EE

Inspection dates 13–14 January 2016

Overall effectiveness **Outstanding**

Effectiveness of leadership and management	Outstanding
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Outstanding
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Outstanding
Outcomes for pupils	Outstanding
Early years provision	Outstanding
16 to 19 study programmes	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school

- Outstanding leadership has led to improvements in all areas of the school since the last inspection. Leaders' high expectations and desire for nothing but the best are the driving force behind the exceptional achievement of pupils across the school.
- Unquestionably, pupils benefit from excellent teaching and make outstanding academic, social and emotional progress during their time at Abbot's Lea.
- Pupils often join the school with very low starting points. They achieve very well in reading, writing, communication skills, mathematics and a range of other subjects.
- Pupils have excellent attitudes to learning. They are prepared well for their next steps in education and life in general. Pupils are frequently stretched to apply their social and communication skills in real-life situations.
- Provision in the early years is outstanding. Children benefit from a calm and purposeful learning environment. They are prepared exceptionally well for school because leadership and teaching are outstanding.
- Parents are overwhelmingly supportive of the school.
- Provision for learners in the sixth form is outstanding. Study pathways are matched expertly to learners' specific needs. Most learners make outstanding progress and go on to attend further and higher education when they leave Abbot's Lea.
- Leaders' robust monitoring of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment has resulted in improvements in teachers' skills and pupils' achievement since the last inspection.
- Pupils are well cared for and they are safe in school. Adults model expertly the school's values of tolerance and respect for one another. This, along with highly effective spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, ensures that pupils' personal development is outstanding.
- The governing body provides effective support and challenge for the school.
- Middle leadership is strong. Senior leaders acknowledge that middle leaders' effectiveness could be further improved through further developing their skills in evaluating precisely the impact of their actions on pupils' learning.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Build on the improvements seen since the previous inspection by ensuring that middle leaders evaluate precisely the impact of their actions on pupils' academic and personal development progress, in order to fine-tune their actions and ensure the optimum effect on learning.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is outstanding

- Since the last inspection, leaders have been relentless and highly successful in their drive to make the improvements necessary to ensure that pupils reach the highest standards of achievement and personal development. The interim headteacher has been effective in taking up the reins of leadership to expertly guide the school on its journey to become outstanding.
- Leaders, along with governors, have worked successfully to ensure that the balance between personal and social skill development and academic progress is appropriate. Leaders do not settle for second best; they communicate their high expectations well to ensure that even those with the most extreme needs increase their rate of progress. Consequently, many pupils make exceptional gains in their learning.
- Meticulous planning and preparation by leaders, teachers and support staff leads to pupils strengthening their resilience to change. Frequent re-evaluation of the whole-school provision by leaders ensures that all pupils benefit from the mixture of different buildings which make up the school. For example, pupils were observed to move quickly, safely and politely around the school and from one building to another. Other pupils were observed working with and alongside a variety of different teachers and classmates, as they would in mainstream settings. This level of flexibility is an indication of the outstanding progress made by pupils with autistic spectrum disorders.
- Leaders' self-evaluation of the school's strengths and weakness is both thorough and accurate. For example, leaders have taken appropriate action to ensure that their assessment of pupils' ability in basic skills, when they start the school, is precise. As a result, pupils' progress is excellent in mathematics, reading, writing, communication skills and their overall personal development.
- The excellent curriculum incorporates a broad range of appropriate subjects and opportunities, including extra-curricular activities such as residential visits, which engage pupils and ensure that they want to learn. The effective balance between basic skills and life skills contributes well to pupils' academic achievements and their physical, spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Pupils benefit from frequent opportunities to bolster their social communication skills and deepen their learning through frequent and purposeful visits into the local and wider community.
- Parents are overwhelmingly supportive of the school. Those spoken to, along with the parents who responded to the online survey, could not praise the school highly enough. Parents agree that the effective communication between school and home is a significant factor in their children's excellent progress. For example, one parent said: 'They work with me to meet his needs and keep me well informed about his progress. He has made excellent progress while attending Abbot's Lea and enjoys his time at school.'
- Raising the quality of teaching has been a key priority for leaders since the last inspection. Teaching and support staff take part in regular training to raise the quality and effectiveness of teaching across the school. For example, training in aspects such as effective questioning, managing behaviour and the safeguarding of pupils has ensured consistently strong practice throughout the school.
- Leaders have introduced a rigorous system for the setting of performance management targets for teachers and middle leaders. Targets set for teachers match closely the school's priorities for improvement. Progress towards these targets is used to inform leaders' decisions when awarding pay increases to teachers.
- The survey of staff undertaken during the inspection demonstrates that the interim headteacher has the overwhelming support of adults working at the school. However, a small proportion of support staff identified that their professional development could be even better. Inspectors' scrutiny of the school's training records show that all adults have taken part in a wide range of training which contribute effectively to the outstanding work of the school. Leaders are aware that they need to do more to ensure that staff appraisal systems are used effectively to highlight the impact that support staff have on pupils' progress.
- Leaders use effectively additional funding received for disadvantaged pupils and those who need to catch up in literacy and numeracy in Year 7. Specific interventions, such as more frequent one-to-one reading support, along with significant purchases such as reading programmes and the employment of a family support worker, have combined well to reduce barriers to learning for these pupils. As a result, there are no discernible gaps between the progress of disadvantaged pupils and that of their peers in school.
- The additional funding received by the school, through the primary physical education and sports grant, is used well to promote enjoyment and participation in physical activity by primary-aged pupils. The

