

The Libra School

Edgemoor Court, South Radworthy, South Molton, Devon EX36 3LN

Inspection dates

20–22 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

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Good

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school

- Pupils are at the heart of this outstanding school. Leaders have the highest expectations of staff and pupils. They are relentless in their pursuit to further improve this outstanding provision.
- Leaders make excellent use of the systems in place to gather information about pupils' progress. They use this information to refine and adjust learning, ensuring that pupils make the best possible progress.
- Teaching is outstanding. Teachers are passionate in their work; they are also diligent and resilient. They show a determination to provide the very best education they can for pupils.
- Pupils with a history of extremely challenging behaviour and significant mental health issues make outstanding progress from their starting points. A creatively designed curriculum and personalised learning programme for each pupil ensure their needs are met exceedingly well.
- Support staff are exceptionally well trained. This results in pupils receiving high-quality support and guidance.
- Staff are exceptionally vigilant in their approach to the welfare of pupils, and safeguard them very effectively. Handover of supervision at the start and end of the day ensures consistency of approach between the school and pupils' homes.
- Pupils' behaviour is typically outstanding around the school and in lessons. Pupils have a clear understanding of what constitutes acceptable behaviour and recognise the importance of their education.
- The promotion of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is of the highest quality and is integral to the school's ethos.
- The school provides pupils with a range of high-quality therapeutic provision. This is making a positive contribution to building pupils' self-esteem and confidence.
- Relationships between staff and pupils in the school are strong. This enables pupils to build trust with adults to help them feel safe and secure.
- The proprietors play an active role in the school. They challenge and support the staff effectively and ensure that all independent school standards continue to be met successfully.
- The school works effectively with social care to ensure that pupils are provided with the best possible support for their academic and emotional development.
- Parents and carers speak highly of the school. They appreciate the quality of learning opportunities the school provides for their children and the stability and care given.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

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

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that teachers adapt work to maintain a high level of challenge in every lesson, especially for the most able, so that pupils achieve consistently well and make outstanding progress.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is outstanding

- The headteacher and deputy headteacher have created an extremely strong ethos, which puts pupils' needs at the heart of all that they do. They are ably supported by a highly committed, talented and resilient staff who share leaders' high aspirations for excellence in all aspects of the school's work. 'There is no stone left unturned in the efforts of management and staff to find ways to encourage and promote these children and their welfare in all areas,' is typical of the comments made by staff.
- Teachers, support staff and therapists are passionate about the 'holistic' education they provide for their pupils. They work together exceptionally well to provide the very best 'all round' education.
- The school's evaluation of its own performance is accurate. Leaders link the school development plan firmly to their evaluation, meticulously tracking and monitoring the impact of their actions. Consequently, leaders have a good understanding of what works well and why.
- The targets set for teachers are used very effectively to hold them to account for pupils' performance. High-quality training and development are also pivotal in ensuring that the quality of teaching remains consistently outstanding. Staff work well together and are highly reflective practitioners. Along with leaders, they are far from complacent, continually searching for ways to improve their practice in order to achieve the very best outcomes for pupils.
- The curriculum is outstanding. Pupils have access to all the national curriculum subjects. Teachers work extremely hard to provide bespoke learning programmes for each pupil. As a result, learning needs are effectively met and pupils increasingly enjoy their lessons and appreciate the value of their education.
- Learning is enhanced by an extensive range of trips, visits and cultural experiences, all carefully planned to meet the needs of pupils. For example, as part of their geography work on volcanoes, a group of pupils visited Tenerife to conduct first-hand research – investigating the behaviour of volcanoes and the impact they have on the surrounding areas. These experiences bring pupils' learning vividly to life.
- Excellent relationships between all members of staff, the pupils, parents and carers are pivotal to the success of the school. As a result, pupils feel safe and secure. In addition, staff have a deep knowledge of personal circumstances and the many challenges individual pupils face, enabling them to support pupils' development exceptionally well.
- Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is threaded successfully throughout the curriculum. The school's core values: 'The belief that all young people should be inspired to develop their talents and skills; to be challenged to strive to be the best they can be, but above all develop a thirst for learning that will stay with them throughout their lives' are tangible across the school. Pupils take part in community activities such as rugby and football. Some pupils go further afield and are members, for example, of the police cadets.
- The school works very well at developing pupils' understanding of what it means to live in modern Britain. British values are taught explicitly through personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education and citizenship. Pupils talk knowledgeably about democracy, respect and equality of opportunity.
- A good range of accredited courses is offered to support pupils' career choices. Staff listen closely to pupils' aspirations and plan suitable pathways based on their needs and potential. This approach enables pupils to take GCSE examinations and other accredited and nationally recognised courses. Careers advice and guidance is of a high quality. Pupils go on to carefully planned destinations, including further education settings. Consequently, all pupils have equal opportunities to be successful. For example, older pupils hoping to pursue a career in information technology (IT) welcome the opportunity to gain work experience at a local IT company.
- The proprietors ensure that the school is well maintained. Teaching rooms are welcoming, with high-quality resources. Pupils have access to a range of well-appointed specialist classrooms, including an art studio, science laboratory, library and a range of therapy rooms. Pupils grow a variety of crops and flowers in the established greenhouse and small allotment, harvest the vegetables and cook them in their own kitchens. Pupils develop their entrepreneurial skills by selling the flowers they grow.
- **The governance of the school**
 - The proprietors of the school share the determination of staff to provide the very best quality of education for its pupils. They provide a stimulating and impressive learning environment where pupils are safe and secure. They have leaders who are relentless in driving forward school improvement and making the school's aspirational vision a reality.

