

Merlin School

4 Carlton Drive, Putney, London SW15 2BZ

Inspection dates

7–9 November 2017

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school

- The headteacher and proprietor have fulfilled their aim to provide an outstanding education for their pupils. They have created an environment where pupils thrive, both academically and personally.
- The headteacher leads the school extremely well. She is fully supported by staff, pupils and parents who share her vision for the school.
- Leaders and staff form a strong unit. They work very well together and are committed to providing the best education for their pupils. Staff are proud to work at the school.
- The curriculum is outstanding. It is planned carefully to captivate pupils' interests and inspire them to learn. Pupils develop skills, knowledge and understanding in a broad range of subjects.
- Staff are highly motivated and willing to take on responsibilities. Senior leaders are keen to develop the middle leadership team and provide more leadership opportunities.
- Pupils live and breathe the ethos of the school. They are resilient and independent learners who set about every activity with enthusiasm. They are safe and happy at school.
- Pupils' behaviour is outstanding. They are well mannered, friendly and welcoming. Pupils display excellent communication skills and are confident learners.
- The early years provision is outstanding. Children make strong and sustained progress in all areas of learning. They are very well prepared for Year 1.
- Teachers plan interesting and challenging work for pupils that is tailored to their different starting points. As a result, pupils make outstanding progress in a range of subjects, including English and mathematics.
- The proprietor and leadership team have ensured that all the independent school standards are met.

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?

- Further develop middle leadership so that roles and responsibilities are delegated effectively across the school to drive further improvement.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Outstanding

- The headteacher leads by example and is focused on doing only what is best for the pupils. She ensures that the vision of a creative and broad education for all pupils is a reality. The headteacher is highly respected by all members of the school community.
- The headteacher has carefully recruited a team of talented staff who understand and share the aims of the school. The leadership team is relatively small and senior leaders recognise the need for a more formal middle layer of leadership. This would offer more opportunities for staff to drive improvements in the school. Some staff have recently taken on new responsibilities, such as those of head of year and subject leader. They are committed to their roles and are highly professional.
- Staff receive high-quality training so that they can meet leaders' high expectations. The monitoring and evaluation of teaching are rigorous yet supportive. Leaders' checks on staff's performance have a strong focus on pupils' progress, and the impact of this can be seen in the classroom and in pupils' work. Leaders trust their staff and give teachers autonomy, for example, letting teachers decide which topics to teach and how. Staff are highly motivated and fully on board with the school's priorities.
- Leaders ensure that staff have regular opportunities to observe each other's practice. Links with other schools also give staff a chance to share outstanding practice and hone their teaching skills. Newly qualified teachers feel very well supported. They feel valued and involved in the school community.
- Leadership in the provision for special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities is strong. Leaders work closely with parents, staff and external specialists to ensure that pupils get the individual support they need. Additional support for pupils comes in different forms, such as a social skills club and extra sessions in basic skills such as phonics and mathematics. Additional funding for pupils with an education, health and care plan is directed appropriately and analysed regularly to ensure that it is being used effectively.
- Leaders track pupils' progress across all subjects with precision. They hold regular progress meetings with heads of year to identify pupils at risk of underachievement and decide on appropriate support. Leaders review actions at various points in the year and assess targets continually to ensure that pupils are receiving appropriate challenge. Consequently, teaching and learning are well matched to pupils' abilities and they make outstanding progress.
- The outstanding curriculum ensures that pupils have a rich and stimulating education. Specialist teachers deliver lessons in music, art, science, computing, French and physical education, which are balanced with a strong focus on English and mathematics across the school. Pupils develop their speaking and listening skills from an early age through regular class presentation sessions. The topic-based curriculum enables pupils to develop their skills across subjects, including in history, geography and religious education.
- Creativity underpins the curriculum and leaders provide excellent opportunities for pupils to feed their imagination. Drama is taught through termly class productions where every pupil has an active role to play. Extra-curricular activities, such as chess, Spanish, yoga

and sewing, enhance pupils' progress and personal development. Sports and games play a prominent role in school life. Pupils learn key skills in a variety of sports, and all Year 2 and Year 3 pupils represent the school at a sporting fixture during the school year.

- Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is embedded across the school. Pupils benefit from a wide range of activities, trips and visitors to the school which are linked to their current learning. For example, pupils studying the topic of anatomy enjoyed a trip to the Natural History Museum. Remembrance Day was woven into different subjects, as pupils used a war poem to inspire artwork. Pupils understand what it means to be a good citizen. They raise money for different charities and enjoy singing at a nearby hospital to entertain patients.
- Pupils are knowledgeable about British values and show maturity when discussing these. They are respectful of people from different backgrounds and faiths. They recognise differences and understand the importance of tolerance. One pupil said: 'It doesn't matter if you are religious or non-religious, we still respect you.'
- Parents are overwhelmingly supportive of the school. They particularly appreciate the communication from staff and the hard work of teachers, and are very positive about the progress their children are making.