purchase of sensory equipment along with specialist outdoor play equipment has contributed significantly to improvements in the engagement of pupils who previously chose not to participate in physical activity, for example.

- Senior leaders work well with the local authority and a number of other mainstream and special schools in the area. They are able to check their understanding of pupils' progress while at Abbot's Lea by comparing the information they have about pupils' achievements with that of other schools. This action is effective in ensuring that leaders' and teachers' assessments of pupils' progress are accurate.
- The interim headteacher has been instrumental in strengthening leadership at all levels across the school. Several middle leaders are currently enrolled on the National Professional Qualification in School Leadership programme. Middle leaders lead and manage specific areas of the school well. They frequently contribute effectively to leaders' monitoring of teaching and the analysis of progress information. However, middle leaders do not always evaluate precisely enough the impact on learning of the whole-school projects they lead and therefore opportunities to fine-tune their actions are missed.
- **The governance of the school**
 - Governance of the school is strong. Governors have a good balance of experience and expertise which matches well the educational, social and specific needs of pupils at the school. The governing body ensures that effective systems are in place to safeguard pupils and to check the suitability of all adults who carry out work at the school.
 - Governors have an appropriate understanding of the impact of the school's work, for example the spending of government grants, because they are well informed by the senior leaders and middle leaders.
 - The experience of some governors, as senior leaders in other schools, ensures that governors have an accurate understanding of pupils' progress. They are able to judge for themselves the impact of leaders' actions on pupils' learning and personal development. Governors use their combined knowledge and experience well to question and challenge leaders about progress in all aspects of the school.
 - Governors play an active role in the determination of the headteacher's pay and have a secure understanding of how leaders administer the school's performance management systems.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Leaders take the safeguarding of pupils seriously. They ensure that their practices meet current requirements and provide appropriate training to all staff and pupils. For example, staff are well trained in first aid. Furthermore, they receive regular and frequent training in child protection procedures and are aware of the government's 'Prevent' strategy and wider safeguarding issues, such as homophobic and transphobic bullying. Pupils spoken to were able to describe in detail some of the consequences of using social media, such as leaving a digital footprint.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment **is outstanding**

- Since the last inspection, the quality of teaching has improved. High-quality teaching in all subjects leads to all pupils making outstanding progress and being prepared well for their next steps in education and life beyond school.
- Teachers and other adults build strong relationships with pupils. Teachers have a thorough understanding of pupils' specific needs. They use their knowledge well to plan lessons which are appropriately stimulating and capture the interest of pupils. Consequently, pupils are eager to learn and make strong progress academically and socially in a wide variety of situations.
- Teachers' assessments of what pupils can do are accurate. Links with other schools provide teachers with an opportunity to check the accuracy of their judgements. This, combined with the sharing of strong practice already within the school, results in adults' precise understanding of pupils' capabilities. This accurate information is used by teachers to ensure that activities are age-appropriate and suitable for pupils' abilities. Teaching, therefore, is effective because it meets the needs of all pupils, including those who are the most and least able.
- Teachers' feedback to pupils follows closely the school's policy and contributes effectively to improvements in pupils' learning. Adults use a wide range of strategies, including verbal, written and pictorial communication, to acknowledge pupils' successes and where they could do better. Where appropriate, teachers help pupils to understand what they can do to improve next time. This action contributes to many pupils deepening their learning.
- The teaching of communication skills, particularly social communication skills, is strong throughout the