- The proprietors know the school exceptionally well. They visit the school regularly and challenge leaders at the school from a position of knowledge and understanding. They carefully check the progress of pupils, both academically and emotionally, and have a good grasp of the quality of teaching. They ensure that all independent school standards are successfully and consistently met.
- Finances are closely monitored, ensuring the financial stability of the school. For example, the proprietors know how pupil premium funding is spent and the positive impact it is having on the outcomes for disadvantaged pupils.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are rigorous and effective. Leaders are relentless in ensuring that they provide an environment where pupils feel safe and secure. The policies and procedures for keeping pupils safe are skilfully threaded through all aspects of the school's work. Staff receive high-quality training and regular updates on keeping pupils safe. School leaders do not shy away from controversial matters. For example, staff have undertaken training on the government's 'Prevent' strategy, which raises awareness about the dangers of radicalisation and extremism. As a consequence, staff have a clear understanding of the need to protect pupils from all possible risks. Leaders meticulously monitor all pupils and are assiduous in following up any concerns. They work effectively with outside agencies to minimise the risk of harm to any pupil. Great diligence is shown in staff recruitment and safeguarding; records are detailed and of high quality.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is outstanding

- Teaching is of a consistently high quality. Teachers show dedication, determination and a desire to provide the pupils with the very best learning experiences.
- Teachers effectively develop pupils' key skills in reading, writing and mathematics across the curriculum while retaining their interest. For example, in a Year 11 geography lesson, GCSE practice questions enabled pupils to demonstrate their geographical skills and their knowledge and application of English grammar.
- Relationships between adults and pupils are exceptional. Adults provide a highly positive climate for learning which encourages pupils to be inquisitive, to explore new challenges and to increasingly take appropriate risks.
- Teachers have consistently high expectations of pupils. Staff show resilience and resolve in getting the very best out of pupils. For example, in a Year 5, 6 and 7 English lesson on poetry, pupils excelled in writing their haiku poems, using exciting vocabulary to bring their poetry alive to the reader.
- Teachers and therapists work well together, setting aspirational learning targets for pupils. These help pupils to secure important small steps in their learning, personal development and behaviour. Leaders regularly review pupils' progress and keep detailed records on each pupil. They provide robust challenge to teachers if pupils' learning and progress stalls.
- Teachers' strong subject knowledge and enthusiasm lead pupils to engage swiftly with their learning. Teachers give pupils activities which are extremely well matched to their individual needs, based on accurate knowledge of what pupils can and cannot do. Consequently, this increases pupils' confidence, helping them to make rapid gains in their learning. For example, in a Year 8 science lesson on chemical compounds, pupils made accurate predictions and used the periodic table with confidence.
- The high quality of questioning by teachers and support staff is impressive. They routinely challenge pupils by using probing questioning which makes them think deeply and increases their rates of progress.
- Support staff are highly trained and extremely well deployed. They develop superb relationships with the pupils to whom they are assigned, providing very effective support which contributes significantly to pupils' outstanding progress.
