

Doucecroft School

Abbotts Lane, Eight Ash Green, Colchester, Essex CO6 3QL

Inspection dates

12–14 February 2019

| Overall effectiveness | Inadequate |
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| Effectiveness of leadership and management | Inadequate |
| Quality of teaching, learning and assessment | Requires improvement |
| Personal development, behaviour and welfare | Inadequate |
| 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 an inadequate school

- Leaders do not have the capacity to undertake essential strategic work. High staff turnover and difficulties in recruitment result in leaders 'fire-fighting' day-to-day needs.
- Leaders still do not understand the independent school standards, despite this being identified as an issue in the previous inspection. There are several unmet standards.
- Leaders are failing to seek timely, well-coordinated support for a significant minority of pupils who have the most complex needs.
- Leaders do not know how well they are meeting the needs of the pupils who have been repeatedly physically restrained.
- Leaders' evaluation of the school lacks rigour and is overgenerous in its view about the quality of the provision.
- Leaders and staff do not support pupils well to 'voice' their opinions about their experience and aspirations. Staff do not prioritise or understand the importance of this work.
- Leaders' monitoring does not focus sharply enough on the difference that staff are making to the progress and development of the pupils.
- Staff's expectations about what pupils can achieve is too variable, especially in foundation subjects. Their subject knowledge is sometimes weak. Planning for learning is too variable.
- The school's key stage 2 curriculum, and the 'transition hub' provision, which supports key stage 4 pupils and students in the sixth form, are not meeting everyone's needs.

The school has the following strengths

- Governance has improved since the previous inspection. Governors have a broad understanding of the weaknesses in the school.
- Hardworking, dedicated staff ensure that pupils are kept safe and looked after on site.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

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

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- The proprietorial body and leaders should work collectively to rapidly improve the quality of leadership and management by:
 - increasing the capacity of senior leaders to undertake essential strategic work
 - developing school systems so that leaders can ascertain the progress that pupils are making over time, and recognise where there are gaps in the provision for pupils and meet staff training needs
 - identifying and securing timely and well-coordinated professional support for pupils with the most complex needs
 - regularly reviewing the use of physical restraint, especially where it occurs on multiple occasions with the same pupils, and identifying whether this is a reflection of unmet needs
 - developing a wider understanding among leaders and staff about the importance of meaningfully gathering pupils' views about their aspirations and experiences and then developing a strategy to gain these views
 - ensuring that all independent school standards are routinely reviewed and met
 - enhancing the school's key stage 2 and 'transition hub' provision for key stage 4 pupils and sixth form students so that they are better prepared for further education, employment, training and independent living that is in line with their ambitions, aspirations and abilities.
- Develop the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, and pupils' achievement, including in the sixth form, by:
 - improving staff's subject knowledge and planning in foundation subjects
 - raising staff's expectations of what pupils can achieve by gaining a thorough understanding of what pupils already know and can do.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Inadequate

- Leaders' and the proprietorial body's monitoring of the independent school standards is imprecise and poorly managed. Despite this being identified by inspectors in 2017 as an area for improvement, leaders lack understanding about too many of the standards. Consequently, several standards are unmet. Leaders acted to address some of the unmet standards during the inspection.
- Leaders and staff do not have enough understanding of their statutory obligations as outlined in the Children and Families Act 2014. There are significant weaknesses in how leaders and staff secure timely support for pupils with the most complex needs. Leaders cannot account for how funding is being spent to support pupils. They have not put systems in place to gather pupils' views meaningfully, or to seek independent advocacy for pupils.
- There is a complete absence of any information about how funding is being used for individual pupils. Annual review processes are not thorough, especially for those pupils whose needs are not being met well. In the plans sampled, there was little evidence of important information being shared or urgent actions being identified and acted upon.
- Leaders do not check thoroughly that they are meeting the needs of pupils over time. The most notable example is in the use of physical restraint in the school. Leaders check the appropriateness of physical restraint when it is used, but do not have enough understanding about how well they are meeting the long-term needs of those pupils who are restrained multiple times across weeks, months and years.
- Leaders are not using their own processes and policies when recording serious incidents in the school. This means that there are a number of things that the school would classify as 'serious incidences' that they have not recorded as such. Equally, leaders are not ensuring that risk assessments reflect the most up-to-date information about pupils or incidents in the school.
- Leaders' capacity to make vital improvements to the school's provision is severely limited. Leaders say that staffing turbulence since the progress monitoring visit in 2018 has meant that they are often 'fire-fighting' day-to-day issues. This hinders their capacity to undertake other work and is obstructing their ability to have strategic oversight of provision in the school.
- Leaders have identified that several staff do not have an understanding of autism spectrum disorder. While there is planned training for staff, leaders are struggling to ensure that all staff adhere to the protocols for completion of behaviour and welfare records. This is hampering leaders' efforts to identify where pupils need further help and support, or what leads to incidents of poorer behaviour.
- As a result of poor capacity and weak monitoring, leaders' scrutiny and evaluation of current standards in the school lack rigour. Consequently, leaders have an overgenerous view of the performance of the school.
- The curriculum is not meeting the needs of all pupils. In key stages 2 and 3, English and mathematics programmes are well developed. However, other subject areas are less well planned and delivered. Developing the curriculum for the growing numbers of pupils in

key stage 2 is bringing new challenges to an already overstretched leadership team.