school. Teachers and adults carefully plan their use of the school's wide variety of buildings, rooms and spaces, along with visits into the local and wider community, to provide opportunities for pupils to deepen their learning. As a result, pupils effectively build their resilience to change. This represents outstanding progress for these pupils and is a significant factor in pupils' overall progress.

- Effective communication between teachers, support staff and specialist staff, such as the school's outreach team, ensures a consistent approach to the meeting of pupils' specific needs. This serves to build pupils' self-confidence and trust in other adults. For example, visitors are welcomed to the school by the vast majority of pupils. Pupils go out of their way to engage, in their own unique style, with the visitors they encounter in classrooms and around the school. This is not only an indication that pupils feel safe in school, but also that they are beginning to overcome their social communication difficulties.
- The teaching of reading is effective because it encourages pupils to read widely and often. Pupils, particularly those who benefit from additional one-to-one support, are often able to read well and in many instances can decode difficult words by sounding out letters. This is a sign of strong progress in reading.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare is outstanding

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding. Because pupils' personal development is seen by the school as the key to unlocking their potential as learners, adults are unrelenting in their efforts to ensure that pupils benefit from as wide a range of social experiences as possible.
- The school is characterised by its calmness and pupils' desire to be successful learners. The fundamental British values of tolerance and respect are at the heart of the school and permeate every aspect of its work. Adults model valuing the contribution made by everyone and this is mirrored by the pupils. Whole-school focus days, for example that on Remembrance Day, are used expertly to deepen pupils' understanding of what it is to be British. As a result, by the time pupils leave the school they are well on the way to developing into well-rounded young people who able to make a significant contribution to society.
- Pupils are proud to attend Abbot's Lea School and they take pride in everything they do at the school. Pupils' views are sought on a frequent basis. Pupils are encouraged to speak out and put their own point of view forward. Pupils spoken to understand what democracy is and were able to describe how they voted to elect a student council for the school. They said that they feel valued by adults at the school and that 'coming to the school is like being in one big happy family'.
- Pupils are frequently given responsibility in line with their specific needs and abilities. One pupil described how he is given the responsibility for his own learning at certain times of the day. Older pupils, such as those in the sixth form, frequently make choices about their learning activities and are given the opportunity to make their own drinks and snacks. These actions are an indication of improvements in pupils' personal development as they move through the school.
- Pupils are safe in school. Pupils and their parents feel this is the case. Pupils spoken to were able to identify things, such as knowing staff are well trained in first aid, the security of the building, their own training in online safety and having someone to turn to when they have a concern, as reasons why they feel safe.
- The school's records show that incidents of bullying of any description are very rare. This view was corroborated through discussions with parents and pupils. Pupils spoken to were aware of different forms of bullying, such as homophobic, transphobic and racist, but were adamant that these did not take place in school.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils, including children in early years and learners in the sixth form, is outstanding. The vast majority of parents who responded to the online survey, along with all those spoken to, were in agreement that this is the case. This was confirmed during the inspection where inspectors saw nothing but exemplary conduct around the school. Many pupils play energetically at breaktimes, enjoying a game of football for example, but remain polite and courteous to one another and also to the adults around them.
- Pupils' attitudes to learning are excellent. They say they enjoy school very much. Pupils attend well and

absence levels are in line with other schools nationally.