- Teachers and support staff provide ongoing feedback to pupils in lessons, which is effective in guiding and encouraging pupils to improve their work.
- Teachers are constantly monitoring most pupils' learning and progress. They quickly identify gaps in skills and understanding and provide highly effective support. Consequently, most pupils catch up quickly, often from extremely low starting points. There are occasions, however, when teachers do not adapt work readily enough to meet the needs of the most-able pupils.
- As a result of consistently outstanding teaching, coupled with interventions which precisely meet the needs of individual pupils, disadvantaged pupils and those identified as having special educational needs make rapid progress. For example, a high proportion of pupils have made accelerated progress in their reading and achieve in line with, or better than, their peers nationally.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare are outstanding

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding. Pupils feel safe and secure. They have a good understanding of risks in and out of school. Pupils in Years 10 and 11 have a good understanding about the risks of drugs, alcohol or tobacco.
- In lessons, teachers are extremely skilful at encouraging pupils to join in discussions and respond to their instructions. Staff manage any episodes of challenging behaviour well. Physical restraint is only ever used as a last resort. Records show that the incidence of physical restraint reduces significantly over time as pupils become more settled in their surroundings.
- All staff are trained to recognise signs of harm and abuse. They are diligent and act quickly to deal with any concerns. Daily meetings ensure effective communication between school and care staff. Taxi drivers also provide staff with updates on pupils' behaviour and welfare following journeys to and from school.
- Pupils attend school regularly. They are aware of how important their education is and the need to remain positive towards their learning. Pupils experience a very calm and settled start to the school day. This is due to the robust handover procedures in place, which ensure that pupils get off to the best possible start each morning. A similar routine takes place at the end of the day.
- Pupils, staff, parents and carers are very positive about behaviour and safety. One parent stated: 'This school has been a life-saver. I can't praise the school enough. It is outstanding.' Social workers confirm this view, one stating, 'I wish there were more "Libras" out there.'

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding. During the inspection, pupils' behaviour in lessons was exemplary, with pupils keen to get on with their learning. Teachers' deep understanding of the needs of each individual enables them to quickly identify when a pupil needs to take 'time out' from their learning. On such occasions, this is done with little interference to learning for other pupils, and the pupil often returns quickly to the class.
- Leaders monitor pupils' behaviour closely to identify patterns and triggers for potential lapses. Records confirm a significant reduction in incidents over time, although 'spikes' appear when pupils are facing a particularly challenging time. The school's behaviour charter: 'We are ready to learn, we behave honestly, we keep ourselves safe, we listen to people and show respect, we look after property' is clearly understood by all. The positive reward scheme serves to promote this charter, resulting in outstanding behaviour. Pupils work hard on their behaviour and are justifiably proud to receive their awards.
- Pupils respond well to the structure of the day. Lessons start without delay, and clear routines are well-established. Pupils find the visual timetables particularly helpful in managing the day.
- Breaktimes and lunchtimes are happy and sociable occasions where pupils and adults have the opportunity to talk more informally while eating lunch together. Adults provide good role models for pupils, helping them to develop positive social skills.

