

The Unicorn School

20 Marcham Road, Abingdon, Oxfordshire OX14 1AA

Inspection dates

27–29 June 2017

Overall effectiveness	Good
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Outstanding
Outcomes for pupils	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- There is no doubt that pupils' confidence, self-esteem and well-being quickly flourish when they join this school. Leaders and staff are exceptionally successful in giving pupils' personal development and welfare a real boost.
- Many parents shared moving stories with inspectors about how The Unicorn School has transformed their children's experience of education.
- The school's effectiveness has improved markedly since the previous inspection. Strong leadership and governance ensure that the independent school standards are all met.
- The outstanding promotion of pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare contributes well to their good and improving academic outcomes.
- Pupils are polite, confident and friendly. Many have had negative experiences in previous schools. Some pupils had switched off from education altogether. Despite this, Unicorn pupils have extremely positive attitudes and work hard. They sustain impressive levels of concentration when it really counts.
- Teaching is good overall. Pupils also benefit from the excellent quality of highly personalised one-to-one teaching that meets their specific needs exceptionally well.
- In group lessons, some teachers do not provide quite the precise level of challenge and support to secure the best possible outcomes for pupils.
- Teachers do not judge consistently well enough how to tackle the gaps that some pupils have in their mathematical understanding. In some classes, pupils do not have sufficient opportunity to use what they learn in mathematics in different situations and contexts.
- With no sense of complacency, leaders constantly seek ways to further improve the school. Despite this clear drive, the strategies they use do not always focus sharply enough on the differences actions make to pupils' outcomes.
- There is a wealth of information available about how well each and every pupil is doing across a broad range of areas. However, leaders' strategic overview of how well the school as a whole is performing is not sharp enough.

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?

- Secure the best possible teaching and outcomes, especially in mathematics, by:
 - ensuring that teachers are consistently adept at using their knowledge of what pupils already know and can do to maximise learning and progress
 - making sure that pupils, including those of lower ability, have a sufficiently secure understanding of concepts before moving on to more advanced work
 - giving pupils more consistent opportunities to master the skills that they have learned in mathematics through using them in different situations and contexts.
- Sharpen strategic leadership by:
 - ensuring that all improvement strategies and systems focus strongly on improving pupils' outcomes
 - finding a way to use the detailed information known about the progress of each pupil to gain a clearer overview of the performance across the school in different subjects
 - using this overview to identify priorities for further improvement more precisely.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- The positive ethos, values and culture of the school are very clearly established and realised. Leaders and staff strive to ensure that pupils develop the 'confidence', 'appetite' and 'desire' to learn and succeed. The success of adults and pupils in this drive is clear to see. There is no sense of complacency. Leaders are keen and ambitious to continue to improve the school.
- Leaders and governors have a realistic and accurate view of the school's effectiveness. They are rightly proud of the significant improvements that they have secured since the previous inspection. Not only have they ensured that the school is now fully compliant in meeting the independent school standards, but they have also markedly improved the quality of education that The Unicorn School provides.
- Staff are typically very well qualified. In addition to teaching qualifications, many have specific qualifications or certificates relating to pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. The high degree of expertise of some staff is used in partnership with Oxford Brookes University as part of outreach to provide specialist dyslexia training for others.
- Staff morale is very high. At all levels, staff are loyal and supportive of the school's ethos, vision and direction. Responding to the inspection questionnaire, staff repeatedly told inspectors about improvements, including stronger leadership and better teamwork for the benefit of pupils.
- A central pillar of leaders' work to improve the school since the previous inspection has been to ensure different staff work more closely together to share their expertise. Strong links between class teachers, one-to-one teachers, therapists and other professionals mean that work to meet pupils' needs is more joined up. This tight network of support wraps around pupils to secure positive outcomes, both personally and academically.
- The performance management system ensures that staff can continue to develop professionally and hone their skills. Senior leaders carry out a range of helpful checks on the quality of teaching and learning. The headteacher pays close attention to the difference teachers are making to pupils' learning when observing in class. However, targets for teachers do not link tightly enough to how they are improving outcomes for pupils.
- Leaders and governors have invested careful thought and effective strategic planning when designing the curriculum. Since the previous full inspection, the school has been permitted to expand its age range to include key stage 4. The passionate and tireless leadership of the deputy headteacher has been instrumental in making this venture a success. Due to the low numbers in each year group, leaders are realistic about the extent and range of what the school can offer without compromising quality. The intention, already begun, is to design the key stage 4 curriculum to meet the needs of specific groups of pupils as they move through the school. Leaders are well aware that the current offer will not suit all of the current groups of pupils in the school.
- The productive links leaders have made with other schools have been invaluable, particularly in the development of the curriculum. Staff have benefited from experience

and expertise elsewhere in shaping and adapting their curriculum, teaching and assessment.