- The school's own records show that poor behaviour incidents are rare. Published figures show that the school does not use exclusion as a means of managing behaviour. In every area of the school, pupils are a true model of British values. Pupils get on well together in lessons; they value and share one another's ideas and are tolerant of their differences. When misunderstandings arise between pupils, they are often a result of anxiety associated with autism conditions. However, such incidents are dealt with skilfully by adults so that learning does not falter.
- Both pupils and adults use the school's behaviour management system well. Pupils and adults were observed using a 'traffic light' system to identify a pupil's unease or a need to change activities. This, used in conjunction with an appropriate reward system, ensures that lessons run smoothly while activities in other parts of the school are purposeful and contribute effectively to pupils' overall progress.
- Pupils' impeccable behaviour in and around the school and in the local and wider community is promoted by excellent relationships between staff and learners. Those parents spoken to said that the behaviour of their children, especially at home, has been transformed since they joined the school. This is a result of regular and frequent high-quality communication between parents and adults at the school in order to share information about pupils' specific needs.

Outcomes for pupils

are outstanding

- Pupils' attainment on entry is almost always well below that expected for their age. In many cases, pupils join the school several years behind their peers in mainstream schools. From these very low starting points, many pupils, including those from all groups, progress rapidly. This results in outstanding outcomes overall.
- Since the previous inspection, pupils' rates of progress in their basic skills have increased and are now outstanding. Of the pupils who left school last year, almost three quarters achieved a GCSE pass grade in English and mathematics, compared to one quarter in 2013. All of last year's leavers achieved a recognised qualification in English and mathematics.
- Evidence in pupils' work books and files, along with that on display around the school, substantiates teachers' and leaders' records. These records show outstanding progress across all year groups and in a range of subjects including art, history and physical education (PE).
- Whole-school special events, when the usual timetable is dispensed with to focus on a particular topic, such as the mysterious 'dinosaur eggs' found in the school grounds, are interspersed judiciously to bolster the curriculum. Well-thought-out planning of the curriculum ensures that it is matched precisely to pupils' specific needs. As a consequence, all groups of pupils progress equally well over time. For example, a high proportion of pupils who are identified by the school as being the most able gain an appropriate range of external qualifications, including at GCSE and BTEC level. Furthermore, pupils identified by the school as being the least able have success in building their basic literacy and numeracy skills and progress to achieve elementary qualifications in English and mathematics, along with other recognised qualifications such as the ASDAN Certificate of Personal Effectiveness (CoPE) award.
- The proportion of girls who attend the school is low in all year groups. However, inspectors observed girls involved in every aspect of school life, whether in or out of the classroom. In a PE lesson, for example, girls were observed to take part enthusiastically in the activity because the exercise circuit had been designed to provide an appropriate balance between strength, stamina and agility. Teachers' precise and considerate planning ensures that girls and boys achieve as well as each other in all subjects.
- The school's records show that almost all pupils who are on roll at the school at the end of Key Stage 4 remain in the school's sixth form. The small proportion of other pupils secure places in local colleges. Pupils are prepared very well for their transition into sixth form and have a high rate of success in their personal learning pathways by the time they leave the school.

Early years provision

is outstanding

- Safeguarding procedures at the Abbot's Lea Matthew Arnold (ALMA) Assessment Centre are effective. Children are kept safe in a calm and welcoming environment. Outstanding leadership ensures that staff are trained well in how to care for and keep children safe. As a result, children's welfare and safety needs are met sensitively by a team of caring adults. For example, during road safety week children are taken

for a walk in the community. Here children focus on crossing the road safely. Because noise is a significant obstacle to learning for many of children in the provision, such activity supports children in effectively managing their response to road traffic noise. Such outcomes are, therefore, a sign of exceptional progress for a significant proportion of children.

- Adults are effective in establishing routines quickly so that children begin to build strong relationships with adults in the centre. Children respond to adults' requests and, as a result, start to develop their communication and language skills effectively. These actions contribute significantly to children being ready to learn in Year 1 or when they move from the ALMA Assessment Centre into other mainstream or special schools.
- From their various starting points, which are frequently very low, children progress swiftly with their basic skills in reading, writing and numeracy and also with their social and emotional skills. Outstanding teaching is typical within the centre and is a direct result of teachers' pinpoint accuracy when assessing children's specific needs. Teachers use their accurate assessments, along with information they glean from partners such as parents and other professionals, to plan lessons which are effective in capturing the varying interests of this group of children.
- Analysis of leaders' assessment information shows that children eligible to receive additional pupil premium funds achieve as well as their peers who also attend the ALMA Assessment Centre. Leaders use other supplementary funds well to ensure that appropriate additional support is directed to those who need it the most, so that all groups of children have an equal opportunity to succeed.