Governance

- The proprietor fulfils the role of chair of governors and works closely with an external educational consultant to very effectively support and challenge the headteacher. The proprietor ensures that the founding principles of the school remain at the heart of the school's aims and future development. This commitment has ensured the success of the school.
- The proprietor ensures that all aspects of school life are monitored carefully and that the headteacher is fully held to account. He visits regularly to keep himself up to date and checks that the quality of teaching reflects the aims of the school. The proprietor takes on board the views of staff, parents and pupils. The unique school building presents its own challenges in terms of maintenance. The proprietor ensures that health and safety requirements are met and provides a learning environment where pupils can feel at home.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Leaders ensure that there is a strong culture of safeguarding within the school. Safeguarding issues and training updates are discussed at weekly staff meetings and all staff are aware of their statutory responsibilities. Staff have received training in all aspects of safeguarding, including the 'Prevent' duty. Risk assessments are detailed and specific.
- Staff and pupils know whom to go to if they have any concerns. The personal, social, health and economic curriculum includes specific teaching to help pupils keep themselves safe, such as on 'stranger danger', road safety and staying safe online. Pupils feel safe at school and parents are confident that their children are safe and well looked after.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Outstanding

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is outstanding. Teachers have very high expectations so that pupils make outstanding progress.
- Lessons are well planned and structured. The school day begins with 'quickies', where pupils work independently on their literacy and numeracy skills, consolidating previous learning. Teachers think carefully about how to interest pupils and plan activities accordingly. Staff enthusiasm is infectious. Consequently, pupils are highly engaged in lessons.
- Teachers demonstrate excellent subject knowledge. They have strong questioning skills, drawing out pupils' understanding and addressing misconceptions quickly and effectively. Teachers expect pupils to explain their thinking and pupils are highly articulate in this regard.
- The level of challenge in lessons is consistently high. Pupils demonstrate knowledge and understanding of difficult concepts. Teachers know their pupils well. They use detailed notes from lessons and ongoing assessment to inform their lesson planning on a day-to-day basis. This enables teachers to match work precisely to individual needs and abilities so that it stretches pupils, including the most able.
- In mathematics, teachers skilfully use resources to demonstrate concepts. They make mathematical problems relevant to real life. For example, pupils used a shopping role play activity to practise addition and subtraction. Pupils can show different methods of working out mathematical problems and they learn from each other. In Years 2 and 3, pupils learn reasoning skills as a separate subject, which encourages them to look at problems from different angles and think outside the box.
- Teachers focus on the creative and practical aspects of subjects. In science, pupils primarily learn through investigations and experiments. Pupils talk enthusiastically about lessons they have enjoyed, such as dissecting sheep organs and handling bones. In music, pupils can apply the practical skills they have learned, such as understanding musical terminology and reading music, to creating their own music through playing the recorder or singing.
- Pupils' reading and writing skills are well developed across subjects. They use grammar and punctuation accurately and have an excellent range of vocabulary. Reading is promoted very well and pupils read widely.
- Classrooms are stimulating environments, filled with colourful displays which pupils use to help them with their learning. They fill 'Curiosity Corner' with questions and possible answers, sharing ideas and views.
- Teaching assistants are well deployed and work closely with teachers. They explain ideas and instructions clearly to pupils while ensuring that pupils complete tasks as independently as possible.

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding. Staff are committed to ensuring that pupils receive an all-round education that does not put undue pressure on them. As one parent said about her daughter: 'The school is very concerned about her as a little person, not just a pupil.'
- Pupils are resilient and show a thirst for learning. They listen attentively in class and are keen participants in all activities. Pupils know what is expected of them and don't give up easily, quoting the school motto: 'Merlins always have a go!'
- Pupils feel happy and safe at school. They understand how to keep themselves safe. For example, they follow the playground rules and know about staying safe online. Warm relationships between staff and pupils help them feel confident and assured.
- Bullying is almost unheard of. Pupils say that it doesn't happen at the school, but they know to go to a teacher if they have any worries.
- Pupils are confident learners. Staff make sure that pupils have opportunities to overcome any issues of low self-esteem and pupils' blossom under their care. Weekly speaking and listening sessions develop key skills as pupils give speeches to their class, listen to each other and ask or answer questions.
- The personal, social, health and economic education curriculum is well designed and delivered effectively. Pupils learn about topics in depth and have many opportunities to discuss issues, sharing their thoughts and feelings. For example, Year 1 pupils were observed talking about different problems and worked together sensibly and maturely to come up with solutions.
- Pupils are proud to attend the school. They demonstrate a sense of belonging to the school community and wear their uniform with pride.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding.
- Pupils respect and follow the 'Merlin Code of Conduct'. They understand how important it is to behave well, including between lessons. The school building is quirky and full of interesting features, but pupils are not distracted by this. They conduct themselves in an exemplary manner at all times.
- Pupils are considerate and kind to each other. They help each other, both in and out of lessons.
- In lessons and at playtimes, pupils from all year groups get on very well together. In the playground, staff set up different games which pupils join in with eagerly. If they are feeling less active at playtime, pupils sit quite happily chatting to each other. Disagreements are extremely rare.
- Pupils enjoy coming to school and rarely miss a day. Attendance is well above the national average.

