

Great Oaks Small School

Jutes Lane, Minster, Ramsgate, Kent CT12 5FH

Inspection dates

30–31 January 2018

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- Great Oaks Small School has undoubtedly been transformed since the previous inspection. There have been significant improvements since that time. All the independent school standards are met.
- Through the school's positive work, pupils who have often previously had negative experiences of education are enabled to feel positive about school and learning. Their outcomes are good.
- The headteacher has a clear and compelling sense of vision and purpose. She is well supported by a competent senior leadership team.
- This is a happy school. Strong relationships at all levels, and close teamwork among staff, contribute well to the harmonious atmosphere.
- Staff are highly respectful of the school's pupils. In turn, pupils feel safe, valued and nurtured.
- The carefully planned promotion of pupils' personal, spiritual, moral, social and cultural development contributes well to their good behaviour and subsequently improving academic progress.
- Teaching is good. Teachers use their strong subject knowledge skilfully to develop pupils' own knowledge and understanding. Leaders identify the right areas for improvement in their continuous drive to lift teaching consistently to the highest quality.
- Leaders' and teachers' aspirational approach results in pupils' particularly impressive work in some subjects. Leaders have correctly identified that the curriculum and staff expertise in science are priorities for improvement.
- Pupils are overwhelmingly positive about school and around half are hardly ever absent, if at all. However, despite leaders' increasing efforts in this area, too many pupils still miss too much school. Their progress, both personally and academically, suffers as a result.
- Compared with the previous inspection, there are now much firmer foundations of effective governance in place through the board of trustees. However, trustees recognise that there is still some way to go before the board is functioning fully effectively.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

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

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that teaching and the curriculum are of similarly high quality across subjects, especially science, to secure the best possible outcomes for pupils academically and personally.
- Sustain the drive to ensure that pupils come to school regularly and reduce the proportion whose attendance falls below the national average for special schools.
- Strengthen governance by ensuring that trustees have a comprehensive understanding of all of the board's functions and fulfil these effectively.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- Under the visionary leadership of the headteacher, the school is unrecognisable compared with the time of the previous inspection. The skilfully controlled but relentless momentum of improvement continues. The senior leadership team knows the school extremely well. Leaders know exactly which aspects of the school are most effective and what to tackle next.
- The headteacher judiciously couples her compelling vision for the school with clear sightedness about how to make her aspiration a reality. To manage the pace of change successfully over time, she has made shrewd decisions about what to prioritise. Her astute leadership ensures that improvements run deeply through the school and last.
- Pupils' best interests are central to the drive for improvement. This underpinning principle has given leaders the courage to make the more difficult strategic decisions necessary along the way.
- The work of the school has been made more systematic at many different levels. For example, leaders now track carefully the academic progress and personal development of each pupil. Leaders are now rightly striving to ensure that the maximum benefits of this more strategic approach are fully realised. They are at the early stages of analysing the patterns in the information they have gathered to refine the school's work and secure the best possible outcomes for pupils.
- Leaders' varied checks of teaching and learning mean that they have a realistic view of its quality. Leaders rightly pay close attention to the impact of teaching on pupils' outcomes, both personal and academic, especially when observing in lessons. As a result, their evaluations are meaningful and pertinent.
- Systems for staff appraisal have recently been overhauled and tightened to balance more effectively individual staff and whole-school priorities. The part in the school's improvement journey played by training and other professional development opportunities for staff is strengthening. For some staff, it is already making a significant difference. For example, the special educational needs coordinator is using what she has learned from studying towards her professional qualification to sharpen the planning and review of pupils' education, health and care plans.
- Staff are understandably proud of what the school does and achieves. The overwhelming majority are positive about all aspects of the school's work. They convey a deep understanding of the school's particular context. Teamwork and mutual support are very well established. One member of staff summed up the sentiment of many by saying that the school is the 'most harmonious place I've ever worked'.
- Considering the number of pupils on roll, the range of high-quality learning opportunities and qualifications offered across the curriculum is good. The curriculum offers an effective balance between the drive to develop pupils' personal, emotional and social skills as well as ensuring that pupils leave with appropriate certificates and qualifications. However, the science curriculum is relatively limited by a lack of facilities and subject expertise.
- The curriculum provides pupils with a wide variety of enriching experiences. Pupils are justly extremely proud of their excellent achievements in areas such as textiles,

photography, art, music and cooking. The thoughtfully planned and coordinated promotion of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development has a high profile, both across subjects and in dedicated sessions.

