

Inspire Free Special School

Silverbank, Churchill Avenue, Chatham ME5 0LB

Inspection dates

27–28 January 2016

Overall effectiveness

Inadequate

Effectiveness of leadership and management	Inadequate
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Inadequate
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Inadequate
Outcomes for pupils	Inadequate
16 to 19 study programmes	Inadequate
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an inadequate school

- Leadership at all levels is inadequate. The Principal and other leaders have not secured effective provision in key areas, such as the quality of teaching and pupils' personal development and welfare.
- Leaders' evaluations of the school's effectiveness are much too generous because leaders' checks on provision have not been maintained. Their management of staff performance is ineffective.
- Senior leaders' effectiveness has diminished because of the absence of staff in key positions. This means that the headteacher has no support to stop or tackle the recent decline in standards.
- Governors have been too slow to secure adequate support for the school. This means that leaders have not been able to make the significant changes needed. The leadership of teaching and learning is, therefore, ineffective.
- In too many lessons, pupils are insufficiently engaged because work is not challenging or interesting enough. Pupils have poor attitudes to their learning.
- The curriculum is not developed well enough to cater for the different needs of pupils.
- Rates of attendance are too low and show little sign of improvement. Exclusions are much higher than is typical and are increasing.
- The quality of teaching is inadequate. Teachers' expectations of pupils are too low. Teachers do not ensure that pupils receive the level of challenge they need to make suitable progress in their learning, particularly in English.
- Pupils' reading and writing skills are poorly developed and, in many cases, pupils do not see the value of reading. Pupils' outcomes are too low. The legacy of underachievement and low expectations has not been sufficiently addressed.
- Key groups of pupils, including the most-able and disadvantaged pupils, underachieve.
- Provision in the sixth form is inadequate because the curriculum does not meet learners' needs.

The school has the following strengths

- The use of additional adults is a relative strength and helps to improve pupils' attitudes to learning.

Full report

In accordance with the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires special measures because it is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the school are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve leadership and management at all levels so that essential improvements are made by:
 - implementing rigorous and effective systems for monitoring all aspects of the school's work, ensuring that self-evaluations are accurate
 - sharpening leaders' plans for improvement so that they are more focused on the key issues
 - developing middle leaders so that they can help to raise standards more quickly
 - ensuring that senior and middle leaders improve the quality of teaching and its impact on learning
 - securing high-quality external support for leaders as a matter of urgency
 - implementing improvements to the curriculum so that it fully meets the needs of all pupils, including learners in the sixth form
 - ensuring that procedures for managing teachers' performance are effective and staff are held to account for their impact on pupils' achievement.

- Significantly improve teaching to raise the achievement of all groups of pupils in all subjects, but particularly in English, by:
 - raising teachers' expectations for all pupils and groups of pupils so that work has the appropriate challenge and builds on what pupils already know and can do
 - tightening teachers' use of assessment so that work set in lessons is more closely linked to the needs of pupils with differing abilities
 - developing teachers' subject knowledge
 - ensuring that lessons more consistently capture the interest and enthusiasm of pupils.

- Improve pupils' behaviour through:
 - making better use of behaviour plans and how they link to the curriculum to reduce the number of exclusions
 - improving levels of attendance for all pupils.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is inadequate