- The rich variety of experiences and activities offered to pupils promotes their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development well. A diverse range of high-quality artwork is celebrated throughout the school, together with certificates documenting pupils' participation and success in local and national competitions. Exciting extra-curricular opportunities, from sailing, to theatre visits, to camping, broaden pupils' experiences.
- Up until the end of key stage 3, the range of subjects is suitably broad and balanced. The range of courses on offer at key stage 4, though not extensive, is sufficiently varied. However, for pupils of all ages, opportunities for more physical education is a repeating wish from pupils and parents.
- The level of empathy and understanding of others that pupils develop, both through their experiences and the school's teaching, prepares them well for life in modern Britain. Pupils are able to articulate what it means to uphold shared values and can explain how these are embedded within the school's own ethos.
- At present, the strong leadership of the headteacher and deputy headteacher, supported by the special educational needs coordinator, has been sufficient to secure a good and improving quality of education. Senior leaders have plans to delegate leadership responsibility further to sustain and build on this improvement as the school continues to grow.
- There is firm evidence of clear strategic thinking by leaders and governors. As a result, the school is improving. However, leaders' strategic planning is not always informed by quite the right things in order to secure even greater improvement. For example, although the tracking of the progress of individual pupils has improved, the strategic overview of how much progress pupils make across all subjects, including particular groups such as the most able, is undeveloped. Without this, the diagnosis of the priorities for improvement is less sharp than it could be.

Governance

- The committed and passionate governing body is a strong feature of the school's effective leadership. Governors have clear oversight of the key strengths of the school and they are strongly involved in its strategic direction. They are ambitious for the school and its pupils.
- Governors' chosen committee structure supports their work to scrutinise the work of the school effectively. Governors meet with a variety of leaders and staff as part of their system of accountability checks. They draw on the views of external 'critical friends', such as other headteachers, to inform their view of teaching.
- The governing body scrutinises the available assessment information about how well pupils are doing. Through this work, in broad terms, governors know the make-up and outcomes for different groups of pupils. Governors draw on a wide range of views, including paying close attention to staff at all levels, to identify priorities for further improvement.
- Governors oversee effective systematic checks, delegated to the headteacher, that ensure that the independent school standards are continuously met.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- The school's clear and comprehensive safeguarding policy is readily available on the school's website. It takes close account of Local Safeguarding Children Board guidelines, but contains specific detail regarding the school's particular personnel and procedures. The policy reflects current government requirements and is fit for purpose.
- Safeguarding records show that the school's systems are effective and followed well by staff. Staff are alert to low-level concerns and pass these on appropriately. Helpful forms prompt staff to take the right action, and safeguarding leaders share information correctly with other professionals and agencies where necessary.
- Leaders work very closely with parents and pupils to help keep pupils safe. Staff and parents that participated in the surveys were unanimous in their view that the school keeps its pupils safe and that pupils feel safe at school.
- Staff with delegated responsibility carry out a broad range of well documented and systematic health and safety checks. For example, leaders trigger fire drills at different times of the day to be certain that systems can always be relied upon. They make any necessary adjustments in response to their evaluations of the success of each practice evacuation.
- Comprehensive and detailed risk assessments, informed closely by published specialist guidance, are part of the school's successful work to minimise risk for pupils and staff.
- The single central register is complete, with all the necessary checks that adults are suitable to work with children. This central record also systematically records wider checks and training linked with the effective safeguarding of pupils.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Within the good quality of teaching, learning and assessment overall, there is evidently some exceptional teaching practice within the school.
- Teachers have deep knowledge of the subjects they teach. Their expectations of pupils' verbal contributions and written work are high. All of this contributes well to pupils' success, including their correct use of technical vocabulary.
- Teachers are extremely adept and skilful in their questioning. They listen very carefully to pupils' responses to prompt them to refine their answers, either probing for deeper thinking or guiding for clearer understanding. Teachers successfully draw in pupils who may initially be reluctant to participate. Pupils also routinely feel confident in posing their own questions.
- The quality of the highly targeted one-to-one teaching to meet the specific needs of each pupil is a tremendous asset. The precise knowledge of individual pupils that teachers demonstrate in these sessions makes a notable contribution to the strides pupils take in their learning. Relationships between adults and pupils are exceptionally strong. Pupils are instantly at ease as teachers guide them through logical sequences of precisely targeted activities.

