

Aurora St Christopher's School

Carisbrooke Lodge, Westbury Park, Bristol BS6 7JE

Inspection dates

11–13 December 2018

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement

- Frequent changes in strategic leadership have hampered the progress of this school since the previous standard inspection.
- The school meets the independent school standards. However, with regards to the premises, some of the standards required attention during the on-site inspection.
- Current school development plans are not sufficiently robust to drive forward the necessary improvements.
- Although statutory requirements for safeguarding are met, record-keeping, including risk assessments, is not sufficiently rigorous.
- Teaching and learning, including in the sixth form, are not yet consistently good across the school. As a result, pupils, especially the most able, do not achieve as well as they could over time.
- Pupils' anxiety levels are heightened when activities do not match their needs. This has a negative impact on their behaviour for learning.
- Staff gather a wealth of information about their pupils' learning and achievement. However, this information is not used well enough to secure good progress.
- Middle leadership is not yet securely in place. Therefore, these leaders are not playing a lead role in developing aspects of teaching, learning and assessment.
- Staff training is underdeveloped. This means that staff do not receive the training to further develop their skills and expertise to be highly effective in their roles.

The school has the following strengths

- The drive of the proprietor and area principal, working closely with the head of education, is having a positive impact on improving pupils' learning and development.
- Relationships between staff and pupils are strong. Staff care about the pupils and work hard to meet their complex needs.
- Leaders provide pupils with a range of work experience opportunities which prepare them well for life after they leave school.
- The school's work to develop pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is effective.

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?

- Improve the quality of leadership and management by:
 - raising levels of accountability across the school to ensure that pupils achieve well
 - setting clear priorities for improvement which are regularly checked and monitored by leaders, including governors, to determine what is and is not working well and why
 - ensuring that recording systems and processes are precise and meticulously maintained so they are clearly understood by leaders and staff, leading to effective school improvement
 - increasing the opportunity for strategic leadership across all areas of the school, including the sixth form, to further enhance school leadership and build the capacity for further improvement
 - establishing a robust programme of continuing professional development to equip staff with the skills to be highly effective.
- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by ensuring that:
 - activities are planned more carefully to consistently meet the individual needs of pupils, especially the most able, to enable them to make the best possible progress
 - assessment systems are securely in place and are used accurately to inform planning so that learning is well matched to the needs of pupils
 - leaders and teachers set consistently high expectations for the quality of work that pupils produce and their engagement in learning.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Requires improvement

- Frequent changes in strategic leadership have hampered the progress of the school. Leaders, including the proprietor, are having to work quickly to drive forward the necessary improvements. This work is still in its early stages and it is too early to see demonstrable impact of their work.
- The proprietor, leaders and those responsible for governance ensured that, by the end of the inspection, the school met all of the independent school standards. However, they are aware that these standards need to be monitored more rigorously to ensure that they remain met.
- Leaders readily acknowledge what needs to improve. However, the school's current development plan is weak. This is because the plan lacks precision and does not identify well enough the priorities leaders need to deal with to address the weaknesses and improve pupils' achievement. Plans lack clarity as to who, when and how checks will be made. As a result, leaders' monitoring of the success of the plan and the impact of actions taken are not sufficiently robust.
- Leaders gather a wealth of information on pupils' achievement. However, they do not use this well enough to help staff identify accurately what pupils know, understand and can do, or to plan learning that secures, over time, consistently good progress.
- The quality of teaching is not consistently good across the school. This means that some pupils, especially the most able, are not achieving as well as they could. This is, in part, a result of leadership changes and the limitations placed on staff with regards to further developing their teaching practice and expertise.
- Middle leadership is underdeveloped as a result of the significant leadership changes since the previous standard inspection. Consequently, teachers are not leading subjects effectively or playing a lead role in improving the school's performance.
- There has been a new proprietor appointed since the previous standard inspection. Along with other newly appointed leaders, the proprietor has quickly identified the schools' strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, the capacity of the school to make the improvements required is strong.
- The school's curriculum continues to evolve to meet pupils' changing complex needs. Pupils have the opportunity to engage in a wide range of subjects, including history, design technology, sports, art and music. There is a focus on developing pupils' English and mathematical skills across subjects. For example, older pupils were able to read simple sentences on William the Conqueror.
- Pupils have access to a range of therapeutic and additional activities. These services, for example the hydrotherapy pool, support pupils in regulating their behaviour and to be able to better manage their often high levels of anxiety.
- Activities made available beyond the school environment, such as sailing, provide opportunities for pupils to develop their social skills and increase their self-esteem and self-confidence.
- Spiritual, moral, social and cultural education is strong. Pupils have a growing awareness

of other cultures and beliefs through learning about different religions, including Judaism and Islam. Through the dedication and care of staff and the modelling of social skills, pupils are increasingly able to understand the different and often significantly complex needs of their peers, becoming more tolerant of these needs. For example, in the Thursday hot chocolate café run by one of the older pupils, pupils waited patiently to be served their drinks and to take the opportunity to socialise with their friends and staff.

