

Aurora St Christopher's School

Carisbrooke Lodge, Westbury Park, Bristol BS6 7JE

Inspection dates

23–25 January 2017

Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Requires improvement
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Requires improvement
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Requires improvement
Sixth form provision	Requires improvement
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement

- Leadership, management and governance are not good because leaders have not ensured that all of the independent school standards are met.
- Teaching is not consistently good. Teachers do not use accurate information about what pupils already know, understand and can do when planning activities. Too often the tasks set by teachers are either too difficult or too easy. Pupils' work is not kept in good order.
- Pupils, and students in the sixth form, are not making good progress from their starting points, particularly in English and mathematics. Their learning in these two areas is weak.
- Frequently in lessons, adults are not used effectively to help pupils learn. Often they have little to do, or do too much for pupils. Pupils do not take 'calculated risks' or operate devices for themselves enough, slowing their progress.
- In the past not enough attention has been paid to preparing pupils for life after school. This is changing, but is in the early stages of development.
- New systems are in place, or are planned for, to provide better and more accurate information about pupils' attendance, behaviour and performance. It is too soon to see the impact of this work.

The school has the following strengths

- Staff care about the pupils in the school and get to know their characters, likes and dislikes. They form good relationships with the pupils.
- Staff work hard to help pupils who are anxious or distressed. They support them to calm down and be ready to learn. Pupils' behaviour is good. Restraint levels are low.
- The school's work to aid pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is strong.
- The new 'team around the young person' meetings are enabling all adults to have a more rounded picture of the pupils' needs and the next steps needed to improve their learning, physical and personal development.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school must take action to meet the requirements of the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 and associated requirements. The details are listed in the full report.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of leadership, management and governance of the school by:
 - ensuring that the school meets all of the required standards
 - ensuring the accuracy of the school's self-evaluation, basing it on first-hand evidence as seen in pupils' work
 - improving the quality of record-keeping and sharing of information throughout the school
 - continuing to extend the range of opportunities for older pupils to have work experience and ensuring the curriculum continues to prepare pupils better for life after they leave school.
- Improve the outcomes for pupils so that all pupils make at least good progress from their starting points by ensuring that:
 - teachers have accurate information about what pupils know, understand and can do
 - teachers make sure that the work set for pupils is at the right level of challenge for them and takes into account the specific barriers to their learning
 - pupils have a greater mastery in English and mathematics so that they can use what they have learned in lessons when interacting outside of the school and when they leave school
 - teachers make better use of other available adults to support pupils' learning
 - adults let pupils have more time to 'have a go', and use the available technological and digital devices to assist them in developing their oral skills in lessons
 - there are more opportunities to help pupils to take 'calculated' risks
 - pupils' work is kept in a way that celebrates their achievements and can demonstrate the progress they have made, sharing this with other adults who work with the pupils.

The school must meet the following independent school standards

- The proprietor must ensure that pupils receiving secondary education have access to accurate, up-to-date careers guidance that:
 - is presented in an impartial manner
 - enables them to make informed choices about a broad range of career options; and
 - helps to encourage them to fulfil their potential (paragraphs 2(2), 2(2)(e), 2(2)(e)(i), 2(2)(e)(ii), and 2(2)(e)(iii)).
- The proprietor must ensure that the teaching at the school:
 - enables pupils to acquire new knowledge and make good progress according to their ability so that they increase their understanding and develop their skills in the subjects taught

- involves well-planned lessons and effective teaching methods, activities and management of class time
 - shows a good understanding of the aptitudes, needs and prior attainments of the pupils, and ensures that these are taken into account in the planning of lessons
 - utilises effectively classroom resources of a good quality, quantity and range
 - demonstrates that a framework is in place to assess pupils' work regularly and thoroughly and uses information from that assessment to plan teaching so that pupils can progress (paragraphs 3, 3(a), 3(c), 3(d), 3(f), and 3(g)).
- The proprietor must ensure that an admission register is maintained in accordance with the Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006 (paragraph 15).
 - The proprietor must ensure that persons with leadership and management responsibilities at the school:
 - demonstrate good skills and knowledge appropriate to their role so that the independent school standards are met consistently
 - fulfil their responsibilities effectively so that the independent school standards are met consistently (paragraphs 34(1), 34(1)(a) and 34(1)(b)).