- Teachers take note of recommendations from other professionals about pupils' particular needs and use these well in their planning. The precise identification of why pupils are struggling to progress academically, and the successful breaking down of these barriers, is a significant factor in the school's success. The effective use of a wide variety of resources supports pupils well, including new technologies, specialist cushions for posture, sloped writing desks and pen-grip writing aides.
- Teachers use their assessments of pupils' capabilities well to guide their teaching. Their knowledge of individual pupils is very well developed. Precise feedback helps pupils to refine their skills and understanding. Well-judged praise and encouragement motivate pupils to sustain their effort while simultaneously maintaining high expectations of what they can achieve. However, the class-group teaching does not meet pupils' different needs consistently well enough to secure the best possible progress.
- The teaching of literacy skills and English is especially strong. Pupils respond readily and enthusiastically to the frequent opportunities to use their developing reading and writing skills. Pupils also have positive attitudes to mathematics. However, some mathematics teaching does not focus relentlessly enough on securing pupils' conceptual understanding. Although frequent in some classes, some teachers do not provide pupils with enough opportunities to use and apply their mathematical skills to problem-solving or reasoning.
- Lesson time is used extremely efficiently and productively. This is especially evident in the targeted individual teaching and in the quality, quantity and range of work in pupils' books. The clear links between classwork, homework and targeted individual teaching sessions are symptomatic of the effective teamwork among staff.
- The highly individualised termly reports sent home to parents capture pupils' individuality well. They provide a wealth of detailed information about pupils' study and progress through a wide range of subjects.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Outstanding

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding.
- There is a very strong and successful focus on pupils' welfare, well-being and mental health. Many pupils join the school with negative prior experiences of education. Some have a history of poor attendance, low confidence and low self-esteem. Parents who spoke or wrote to inspectors repeatedly told their own stories of how they had seen their children flourish since joining the school.
- Relationships at all levels are highly positive within an extremely caring, supportive and nurturing environment. In this climate, pupils develop considerable resilience. Pupils are not frightened to fail in this highly mutually supportive atmosphere.
- Leaders engage pupils in diagnostic checks of their personal development and well-being to identify individual concerns and take supportive steps accordingly. Recent improvements have ensured that this information has been drawn together in a way that will enable leaders to evaluate the difference made by their actions more easily.
- Dealing with their own struggles has made most pupils extremely empathetic. When frequently asked to work together, pupils collaborate extremely well. Their tolerance of

and respect for others' differences, including race, religion, sexual orientation and gender, are very well established. Pupils are reflective about their own similarities and differences, and have a broad knowledge of different faiths.

- Pupils feel safe. They have a vast knowledge and understanding of how to keep themselves safe online. The depth of their awareness guides them to make sensible decisions about the use of new technologies, not just relying on adult-imposed restrictions. That said, the internet filters in place allow leaders to pinpoint the time and terminal of any attempt to access inappropriate material. Leaders were able to demonstrate how they have investigated these triggers to allay concerns.
- At all levels, pupils have an incredibly strong voice in the school. This was clearly evident within lessons, in pupils' individual education plans and across the school more widely. Pupils have a strong understanding of democracy and are proud of the school's democratic systems, including the recent mock general election.
- The large number of parents who expressed views via Parent View, or in person, were unanimous in their view that their children feel safe in school. Pupils who spoke with inspectors agreed.
- The full range of inspection evidence indicates strongly that the school's anti-bullying strategies are highly successful. If it happens at all, bullying is exceptionally rare. Staff are alert to any low-level welfare concerns and respond well to these to prevent them escalating.
- Since the previous inspection, leaders have strengthened the careers guidance offered to pupils. The programme of work encourages pupils to be reflective about their own strengths, interests and aptitudes in considering a wide range of possible career options. Staff make pupils aware of positive role models, with examples of successful people from diverse walks of life who are dyslexic. Past pupils are invited back to the school to share success stories to inspire and motivate pupils.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding.
- Pupils typically demonstrate high levels of focus and concentration. Considering the particular special educational needs of some pupils, this is especially impressive. Pupils conduct themselves well throughout the day, but their behaviour is usually at its most impeccable during lessons.
- The behaviour policy sets out a clear and straightforward system of rewards and sanctions. Records kept show the relatively infrequent use of sanctions. These are tracked carefully on an individual basis to adjust, as necessary, the approach needed to secure positive behaviour. This means that no pupil is repeatedly punished without further action to resolve the pattern of behaviour. Few classes have any pupils where formal sanctions have been required since this system was introduced at the start of this academic year.
- The large majority of pupils attend school regularly. Overall attendance levels and the proportion of pupils frequently absent compare favourably with other schools.