- Staff morale has improved significantly in recent months. 'There is a lot more harmony at leadership level', 'team spirit and morale are very high here' and 'everyone values each other' are three of the positive comments made by staff. Staff care deeply about the pupils in their care and are highly ambitious for the school to be the best it can be.
- Leaders are active in securing external guidance, advice, support and challenge. For example, the new school improvement partner is gathering accurate information about the strengths and weaknesses of the school. This joint work supports school leaders to drive forward the necessary improvements to make St Christopher's a good school.
- There were too few parent responses to the online survey, Parent View, to determine their views of the effectiveness of the school, and the quality of education and care their children receive.

Governance

- Governance has been restructured since the previous standard inspection. The proprietor has worked effectively to form a governing body which has the necessary skills and expertise to improve the school. There is some evidence that governors are increasingly holding leaders to account. However, this challenge is in its infancy and demonstrable impact of governors' work is yet to be fully evidenced in improving the quality of education and care for pupils.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Staff receive high-quality training on all aspects of safeguarding, which includes child sexual exploitation, radicalisation and extremism. This training ensures that staff are confident in the actions to take should they have any concerns about a pupil.
- Leaders have ensured that there is an up-to-date safeguarding policy which reflects accurately the government's current legislation and guidance. This policy is easily accessible on the school's website for parents and carers.
- Staff and governors have a good understanding of the need to protect these vulnerable pupils from all possible risks. However, record-keeping lacks rigour. Records do not demonstrate well enough how actions taken have reduced risk to pupils.
- Leaders take all reasonable precautions to ensure that pupils are safe around the school site. However, risk assessments are not carefully monitored to ensure that they remain fit for purpose and minimise the risk to individual pupils.
- Leaders, including the proprietor, understand the importance of recruiting safely. This means that staff are checked appropriately to ensure that they are safe to work with children prior to starting in post. This minimises the risk to pupils and helps keep them safe.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- The quality of teaching and teachers' use of assessment to ensure that pupils learn effectively is not yet consistently good. As a result, pupils do not achieve the levels which they are capable of. This is especially so for the most able pupils.
- Pupils' work confirms variability in teachers' expectations, especially in mathematics and writing. Teachers do not plan activities for pupils which are suitably matched to their needs. Sometimes, work planned is either too easy or, in some cases, too hard for pupils. While some pieces of work demonstrate pupils' true potential, there are occasions when teachers do not build upon their learning sufficiently well to allow pupils to achieve as well as they can.
- Teachers gather significant information from a wide range of systems about pupils' achievement and progress. However, they do not use this information well enough to secure consistently strong pupil progress.
- Teachers and support staff are a strong and effective team who work hard. Together, they show the determination and commitment to make the necessary improvements to enable pupils to achieve the very best of which they are capable.
- Teachers and support staff have a secure understanding of pupils' often extremely complex needs. They use their good subject knowledge to support learning. For example, where teachers are confident in using a range of communication tools, such as sign language, pupils make good gains in their learning.
- Teachers provide parents and carers with accurate and detailed information about how well their child is progressing in their learning and social development. In addition, teachers provide information on what their child needs to do in order to improve. This detailed reporting enables parents and carers to understand what their child can do well and how they can further support their child to achieve further.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Requires improvement

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare requires improvement.
- The management of the school's risk assessment lacks rigour. There are occasions where risk assessments do not match with the risks identified in pupils' education, health and care plans well enough. Therefore, on occasion, risk assessments are not as effective as they need to be.
- Most pupils feel safe in school. However, some pupils comment that when other pupils become distressed, and exhibit challenging behaviours, their anxieties rise, and they do not feel so secure.
- Pupils learn to be kind and considerate to each other as staff are positive role models. Pupils are more able to recognise each other's individual and complex needs. Together, they support each other and celebrate success, such as learning to kick a ball in a net. This helps raise pupils' self-esteem.