- Leadership and management at all levels are inadequate. As a result, all key aspects of the school's work are declining in effectiveness and pupils are not being provided with equal opportunities to succeed.
- Leaders have been aware of the rapid decline in standards at the school for some time. Long-term absence of key leadership roles, the lack of any external support, the inability to recruit staff successfully to middle leadership roles and the admission of pupils with an array of significant needs have all contributed to leaders' inability to tackle weaknesses.
- Leaders' monitoring of teaching and learning is weak. This is because senior leaders have been too consumed ensuring that the day-to-day functioning of the school is maintained by supporting staff to manage the very challenging behaviour of pupils. As a result, leaders have not checked what is happening in the classrooms enough to know where specific weaknesses exist.
- Senior leaders evaluate the school too generously. They have not given time to amending their evaluations since the recent decline in the effectiveness of leadership and management. Consequently, their evaluations are not candid enough for them to identify and prioritise the key areas of improvement that are needed.
- The Principal and senior staff have planned how improvements can be made but intended actions are too broad and wide ranging. Leaders are not able to follow the plans because there are too many areas for improvement and insufficient prioritisation of the key issues.
- Middle leadership is ineffective. Identified posts within the leadership structure of the school remain unfilled. Leaders have not been successful in addressing this issue and so too much is expected of a few senior leaders.
- Performance management of staff is ineffective. It has not brought about the necessary improvements to teaching. Staff are not held to account properly for the achievement of pupils. The school's performance management policy has not yet been fully implemented.
- The curriculum is inadequate. As some leaders recognise, it does not meet pupils' wide range of needs. Weak teaching in too many subjects means that the curriculum is not appropriately broad, balanced and challenging for pupils in some instances, and not individualised enough for others.
- Pupil premium funding which supports pupils who are disadvantaged, is not used well enough. Support staff provide extra help for individuals and small groups. This has helped a few pupils to make progress, but overall, disadvantaged pupils are not catching up to where they should be, especially in English.
- Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is not promoted well enough. However, leaders have successfully established a sense of community at the school. Initiatives, such as the achievement assembly, have started to support pupils' social development, as does the personal, social and health education curriculum. However, there is little evidence to show how pupils' cultural, moral and spiritual needs are being met.
- Since the school's formation as a free school, there has been no access for leaders to any external support, other than the visits from the Education Funding Agency adviser. This lack has proved a key element in the school's declining effectiveness, following an initial period of improvement. The school's vulnerability, caused by staff absence and unfilled roles, was not recognised quickly enough. Consequently, when weaknesses became apparent, there was insufficient capacity to tackle them and no support.
- The school should not appoint newly qualified teachers.
- **The governance of the school**
 - Governors do not fully understand the issues being faced by leaders at the school. In particular, they have not recognised that the quality of teaching and learning has declined and that pupils' outcomes are inadequate. They are unaware of the poor quality of provision in English and the reasons for this. Governors are, however, aware of the lack of leadership capacity at the school and the inability of the trust to provide appropriate support to manage this. They have rightly started negotiations with relevant multi-academy trusts (MATs) to address this shortfall. Nevertheless, their focus on securing support from a MAT means that they have not maintained a sufficient level of monitoring of the effectiveness of the school.
 - Too many meetings linked to school effectiveness, such as the recent 'governors' day', have been cancelled. Because governors are not aware of current weaknesses in provision, leaders have not been held to account for much-needed improvements. Governors have also failed to secure support quickly enough for the Principal when she has been consumed by day-to-day operational issues.

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Leaders ensure that the agreed systems for protecting children are understood by all staff and followed appropriately. Records are kept and maintained diligently. This allows relevant leaders to ensure that they follow up concerns with social care services tenaciously when needed.
- The pupil welfare officer knows the pupils and their families well. She works closely with them, with senior leaders and with other services. All unexplained absences are followed up. The pupil welfare officer regularly visits pupils and their homes to maintain positive relationships, whilst attempting to improve pupils' attendance.
- Staff are vigilant, know and care for pupils, and ensure that they follow up any concerns they have in a timely manner. Staff look out for one another and for the safety of the pupils in their care.
- Policies on the school website are not always kept up to date. Those currently available do not make reference to the most recent Department for Education guidance. The shortfalls in this area reflect the limitations of current management systems in the school.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is inadequate