Outcomes for pupils

Good

- Pupils join school at a wide range of different ages and stages of their education. Many have considerable gaps in their knowledge, skills and understanding.
- Staff write an individual education plan for every pupil containing focused, measurable targets. This plan is linked to any education, health and care plan that a pupil might have. The timely reviews that check pupils' progress against their individual targets help keep them on track to achieve well.
- Pupils make especially strong progress in literacy and English. Staff work hard and with success to break down the considerable barriers caused by pupils' specific learning needs. For example, difficulties with spelling do not prevent pupils from developing their other writing skills. Pupils' writing is lively and imaginative, and pupils adapt their writing styles to a range of different tasks.
- Pupils' attitudes to reading and writing are extremely positive. Teachers seize frequent opportunities throughout the day to encourage pupils to read. Most pupils have at least sufficiently well-developed reading skills to access other learning. Pupils readily read aloud clearly, and make good attempts to stay in character when reading play scripts. The school has a rich range of high-quality texts available and there is evident enjoyment in the reading and sharing of books between adults and pupils.
- Pupils make strong progress in science. Teachers' high expectations are evident through the level of challenge required to complete tasks, including as they move through key stage 4. The extensive range of good-quality work in science folders, regularly assessed with incisive feedback, helps pupils to progress well. They are able to apply their scientific knowledge successfully to carry out investigations and use scientific vocabulary regularly and correctly.
- Through the food technology GCSE, pupils demonstrate depth to their learning and impressive application of skills, including some techniques that are highly challenging. Pupils take genuine pride in their coursework and reflect well on the areas of improvement identified from previous tasks, striving to meet these. Fortunate enough to be present during the end-of-year 'bake-off', inspectors had the privilege of sampling some of the delicious 'show-stopping' creations.
- Pupils make good progress across a broad range of subjects. Younger pupils develop their basic skills well through varied topics. Across all ages, pupils develop a broad range of art skills to produce a diverse range of high-quality artwork. Overall, pupils make good progress in mathematics. However, the gaps that some pupils have in their mathematical understanding are not addressed consistently well. Some pupils, particular those of lower ability, do not understand concepts securely enough to make better progress or be successful independently when faced with more challenging tasks.
- The most able pupils do well because teachers stretch and challenge them effectively. Teachers put their skilful questioning and detailed subject knowledge to good use to deepen the understanding of these pupils.
- Pupils are well prepared for the next stages of their education. When they leave, many are considerably better placed to succeed in the future than they were when they arrived. Leaders have given careful consideration to the entry requirements of local post-16 providers in planning the GCSE offer.

School details

Unique reference number	123322
DfE registration number	931/6109
Inspection number	10033948

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	6 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	78
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	The Unicorn School for the Dyslexic Child
Chair	Mark Chambers
Headteacher	Andrew Day
Annual fees (day pupils)	£18,860–£19,940
Telephone number	01235 530222
Website	www.unicornoxford.co.uk
Email address	info@unicornoxford.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	28–30 April 2015

Information about this school

- The school caters for pupils who have specific learning difficulties. This includes pupils with dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia. Some pupils also have speech and language difficulties.
- All pupils have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Currently, around one fifth of pupils has an education, health and care plan.
- The school's governing body is the school's proprietorial body.
- The school's previous full standard inspection was from 28 to 30 April 2015.

- Since the previous standard inspection, the Department for Education has amended the school's registration to include pupils up to the age of 16 and the total capacity to 96.
- The school does not use any alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors made 19 visits to classrooms to observe teaching and learning. These included observations of class-group teaching, subject-specialist teaching and one-to-one teaching. The lead inspector was also taken on a tour of the school by senior leaders at the start of the inspection, during which teaching was also sampled briefly.
- When visiting classrooms, inspectors spoke with pupils, looked at their work and heard some of them read. Inspectors also scrutinised a wide range of pupils' work outside of lessons.
- Inspectors spoke with a variety of people to gather their views of the school. This included pupils, parents, staff, school leaders, other professionals and therapists linked with or employed by the school, governors and a representative of a placing local authority.
- Inspectors analysed 49 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, and 33 confidential questionnaires returned by staff. All of the written comments that were added to these were taken into account alongside other inspection evidence. In addition, inspectors noted points raised by one staff member who wrote to them and two parents who spoke with the lead inspector on the telephone.
- The inspection team observed the work of the school and scrutinised a wide range of documentation relating to the independent school standards, including a review of the school's website, and the quality of education.

Inspection team

Clive Dunn, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Emma Sanderson

Her Majesty's Inspector

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