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Requires improvement

- The proprietor, leaders, and those responsible for governance have not ensured that the school meets all of the independent school standards.
- The school's leaders do not focus strongly enough on the progress pupils make from their individual starting points. They do not regularly measure the progress that different groups of pupils make. Too often class teachers' judgements about pupils' work do not align with the quality of what pupils have produced. Consequently, leaders' evaluation of the school is too generous and does not clearly identify the school's weaknesses.
- The curriculum offered meets the requirements of the regulations, with an appropriate range of subjects being taught. However, the ways in which it is interpreted by staff vary too much. Not enough emphasis is placed on extending pupils' experiences of English and mathematics in meaningful ways that will help them to be better prepared for life after school.
- Although very new, the 'team around the young person' conferences are helping all those involved with working with pupils to share what they know about them and identify the next steps for them in their learning and development. In the past, the school staff have not fully appreciated what the therapy team have discovered about each pupil. The conferences allow staff to talk through each pupil, enabling greater understanding about pupils' achievements for all of those involved. The written records are beginning to provide a good starting check for the school leaders and governors to measure the progress that each pupil is making and to identify what further provision is needed.
- The headteacher identifies where good use can be made of pupil premium funding to target the development of individual pupils and their specific learning and/or development needs. Pupils also have a say in how this money is spent by, for example, being involved in choosing a particular piece of physical equipment.
- The headteacher, in her annual report to those responsible for governance, has identified the right areas to prioritise for the school's future development. The principal, governors and proprietor are fully supportive of her work. Likewise, staff reported that, although they had undergone a period of significant change and uncertainty, they felt she was providing a clear direction for moving the school forward. In particular, they appreciate the regular opportunities for staff training after the end of the school day.
- A focus in the school has been staff training to ensure that pupils are kept safe and that staff are fully equipped to support pupils who are distressed or anxious. Training has had a positive impact on pupils' behaviour. Staff are adept at spotting where pupils are at risk of losing their self-control, and at stopping potential outbursts.
- Well-prepared assemblies have a direct link to the curriculum and have a solid focus on building pupils' self-confidence and self-esteem. Multicultural and seasonal events are celebrated. Certificates of achievement have been introduced as part of assemblies, enabling the school community to celebrate and learn from pupils' successes. These assemblies are just one example of the many ways in which the school strongly develops pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and promotes British values.

- More opportunities are being found to enable students to have work experiences and to meet other young people and adults.
- All staff are highly ambitious for the school and the young people in their care.

Governance

- Governance requires improvement. The proprietor and those responsible for governance have not ensured that the school meets all of the independent school standards.
- The proprietor has not ensured that the school's admissions register contains all of the information that it should and that all records are kept in accordance with government guidance.
- The proprietor has invested a considerable amount of money and effort in updating the school environment. Classrooms are less cluttered and distracting for pupils. More improvement work is planned.
- Some parents are not happy with the changes that have been made to policies, procedures and practice since the Aurora Group took ownership of the school. The proprietor is continuing to develop communication methods to allay their concerns.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- There is an effective culture of safeguarding for pupils and staff. Regular training of all school staff after school is helping them to keep up to date with the latest government requirements. Staff appreciate the training they have had and can demonstrate that they have a good understanding of how to keep pupils safe from radical and extreme views, or from child sexual exploitation.
- The school has a suitable and up-to-date safeguarding policy on its website which, although not uploaded to the website prior to the inspector's arrival at the school, is now properly accessible. Other policies and procedures are appropriately and effectively linked to it. The policies and procedures are known, understood and followed by the school staff.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- The quality of teaching and use of assessment by teachers to plan pupils' work is not consistently good enough. Pupils are not learning as much as they could and should. Sometimes the activities planned by teachers are too difficult and sometimes they are muddled due to poor-quality resources.
- Where resources are poor it is generally because the intention of the learning is not clear. For example, this occurs where pictures are open to a wide range of interpretation or require subtle inferences that do not take sufficiently into account the barriers to pupils' learning.