- Teaching across the school does not help pupils to learn quickly enough, particularly in the vital areas of literacy, reading and writing. Teachers' expectations of what pupils should achieve are inconsistent and, too often, low. In many lessons, work is not set at the right level to challenge pupils and meet their different needs.
- Not enough thought is given by teachers to engage pupils' interest. Lessons often do not get going quickly enough and expectations are too low. Teachers do not make strong enough links to pupils' learning in other subjects or from previous lessons. Consequently, pupils lose interest and become distracted.
- Teachers do not challenge pupils well enough, particularly the most able, with the work they have been asked to do. For example, in a Key Stage 3 English lesson, pupils showed some interest in a video about Pepys and the Great Fire of London. However, the teacher did not make any attempt to strengthen pupils' engagement or understanding through questioning. This also meant that pupils' understanding of the video and its content were not checked. When the clip finished, pupils were unable to articulate responses to the teacher's questions because they had not realised why they were being asked to watch the clip. Consequently, the teacher repeatedly answered her own questions.
- Too often, the needs of different groups of pupils are not adequately met. This is because the use of assessment by teachers is underdeveloped. Leaders are clear about how assessment should be used, but the high turnover of staff means that they have not been able to establish consistent systems.
- Too much teaching does not have an impact on pupils' learning. Very often, teachers ask pupils to complete activities that will fill time, but which do not help them to learn. This means that too much time for learning is lost and pupils lose interest in lessons.
- Teachers do not take enough care over the feedback they give to pupils. Pupils are not always clear about how they can improve their work. There are also times when teachers praise pupils even though they have not completed their tasks correctly. This means that feedback does not do enough to help pupils make progress.
- Pupils' work shows that there are considerable inconsistencies between subjects and the progress being made by different pupils. This reflects the variability of teaching seen during the inspection. Rates of progress are too slow. There are insufficient opportunities for pupils to investigate and reason in mathematics. Pupils do not write often enough or sufficiently across other subjects in the curriculum.
- Teachers do not always have the subject knowledge they need to help pupils learn. This is particularly the case in English, because there is no specialist teacher at the school. Consequently, the teaching of English is particularly poor and most pupils do not make enough progress in their literacy, reading and writing.
- The use of adults, such as teaching assistants, is a relative strength. Pupils show better attitudes to their learning when they have opportunities to work with support staff and teachers.
- Teaching in some subjects is better, for example, in physical education and in design and technology.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

is inadequate

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is inadequate.
- Leaders do not support pupils' personal development and welfare sufficiently. For example, pupils' attendance is very poor and, overall, shows little sign of improvement. This is despite the development of systems to analyse and review individual pupils' rates of absence. Although leaders have managed to improve the attendance of some pupils, this is not consistently the case and too many pupils do not attend the school frequently enough.
- Pupils enjoy physical education lessons. Consequently, they show better attitudes in these lessons. This, combined with the relatively stronger teaching, mean that pupils are beginning to gain a better understanding of healthy lifestyles.
- The Principal has worked effectively with other agencies to develop clear plans to improve careers advice. The implementation of these plans has already improved the timeliness of advice and support that pupils receive. Leaders have rightly recognised that there is still more work to be done before pupils are prepared well enough for the next stage in their education, employment or training.
- Pupils report that they feel safe. They believe that staff manage behaviour well and deal with bullying when it occurs.
- The parents spoken to during the inspection also report positively about the school. They believe that they are communicated with effectively and receive useful information about how well their children are doing.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is inadequate.
- Systems to promote good behaviour in lessons and over time are not effective. Pupils' attitudes to their learning are too often poor. Behaviour plans are drawn up, but are not used well enough by staff to assess and review the impact they are having. These plans often do not have secure dates for review recorded on them. Others are already out of date and sometimes months past their review date. The plans themselves do not link well enough to the wide-ranging analysis undertaken by leaders, rates of attendance and the impact of exclusions.
- In several lessons seen by inspectors, pupils showed very poor attitudes to their learning. They often chose to abscond and wander around the school. In lessons, they are slow to start their work and sometimes do not attempt to complete tasks they have been set. Teachers do not sufficiently challenge pupils to do their work when they are not on task. Pupils are not encouraged sufficiently and so do not show enough pride in their work.
- Pupils are too readily and regularly excluded. This reflects the poor management of their behaviour plans and the deficiencies of the curriculum. The proportion of sessions missed in the previous academic year was very high and much higher than is typical. Although the number of pupils who have been excluded this academic year is currently lower, the total number of sessions missed because of exclusions has already nearly equalled the total number of sessions missed for the whole of the previous year.
- Staff manage very challenging behaviour effectively. There are clear systems to follow in times of crisis. Staff work together effectively to minimise the risk to themselves, their colleagues and other pupils. They have received useful training and use de-escalation strategies appropriately.

Outcomes for pupils

are inadequate

- Standards at the school are too low, particularly but not exclusively in English. All groups of pupils make slow progress. Their performance in the GCSEs taken reflects the poor standards seen in the school. Attainment at Key Stage 4 is too low. Only one pupil achieved A*–G grades in five GCSEs, including English and mathematics. This was significantly lower than the school's target of four.
- Work seen in books and during lessons demonstrates that pupils do not make the progress that they are capable of, particularly in reading and writing. This is because, too often, the work they are being asked to do lacks challenge or is not matched well enough to pupils' needs.
- Pupils do not attain well in a number of subjects. The standards seen in several subjects is too low. There are limited opportunities for pupils to apply their learning across subjects, and too few links are made to pupils' interests.