- Staff form positive relationships with pupils. As a result, pupils learn to trust adults quickly, which supports them at times of heightened anxiety.
- Pupils have an effective understanding of how to keep themselves safe according to their cognitive ability. For example, pupils learn the importance of keeping their bodies safe and the differences between appropriate and inappropriate touch. This helps to minimise risk and keep them safe.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils requires improvement. When teachers do not provide pupils with activities which engage or precisely meet their needs, some pupils become agitated and disengage with their learning. This leads to behaviours which do not promote good learning and impedes the progress that pupils make.
- Pupils generally socialise well at playtimes and lunchtimes. They enjoy getting outside, riding their bikes and playing on the swings. However, sometimes there are fall-outs when pupils get frustrated and angry.
- Pupils attend school regularly. Attendance has improved since the previous standard inspection and is now above the national average. This improvement reflects pupils' enjoyment of school.
- School staff work extremely hard to help pupils with significant and complex needs overcome the many challenges they face in trying to understand the world in which they live.

Outcomes for pupils

Requires improvement

- Pupils' attainment on entry is significantly below that expected for their age due to their significant and complex needs and/or disabilities. All pupils have an education, health and care plan. However, pupils across year groups are not making consistently good progress and achieving what they are capable of.
- The most able pupils across the school are not achieving their full potential. This is because the activities teachers plan do not sufficiently challenge pupils or encourage them to work as hard as they could. For example, in number work, pupils sometimes complete tasks that they have clearly demonstrated they understand and can do without effort. Consequently, this limits the progress they make.
- Current progress information indicates that pupils are not making consistently good progress, especially in developing their skills in reading, writing and mathematics. Where teaching is stronger, and activities meet pupils' needs well, they make better progress, especially in their reading, writing and mathematical skills.
- Pupils receive high-quality personal, social and health provision. This provision enables pupils to make good progress in their personal development from their comparative starting points. As a result of effective teaching, pupils have a growing understanding of how to keep safe. For example, the work undertaken with pupils on understanding radicalisation and extremism is impressive. The activities were well planned to precisely meet the needs of pupils without increasing their levels of anxiety.
- Pupils receive high-quality independent careers guidance across the school. Such guidance allows pupils to identify their interests and future aspirations. This leads to

purposeful work experience for older pupils. Work experience, such as in horticulture, hospitality and retail, builds their self-confidence, raises self-esteem and gives pupils the belief that they can lead purposeful lives.

Sixth form provision

Requires improvement

- Teachers in the sixth form provision, while highly committed and passionate about their work, do not have sufficient time to ensure that students make the best possible progress, particularly in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science. Cohort sizes vary, often being very small, and there is a significant range of abilities and special educational needs.
- Students identified as being most able do not consistently make the good progress of which they are capable. This is across a range of subjects, but especially in writing and mathematics.
- The curriculum offer to students continues to improve. This improvement is due to the dedication and determination of staff to provide students with opportunities which will enhance their life experiences and increase their level of independence. For example, students are able to prepare and cook simple but nutritious dishes with success. In addition, students work in the school's vegetable plot growing various crops, such as sprouts and other root vegetables.
- Students receive high-quality careers guidance. This guidance helps them make well-considered decisions for their future, either at college or in the workplace.
- Students have access to a range of vocational studies and work experience. These courses and work-related experiences lead to increasing success in students gaining paid employment, for example at a local retail centre. This raises students' aspirations, self-worth and belief that they can make a positive contribution to society.

School details

Unique reference number	109342
DfE registration number	801/6008
Inspection number	10056301

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	28
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	14
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	The Aurora Group
Chair	Kathryn Rudd
Head of education	Thereza De Lucca
Annual fees (day pupils)	£79,000
Telephone number	01179 733301
Website	www.the-aurora-group.com/
Email address	info.stchris@the-aurora-group.com
Date of previous inspection	23–25 January 2017

Information about this school

- Aurora St Christopher's School is an independent special school. The school provides specialist education for pupils aged 5 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 development delay and epilepsy.
- Since the monitoring inspection in October 2017, there have been significant changes to

the leadership structure and ethos of the school. There is a new proprietor, executive principal and area principal. The governing body has been restructured. A deputy head of education has been appointed and is due to take up their appointment in January 2019.

- The school provides education for 40 weeks of the year.
- All pupils have education, health and care plans.
- There are currently no pupils in key stage 1. Most pupils are boys.
- 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, pupils are escorted at all times by members of the school staff.

Information about this inspection

- The inspector observed learning in classes; all observations were conducted jointly with leaders.
- The quality of pupils' written work and pictorial records of their learning were viewed by the inspector.
- Meetings were held with the head of education, area principal, executive principal, proprietor, staff and the school improvement partner.
- The views of pupils were informally gathered during the inspection.
- A wide range of documentation was examined, including the school's evaluation of its own performance, the school development plan, and information relating to pupils' achievement and progress. Records relating to behaviour, attendance and safeguarding were also scrutinised.
- The inspector took account of the views from the 20 completed staff questionnaires. The three responses to the online questionnaire, Parent View, and two text messages were taken into account.

Inspection team

Jen Southall, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

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Manchester
M1 2WD

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