- Some pupils' files contain work that is not stored or managed in a way that helps the staff, pupils or parents to clearly see the progress, or lack of it, that each pupil has made.
- Pupils receive some very exciting and suitably demanding teaching. However, this is not consistently the case. Teaching does not effectively develop aspects of mathematics and English mastery needed for pupils to function in the community when they leave school. In addition, pupils do not make enough use of the available technological and digital communication devices themselves to demonstrate their choices and to take part in activities and develop their oracy skills. Too often adults take control of these devices.
- Insufficient attention is paid in some teachers' planning to ensure pupils have a suitable variety and number of choices to challenge their learning. Pupils are sometimes given limited choices; for example, a choice of two similar-sized balls, the difference being the colour.
- Teachers have good subject knowledge and understanding. Where work is well planned, and the involvement of other adults in the lessons carefully thought through, pupils make good and sustained progress in their learning. Aspects of literacy and numeracy are interwoven in the activities. This makes, for example, pupils use their counting skills for a real purpose, rather than them trying to count as an abstract concept.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- A wide range of therapists work closely with individual pupils. The speech and language therapist has a good understanding of each pupil's language development, while the health therapists ensure that the pupils have the right equipment to support their physical needs and development.
- The interweaving of the personal, social and health education programme in daily school life is a strength of the school's provision. Pupils learn about those who help society, such as the police and fire services.
- Pupils take part in seasonal and multicultural events. Assemblies mirror these themes, strongly supporting and promoting the Equalities Act.
- First aid and medical provision is available through on-site qualified nursing staff. In addition, a pharmacist regularly visits the school.
- The attractive site has been created to allow pupils and students to have as much space and independent movement as possible, within a structured and safe environment designed to meet their needs.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good. They behave well in school and when out in the community.
- Some pupils find it extremely difficult to understand the world around them and how to socialise. The school staff work very hard to help pupils overcome these and other barriers to their learning, which are due to the pupils' special educational needs and/or disabilities.

- Staff care for each individual child and young person at the school. Pupils and staff enjoy each other's company. Sometimes staff do too much for the pupils. Pupils need to be able to make more mistakes and 'have a go for themselves', even if this means that they make a mess or get things wrong.
- There are new systems in place to help the school leaders have better and more accurate information about pupils' attendance, behaviour and performance. It is too soon to see the impact of this work.
- Attendance is below that seen nationally. Generally absences are due to pupils attending medical appointments that cannot be re-arranged. At other times the school grants permission for pupils to participate in external events that provide unique opportunities, which contribute highly successfully to the pupil's self-esteem and achievement.

Outcomes for pupils

Requires improvement

- Outcomes require improvement because pupils are not making good progress from their starting points. In particular, pupils' skills in using English and mathematics are not strongly developed. In the recent past, not enough emphasis has been placed on developing pupils' mastery of literacy and numeracy skills. This has slowed their progress in these key areas of learning and limits their potential independence in life.
- Most pupils are at the early stages of development as learners. They learn how to adjust themselves and reduce the challenging behaviours they previously exhibited when frustrated or upset. Pupils learn how to communicate their needs and desires.
- Pupils are encouraged to keep fit and healthy through regular physical exercise, which most of them enjoy. Staff help pupils to undertake the daily 'regulation fitness' exercises designed by the health therapists as required.
- Although there are very few girls in the school, staff ensure that for some activities, where appropriate, boys and girls work and play together. Pupils enjoy this and girls, like the boys, make good progress in developing social skills and self-esteem.
- The good-quality personal, social, health and economic curriculum helps pupils make good progress in their personal development from their relative starting points. They learn how to keep themselves safe and understand the difference between private and public places, and activities. They are also increasingly able to understand how their bodies are changing.
- During their time in school pupils are helped to reduce the need for intimate care by others wherever possible. As a result, pupils increasingly manage their own needs and keep themselves clean, tidy and appropriately dressed in different types of weather.