Outcomes for pupils are outstanding

- Pupils join the school at different times of the year with skills and knowledge which are typically well below average for their age. They display severe social, emotional and mental health needs, which means that they have often missed substantial periods of education in their previous schools. A significant proportion of pupils have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan.
- In their early days at the school, many pupils are reluctant to engage in learning, and quickly become distressed if asked to comply with instructions. However, due to the outstanding guidance and support given by staff, these pupils settle in well and make outstanding progress from their starting points. This is especially so in reading, writing and mathematics.
- Reading is given a high priority. Consequently, pupils rapidly catch up with their peers in mainstream schools, having made excellent progress. This is because reading is taught exceptionally well. As a result, pupils quickly begin to enjoy their reading. For example, in a Year 5 and 6 lesson, pupils were engrossed in reading *The Queen's knickers*. They read with great fluency and expression, interacting well with their classmates during discussions on the text. This well-chosen book linked seamlessly with pupils talking about the history of the monarchy.

- Pupils are making outstanding progress from their starting points in a range of subjects. Once settled, pupils make rapid progress which enables them to catch up, and at times overtake their mainstream peers in the core subjects. In Years 10 and 11, pupils take GCSE examinations, increasing their opportunities to access further education and training. Currently, pupils are on track to achieve at least grade C in their chosen subjects. However, leaders acknowledge that at times teachers could adapt work further in individual lessons to maximise pupils' learning opportunities, enabling them, especially the most able, to make even better progress.
- Disadvantaged pupils make outstanding progress. Well-targeted support and carefully planned activities enable them to quickly catch up with their peers. For example, funding has been used prudently to purchase software to support pupils with their learning. As a result, these pupils make rapid progress, especially in their writing.

School details

Unique reference number	133392
Inspection number	10006819
DfE registration number	878/6202

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
School status	Independent school
Age range of pupils	5–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	24
Number of part time pupils	0
Proprietor	Blackford Education (Schools) Limited
Headteacher	Joan Wilkes
Annual fees (day pupils)	£46,800
Telephone number	01598 740044
Website	www.libraschool.co.uk
Email address	admin@libraschool.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	5–6 March 2012

Information about this school

- The Libra School is an independent special school and therapeutic community for pupils with severe social, emotional and mental health difficulties. The school opened in July 2001 and relocated to its current site in 2007. A large proportion of the pupils live in one of the five children's homes located in Devon and Somerset. These homes are owned by the school's proprietors.
- The school is registered for 24 pupils. Young people are referred to the Libra School by local authorities, social services and health departments from around the country. The Libra School works with boys and girls between the ages of five and 18 years old. At the time of the inspection there were 24 pupils aged between seven and 15.
- There are currently no pupils in the sixth form.
- Almost all pupils have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan.
- There are a small number of disadvantaged pupils who are in receipt of the pupil premium funding. This is additional government funding for those eligible for free school meals and children who are looked after.
- The school was last inspected in March 2012, when it was judged to be good. At that time, the school met the independent school standards and complied with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010.
- The proprietors, who are the company representatives, have responsibility for the governance of the school.
- No pupils attend alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

- The inspector observed lessons in every class; all observations were conducted jointly with the headteacher. During this time, the quality of work in pupils' books was scrutinised and pupils were listened to reading.
- Meetings were held with the headteacher, deputy headteacher, staff, therapists and the proprietor. Telephone conversations took place with social care officers from local authorities. The inspector took into consideration the responses of 22 questionnaires completed by staff.
- The inspector met with groups of pupils to listen to their views.
- A wide range of documentation was examined including the school's evaluation of its own performance, the school's development plan, records relating to behaviour, bullying and safeguarding, and data relating to pupils' achievement and progress.
- There were too few responses to the online survey, Parent View, for these to be published. However, four text messages from parents were taken into account. Telephone conversations took place with three parents and carers during the inspection.

Inspection team

Jen Southall, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

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