16 to 19 study programmes

are outstanding

- Outcomes for this group of learners are outstanding because the quality of teaching is also outstanding. Each learner has a personal learning pathway which is matched expertly to their specific needs and interests. Learners who have not achieved a higher grade in English and mathematics in Year 11 receive effective support to achieve a qualification which is appropriate to their level of ability. Learners typically leave the school with a suitable array of qualifications including ASDAN awards, entry-level qualifications, Duke of Edinburgh Awards, vocational qualifications and higher-grade GCSEs in a good number of subjects, for example.
- Learners in the sixth form receive high-quality independent advice and guidance from a specialist careers advisor. A good proportion of learners benefit from taking part in work experience. Each learner receives a personalised careers and aspirations report which contributes to their education, health and care plan and is reviewed at least annually. As a result of this effective support, along with taster days at local colleges, learners are prepared well for their next steps. Almost all learners enter local colleges to follow courses which demonstrate their continued progress. Recently, a small number of former learners have studied successfully to achieve degrees and higher degrees at universities around the country.
- Strong leadership has built a culture of high expectations and independence within the sixth form. Leaders monitor standards with the same rigour as with the rest of the school.
- Frequent and well-planned visits into the local community are effective in ensuring that learners strengthen their social skills. Learners are safe and well cared for because adults plan meticulously for these valuable activities. Adults expertly guide learners, such as when buying their own ingredients for recipes in food technology, so that they build their resilience to manage for themselves their specific needs associated with autism. As a result learners' personal development is outstanding.
- Learners' behaviour is outstanding because they have the opportunity to manage their own behaviour in and around school, for example when preparing snacks and drinks at breaktimes, and also in real-life situations on a frequent basis.

School details

Unique reference number	104736
Local authority	Liverpool
Inspection number	10001399

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	3–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in 16 to 19 study programmes	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	213
Of which, number on roll in 16 to 19 study programmes	30
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Miss Sarah Powell
Interim Headteacher	Miss Jane Parry
Telephone number	0151 428 1161
Website	www.abbotsleaschool.co.uk
Email address	j.parry@abbotslea.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	13 September 2013

Information about this school

- The number of pupils at the school has increased since the last inspection.
- All pupils attending the school have either a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan, indicating autistic spectrum disorders. All have social and communication difficulties and the vast majority have cognitive delay or deficit. Many pupils also have dyslexia, dyspraxia, mental health needs or sensory processing difficulties.
- The proportion of pupils eligible for pupil premium is above average. Fewer than one in 10 pupils are girls. There is a very small proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups.
- The school manages an outreach service for the local authority to advise and support both mainstream secondary and primary schools on the needs and education of pupils with autistic spectrum disorder.
- The school also manages a satellite site, the Abbot's Lea Matthew Arnold (ALMA) Assessment Centre, which is two to three miles from the main school buildings. The ALMA Assessment Centre has a combination of assessment and full-time places for pupils aged between four and seven years.
- The school does not commission the use of independent alternative providers.
- Abbot's Lea has received the following awards: National Autistic Society Autism Accreditation; Investors in People Award; Enhanced Healthy Schools Award; Sky Sports Living for Sport accreditation and ECO Schools Award.
- The school is a licensed centre for the Duke of Edinburgh Award.

Information about this inspection

- The inspection was carried out with half a day's notice.
- The inspection team observed several part lessons, two of which were joint observations with senior leaders. Inspectors scrutinised a range of documentation provided by the school and observed all aspects of the school's work, including the ALMA Assessment Centre. They looked at pupils' work and at the school's records of their progress.
- The inspectors held meetings with senior leaders, staff, pupils, parents and a range of other professionals.
- Inspectors also considered the responses by 12 parents on the online questionnaire Parent View and 85 staff in a confidential paper-based survey administered by the school.

Inspection team

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