Sixth form provision

Requires improvement

- The sixth form provision requires improvement because students are not making good progress, particularly in developing life-long learning skills in literacy and numeracy. Cohort sizes are very small and there is a wide range of abilities and special educational needs in the current cohorts. There are no obvious differences between the progress made by groups according to level of prior attainment, gender or whether students are disadvantaged or not.
- Students do not have access to impartial careers advice, although the adults working with them help students to identify the next steps for their lives beyond school.
- Students' levels of understanding about the world around them are often limited. However, school leaders have made sure that students do not miss out on the experiences that others would have at the same age. They learn about different religions, types and styles of music and artistic creations. They also learn daily living skills and how to be considerate and caring of each other and the environment.
- School leaders quite rightly expect that the curriculum followed is age-appropriate. This applies to all pupils, of all abilities, including those who have the most complex and debilitating learning difficulties. For example, students experience drama in their classroom: using technical and visual effects, such as 'dry ice' and a large cauldron, they take part in short re-enactments of 'Macbeth'. While they may not be able to understand a Shakespeare text, they are given the opportunities to explore aspects of it and the thrill of theatre in a safe, but exciting, classroom setting.
- As with younger pupils, the good-quality personal, social, health and economic curriculum helps students make good progress in their personal development from their relative starting points. Students take part in a regular range of physical activities. They learn how to take care of their bodies, keeping clean and fit.
- An increasing range of types of vocational studies and work experiences is being developed and provided for students. They are spending more time off-site in purposeful activities and behave well. This increases their personal development and involvement within the local community and public cultural institutions.
- The headteacher has visited a good range of providers and settings in the local community. She has ensured that students will gain in independence and living skills through being there, and that the provisions are safe and secure.

School details

Unique reference number	109342
DfE registration number	801/6008
Inspection number	10006037

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	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	5 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	27
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	17
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	The Aurora Group
Chair	Stephen Bradshaw
Principal	Louise Tully-Middleton
Head of education	Thereza de Lucca
Annual fees	£79,000
Telephone number	0117 973 3301
Website	www.st-christophers.bristol.sch.uk
Email address	info@st-christophers.bristol.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this school

- Following the imminent closure of St Christopher's in Bristol. The Aurora Group, formed in October 2015, purchased and took over the school in April 2016. Since then, there have been considerable changes to the staffing and the leadership structure and the ethos of the school. This is the first standard inspection of the school since it was registered by the Aurora Group in April 2016.
- Situated close to Bristol City centre, Aurora St Christopher's School is an independent special school providing specialist education for pupils aged five to 19 years with a range of needs resulting in severe and complex learning difficulties. The most common diagnoses include autism spectrum disorder (ASD), global developmental delay, epilepsy and cerebral palsy. The school provides education for 40 weeks of the year.
- All pupils have statements of special educational needs or education, health and care plans.
- All pupils are entitled to receive support from the Year 7 catch-up fund.
- A minority of pupils are eligible for the pupil premium fund.
- The majority of pupils are boys.
- The school has a range of different spaces, including a sensory garden, sensory room, therapeutic massage facilities, a hydrotherapy pool, ground-level trampoline, climbing wall, horticulture gardens, tricycles and other therapeutic and leisure equipment. The entire site is currently going through a process of extensive redevelopment.
- The school does not use alternative providers. However, pupils are encouraged to visit and take part in activities off the school site. When this happens they are escorted all the time by members of the school staff.
- Aurora St Christopher's' ethos is to 'create a stable, caring environment which supports and nurtures the emotional, physical, social and spiritual well-being and development of the children and young people'.

Information about this inspection

- Meetings and reviews of school documentation were conducted with governors and staff.
- A range of documentation was scrutinised, including information about pupils' performance and progress, procedures for safeguarding and for monitoring attendance, and information relating to the independent schools standards.
- The inspector observed pupils throughout the school day. She visited classes and carried out joint observations with senior leaders. She also looked at pupils' written work and pictorial records of their learning, and heard them read in class. Discussions were held with pupils after the end of the school day.
- The inspector took account of the views from the 24 completed staff questionnaires, and the seven responses to the online questionnaire (Parent View). The inspector listened to the views of two parents on the telephone.

Inspection team

Steffi Penny, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

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