- The consistent promotion of tolerance and acceptance helps prepare pupils for the diversity within modern Britain. Indicative of the continuous drive for improvement, leaders are embarking upon a consultation with a view to altering the school day to allow for extra-curricular activities that are currently made prohibitive by pupils' transport arrangements.
- Parents and carers rightly recognise and appreciate the difference the school makes for their children. Parents that spoke with the inspector or completed Parent View were effusive in their praise for the school. They spoke of how it has transformed their children's lives. Recognition of the dedication of staff to do all they can to meet their children's particular needs was a constant thread running through their comments.
- Leaders' systematic checks, introduced since the previous inspection, have helped to ensure that all of the independent school standards are met.

Governance

- Around the time of the previous inspection, the chair of trustees was very responsive to concerns about the school raised by the new headteacher. The chair has shown tenacity in steadily recruiting the right calibre of trustees to help enable and support the school's improvement journey.
- Collectively, trustees bring a considerable range of helpful skills and prior experience. This expertise has already resulted in rigorous debate and challenge about the school's finances and leaders' spending decisions. However, trustees do not demonstrate the same depth of understanding across their proprietorial and governance responsibilities.
- Trustees are keen to improve the effectiveness of the board. A strategic audit of trustees' individual skills has informed the logical delegation of particular responsibilities. Trustees have wisely signed up recently to the local authority governance training package to access courses about the different functions of governance.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- It is clear from conversations with trustees, leaders and staff, that safeguarding pupils is the rightful top priority. Staff know pupils well, play close attention to detail and know what to do if they identify any concerns.
- There is a suitable, up-to-date safeguarding policy published on the school's website. It takes full account of a wide range of recent and relevant guidance. The policy provides clear, helpful and unequivocal information about suitable steps to take in a range of different situations. Details of a range of useful contacts for further help or information, both within and beyond the school, are prominently featured.
- Records of any safeguarding concerns about individual pupils are well organised, securely stored and regularly reviewed. Well-designed formats for keeping records ensure that the critical information is captured to support effective decisions about the right course of

action. Leaders work closely with parents and other professionals and agencies to keep pupils safe.

- The responsibilities for the extensive and varied health and safety checks are precisely delegated. Leaders' well-organised paperwork indicates that necessary checks are reliably and routinely carried out. Where any audit or check identifies the need for remedial action, this is well documented, with prompt action taken and signed off when the issue is resolved. Leaders review action plans closely to check that any steps are taken in a timely and effective manner.
- All necessary checks of staff suitability are made and detailed on the single central register.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Teachers' confident subject knowledge across a wide range of subjects is a striking feature of the school's effective teaching. Teachers use this knowledge well to plan logical sequences of work and provide typically clear explanations for pupils. They are skilful and sometimes highly adept at asking pupils effective questions at appropriate times. In turn, pupils are increasingly enabled to recall their prior learning and deepen their understanding.
- Overwhelmingly positive relationships and the fruitful learning climate underpin the successful learning that takes place across the school. In this safe and supportive atmosphere, pupils are willing to offer answers and attempt the tasks placed before them. Keenly aware of pupils' needs, teachers follow structured, familiar and often comfortingly predictable approaches to teaching and learning for pupils.
- Adults' high expectations and aspirations for pupils are clear to see. They manifest themselves in the challenge and pitch of lessons, adults' use of language, and the increasing demands sensitively placed upon pupils. Both pupils and adults take a notable pride in the high quality, and sometimes exceptionally high quality of work, that pupils produce.
- Teaching assistants make a valuable contribution to pupils' learning. At times, the highly effective teamwork between teachers and teaching assistants results in seamless support that enables pupils to do extremely well. Teaching assistants resist any urge to do too much for pupils. Instead, they carefully prompt and guide pupils to build their resilience and try for themselves.
- Leaders accurately diagnose the aspects of teaching that are not consistently at the level of the very best. For example, teachers are not consistently adept at using their knowledge of individual pupils to draw the very best out of them in lessons. At times, teachers tend to rely too much on the more vocal pupils to provide answers, rather than checking thoroughly the understanding of others. The quality of adults' questioning is not of consistently high quality, sometimes leaving some pupils unhelpfully confused or frustrated.