- As for other pupils, the progress of pupils eligible for pupil premium funding is well below that of other pupils nationally, in spite of them being the best-performing group at the school. Only one tenth of these pupils are on track to make expected progress in English. They are not narrowing the gap in their attainment with their peers nationally.
- Pupils who have special educational needs or disability also underachieve. The provision offered does not do enough to meet their specific needs because some pupils, for example those with autistic spectrum conditions, have needs the school is not set up to cater for.
- Higher attaining pupils do not do as well as they should. Sufficiently challenging work for these pupils is rarely evident in lessons, so they do not get the opportunity to reach their potential. Far too few attain the higher levels when they do their GCSEs.
- Pupils' written work is underdeveloped and often untidily presented. Pupils do not get the opportunity to write often enough, or for extended periods of time. When pupils are asked to write, they do not take pride in what they are being asked to do. Feedback and teachers' expectations are not helpful for pupils to make improvements to their writing.
- Pupils have more opportunity to achieve qualifications than they have had in the past. In 2015, 77% of pupils achieved at least one measure in their GCSEs.

16 to 19 study programmes are inadequate

- Leadership of the sixth form, as in the rest of the school, is not as effective as it needs to be. Although leaders have made attempts to provide opportunities for learners who would otherwise not access education, standards are too low. There are too few courses offered to learners and they often do not meet learners' needs and interests. This is partly because this is the first year the school has offered post-16 provision, but leaders lack the capacity to put in the support that is needed to make the provision effective.
- Teaching in the sixth form is inadequate. This is because staff have not been appropriately monitored and supported to develop the precise skills needed to support learning for the learners they teach.
- As in the main school, all groups of learners are not making the progress that they should.
- Learners are not well enough prepared for the next stage in their education, training or employment. Through the development of improved careers advice, learners are beginning to receive better information about the opportunities that they could access. However, this is too new a development and has not come about quickly enough for the learners currently in the sixth form.

School details

Unique reference number	141005
Inspection number	10011225

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	Academy free school
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in 16 to 19 study programmes	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	37
Of which, number on roll in 16 to 19 study programmes	6
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Andrew Reece
Principal	Ms Sharon McDermott
Telephone number	01634 827372
Website	www.inspirefreeschool.uk
Email address	mcdermotts@inspirefreeschool.uk
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this school

- Inspire Free Special School is a special school for pupils with social, emotional or mental health needs. The school opened as a free school in September 2014, following the closure of its predecessor school two days earlier. The predecessor school, which was called The Oaks, as part of the Silverbank Centre, was judged to have serious weaknesses when it was last inspected by Ofsted. The school continues to share its site with The Rowans School, which is run completely separately, and is subject to a separate inspection.
- The majority of the pupils are of White British heritage and there are significantly more boys than girls.
- The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for support through the pupil premium, which is government funding provided for looked after children, those known to be eligible for free school meals and pupils with a parent in the armed forces, is well above average.
- All pupils attending the Inspire Free Special School have a statement of special educational needs or education, health and care plan.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 11 lessons or parts of lessons across all departments, including the sixth form, five jointly with either the Principal or assistant principal. Inspectors observed pupils' behaviour around the school, at break- and lunchtime and during lessons.
- Meetings were held with senior leaders, the special educational needs coordinator, staff at the school and the Chair of the Governing Body. Inspectors also spoke to a representative from the Education Funding Agency on the telephone.
- Inspectors looked closely at school documentation, including minutes of governing body meetings, the school's analysis of how well it is doing, the school improvement plan, and data and tracking information about pupils' achievement, attendance and exclusions. Inspectors also reviewed the school's behaviour logs, analysis and individual behaviour plans.
- There were no responses from parents to the online questionnaire. Inspectors spoke to three randomly picked parents and considered 25 responses to the staff questionnaire.

Inspection team

Matthew Barnes, lead inspector

Janet Tomkins

Her Majesty's Inspector

Ofsted Inspector

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