Outcomes for pupils

Outstanding

- Outcomes for pupils are outstanding because pupils in all year groups make strong and sustained progress over time in a range of subjects, including English and mathematics.
- Pupils join this inclusive school with different starting points and a range of abilities. As pupils progress through the school, the gap between different ability groups decreases. By the end of key stage 1, most pupils are working well above age-related expectations. Teachers' assessments match the work seen in pupils' books.
- Leaders have high expectations of what their pupils can achieve. They have devised their own 'Merlin average', recognising that achieving the national average is not aspirational and will not stretch their pupils sufficiently. As a result, all groups of pupils, including the most able, make very strong, outstanding or excellent progress.
- Pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities make excellent progress. This is due to the high-quality support they receive from staff.
- Pupils' literacy and numeracy skills are excellent. Pupils develop their writing across the curriculum. Over time, their writing shows increasing precision, fluency and skill in a range of genres. Pupils read daily at school, independently or with a member of staff. They use their reading journals to record progress and staff offer constructive ideas for helping parents with children's reading at home. Pupils' work in mathematics is challenging and varied, enabling them to apply their reasoning and number skills effectively.
- Pupils take pride in their work. They develop their handwriting skills in weekly lessons and concentrate fully on producing legible, neat handwriting. Pupils are keen to have their work displayed in the 'Golden Gallery'. Homework tasks are research based and pupils complete these to a high standard.

Early years provision

Outstanding

- Leaders have ensured that children have an excellent start to their education. The early years provision meets the requirements of the independent school standards and children are well prepared for Year 1.
- Teaching is consistently of a high quality. As a result, children make outstanding progress from their different starting points. The proportion of children achieving a good level of development is consistently above the national average. Work in children's books shows excellent progress across a wide range of learning.
- Staff are well qualified and have a secure understanding of children's development and learning needs. They use this knowledge to plan and deliver engaging and stimulating activities. Lessons are well planned and staff make effective use of the exciting range of resources to stimulate children's imaginations.
- The broad curriculum in the school is mirrored in the early years provision. Children learn a range of subjects, including computing and French, which enhances the prime areas of learning in early years.
- Strong phonics teaching ensures that children make excellent progress in their literacy skills. Lessons build on prior learning and provide challenge for all children. Writing

sessions allow children to work at different levels of challenge. For example, after reading 'The Owl', children wrote their own fact file with varying levels of support. Children showed a good understanding of complex sentences and a high level of vocabulary.

- Children's behaviour is outstanding. They share resources, show good manners and are kind to each other. Children respond quickly to teachers' instructions and are eager to please. They clearly enjoy their learning, both indoors and outdoors, and like making choices about the activities they do. They concentrate for sustained period of time and show very good self-discipline.
- The leadership in early years is very strong. Leaders have an accurate understanding of the strengths and current priorities. Children's progress is meticulously recorded and teachers use this information to plan learning activities. Safeguarding is effective and children are well cared for.
- The early years team has developed strong relationships with parents and carers. Parents feel very involved in their child's education and are invited to a variety of events which offer ways they can support their children at home.

School details

Unique reference number	101065
DfE registration number	212/6144
Inspection number	10008537

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	Independent pre-preparatory day school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	4 to 8
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	191
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	Alford Houstoun-Boswall
Chair	Alford Houstoun-Boswall
Headteacher	Katharine Prest
Annual fees (day pupils)	£13,992
Telephone number	0208 788 2769
Website	www.merlinschool.net
Email address	secretary@merlinschool.net
Date of previous inspection	18 March 2010

Information about this school

- Merlin School is an independent pre-preparatory school for boys and girls.
- The school was established in 1986 and is located in a converted Edwardian house in Putney.
- The early years provision comprises four Reception classes. Places are offered on a non-assessment basis.
- The headteacher has been in post since 2003.
- A small number of pupils have SEN and/or disabilities.

- The school's previous inspection was a 'light-touch' inspection in March 2010, when it was judged to be an outstanding school.
- The school's website meets all the requirements of the independent school standards.

Information about this inspection

- This full standard inspection took place with one day's notice.
- Inspectors observed teaching and learning in all classes and in a range of subjects. School leaders joined inspectors for many of these lesson observations. Observations in early years included indoor and outdoor activities.
- Inspectors met with the headteacher, the deputy headteacher, heads of year and teaching staff. A telephone conversation was held with the proprietor.
- Groups of pupils talked to inspectors about their views of the school. The inspection team also talked to pupils informally at playtimes and in lessons.
- Inspectors looked at pupils' work from all year groups in a range of subjects to review their progress over time.
- Inspectors evaluated documentation provided by the school, including the school's self-evaluation and development plan, school policies, safeguarding records, the single central record of staff recruitment checks and monitoring records of teaching and learning.
- The inspection team considered the views of 84 parents who responded to Parent View and held informal discussions with parents at the beginning of the school day. They also took into account 33 responses to the staff survey.

Inspection team

Jude Wilson, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Janet Hallett

Her Majesty's Inspector

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