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Mutual respect runs powerfully through the daily running and life of the school. This well-established foundation underpins a relaxed but orderly atmosphere to breaktimes and lunchtimes. During lessons, the warm and friendly tone continues but becomes equally focused, purposeful and productive. Throughout the day, there are suitable levels of adult supervision. However, because the climate is so positive, this appears laid-back and unobtrusive.
- Pupils' love and pride for their school were frequently evident as they spoke about their experiences. Many emphasised how much better their experience at Great Oaks is compared with that at their previous schools.
- Pupils feel safe. They insist that there is no bullying, or any sort of anti-social behaviour that is targeted at others. They report that they can easily go to any adult in school with any worries, confident that adults will listen and resolve any issues. Records show incidents relating to bullying or prejudicial behaviour are very rare. Staff and leaders log even minor incidents carefully. Records show that pupils' concerns, even if seemingly low level on face value, are taken seriously.
- Leaders and staff are wisely and constantly alert to the risk of pupils becoming unhelpfully dependent or reliant on one particular adult. The widespread trust successfully fostered in the school is therefore very important.
- The thoughtfully planned personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education links well with the wider promotion of pupils' personal development. Although carefully structured and planned in advance, PSHE education and daily SMSC sessions are suitably flexible to allow staff to respond to topical situations within and beyond the school, and any specific needs identified. Staff listen very carefully to what pupils have to say about a wide range of matters, for example, their online habits. They use this to take an even more refined individualised and targeted approach, where necessary.
- Pupils and sixth-form students benefit from helpful careers guidance, both internal and external, to help navigate their particular aptitudes, abilities and aspirations. Valuable work-experience opportunities are a useful supplement to this. Pupils are prompted to reflect carefully on these experiences to refine their thinking about suitable ambitions.
- Leaders have begun helpful work to track a broad range of different facets of pupils' personal development over time. However, the analysis of this is at a very early stage. Leaders are rightly working towards meaningfully capturing the very small steps some pupils take, to be sure that they are doing as well as can be reasonably expected.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- The school's ethos lends a highly successful focus on creating the conditions where positive behaviour is the norm. Dealing with any undesirable behaviour focuses productively on what has led to the lapse, the consequence, and what should be done to

prevent any reoccurrence.

- Pupils typically behave well and often exceptionally well throughout the day. Adults use their well-honed understanding of pupils to judge wisely in lessons when to allow them time and space to increase or decrease their level of participation. Lesson transitions are smooth, orderly and uneventful. Pupils know where they are going and are evidently comfortable with the well-established routines.
- Attendance rates are very good for approximately half of pupils. A small number of pupils have not missed any school so far in this academic year. There are also considerable success stories of good attendance for some individuals who previously have missed significant amounts of school. However, for other pupils, the negative impact of poor attendance on their progress remains too great. Leaders have rightly sharpened their focus on increasing attendance this year, but they recognise that it is too soon to see whether their varied, sensible strategies are sufficiently effective.

Outcomes for pupils

Good

- Taking everything into account, pupils typically make strong progress from their particular starting points across a broad range of areas. Pupils achieve a good range of qualifications and accreditations including A levels, GCSEs, entry-level qualifications and functional skills passes.
- Often, pupils start at Great Oaks Small School having missed significant amounts of schooling for a variety of reasons. Pupils' prior experiences of school have often been negative. Consequently, for varying periods, the correct priority for some pupils is to secure the necessary personal, social and emotional progress, before they are ready to take the first steps academically.
- Leaders carefully track the progress each pupil makes across subjects. Their suitably ambitious starting aim is that pupils should make at least similar progress to other pupils nationally. Depending on the gaps in pupils' prior learning, and their disposition towards learning when they arrive, this aspiration is not always realised. However, some pupils make exceptional progress in some areas.
- The importance of reading and the value of reading for pleasure are reinforced well throughout the day. Through carefully adapted approaches, teachers do not allow any weaknesses in pupils' literacy skills to be a barrier or excuse that prevents them from accessing rich and high-quality texts. Reinforcement of pupils' basic skills in mathematics is similarly prioritised well for those with lower starting points.
- Leaders have recently increased their focus on identifying the most able pupils who, for a variety of reasons, may not be fulfilling their potential. Sometimes, pupils exceed age-related expectations in some subjects, for example mathematics, but leaders are rightly ambitious to make this a more consistent picture. Similarly, leaders have rightly identified increasing the level of certification pupils are able to study towards and gain in science as a next priority.
- As a result of the accelerated progress most pupils make from the time that they join the school, they are at least better prepared, and mostly well prepared, for the future. The majority of pupils sustain positive and meaningful placements when they leave. In recent years, this has included university placements and apprenticeships. Students within the

traditional sixth-form age range benefit from one of a range of pathways that are tailored to varied needs and attributes.

School details

Unique reference number	133539
DfE registration number	886/6093
Inspection number	10033950

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	11 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	26
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	Trustees of Great Oaks Small School
Chair	Penny Jackson
Headteacher	Julie Kelly
Annual fees (day pupils)	£36,000
Telephone number	01843 822022
Website	www.greatoakssmallschool.co.uk
Email address	office@greatoakssmallschool.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	19–21 March 2014

Information about this school

- Great Oaks Small School provides education for pupils who have a diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorder or social communication disorder. All pupils have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities and usually have an education, health and care plan. Most pupils are placed and funded at the school by a local authority.
- At the time of the previous full standard inspection, the current headteacher had been appointed but had not taken up her post. Since that time, several new senior leaders have been appointed, including a mix of existing and new staff. A number of additional trustees have also been recruited.

- Since the previous full standard inspection, on 19 to 21 March 2014, the school has been subject to several shorter, focused inspections. Following an initial progress monitoring inspection on 12 November 2014, the school received an emergency inspection on 10 February 2016. A subsequent monitoring inspection was carried out on 15 September 2016.
- The school rents a suite of rooms at Discovery Park Business Centre, The Gateway, Sandwich CT13 9FF, where sixth-form students study for part of the week. There are currently very few sixth-form students on roll, so this aspect of the school's work is not reported separately because of the risk of individuals being identified.
- The school does not make use of any alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

- During the inspection, the headteacher took the inspector on a tour of the school while lessons were taking place. In addition, the inspector visited 10 lessons covering a broad range of subjects. A senior leader joined him for all of these observations.
- While in class, the inspector looked at a range of pupils' work. He also reviewed an additional sample, some of which he discussed with pupils.
- The inspector observed during lunchtime, between lessons and at the end of the day. He took these opportunities to speak informally with pupils, staff and parents. In addition, he met more formally with a group of pupils and a group of staff.
- Throughout the inspection, the inspector held various meetings with the headteacher and other senior leaders. He also met the board of trustees.
- The inspector reviewed four responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, and 26 confidential questionnaires returned by staff. He took account of all of the written comments that were added to these alongside other inspection evidence.
- The inspector sampled a wide range of documentation relating to the independent school standards and the quality of education, including a review of the school's website.

Inspection team

Clive Dunn, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

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