- Provision in the school's 'transition hub' for key stage 4 and 5 is also not meeting some pupils' needs. Pupils access work experience and work-related learning that they enjoy. However, this is not routinely in line with their aspirations and interests. Equally, the curriculum accreditation and qualifications for the most able pupils are still in development.
- Leaders' recent work to raise standards in teaching, learning and assessment reflects some leaders' emerging understanding about where provision is weak. This includes the provision for students in key stage 5. It is too early to see the impact of this work on improving teaching, learning and assessment or sixth-form provision.
- Most pupils, parents and carers are positive about their experience of the school, with some particularly effusive parents. Staff morale is more varied, with a few identifying concerns about leadership and how well the school is meeting pupils' needs.
- On a day-to-day basis, there are hardworking, dedicated staff and leaders who are working alongside pupils to manage the school day and keep the site calm and orderly. Most pupils develop positive relationships with these staff.
- Leaders have not ensured that all areas of the premises are in suitable working order. The showers are not maintained well enough. Drinking water is not labelled appropriately.
- Leaders do not provide all of the required information to parents and others. Please see the details at the end of this report for the information required.

Governance

- Governors and trustees acknowledge that, following the progress monitoring inspection in 2018, they have not been as insightful in challenging leaders about provision. They have been too slow to ensure that leaders have the capacity, understanding and resources to act quickly where some urgent issues have emerged.
- Despite the weaknesses, governors and trustees have a broad understanding of the fragilities in the school provision. Their evaluation of the quality of education is more accurate than school leaders' evaluations.
- There has been a reorganisation of governance committees so that governors can focus on core priorities. Several trustees from the proprietorial body have joined the governing body. This has ensured that there is clearer communication between the two groups.
- The proprietorial body and governing body have successfully recruited more governors with specialist expertise. For example, the recently appointed governor linked to personal development and behaviour has a clinical psychology background. Governors have been using this expertise recently to challenge leaders about the weaker provision for pupils and staff expertise.
- Governors and trustees have invested time and finances into ensuring that pupils are kept safe. This includes significant improvements in how they check on the employment history of prospective employees.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

- The school has a suitable safeguarding policy published on its website.
- Despite the significant issues facing the school, leaders, governors and trustees have made safeguarding pupils a priority.
- Staff training is up to date with the most recent statutory guidance. Staff use the guidance to make appropriate referrals when they have concerns about pupils.
- Staff make checks on pupils who access alternative provision or work experience. Pupils are often supervised or transported to and from their placements.
- The single central record of the suitability of staff to work with young people meets requirements. Leaders have improved their recruitment processes since their last social care inspection.
- Leaders ensure that the curriculum helps pupils understand how to stay safe. Pupils say that they feel safe and are well looked after by staff.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- Pupils are not suitably stretched in their learning because staff do not have consistently high expectations of what pupils can achieve. Teaching focuses on the completion of tasks, regardless of pupils' academic ability or previous learning. Most pupils undertake the same learning activities, irrespective of whether they find the tasks too easy. This is especially the case for the most able pupils, and for those who have been at the school for the longest time.
- Staff are struggling to support pupils in key stage 2 to make good progress. The number of pupils in this key stage has risen rapidly in a short space of time. Staff are successfully engaging newer pupils with learning. However, pupils who have been in the provision for longer are not being encouraged to make even better use of the learning time provided.
- Teaching, learning and assessment in subjects such as science, history, cookery and geography are variable. Leaders provide schemes of work to help support teachers' planning. However, teachers do not give enough consideration about the sequence of lessons so that pupils' knowledge and skills build over time. This means that pupils have gaps in their learning, which are not always routinely addressed.
- Staff do not use questioning well enough to develop pupils' understanding or to extend pupils' answers. Support provided to pupils tends to focus on whether pupils complete tasks and have an understanding of the topics being taught, rather than providing them with the right level of challenge.
- Staff work hard to support pupils' behaviour in lessons and develop pupils' confidence to engage in their lessons. Consequently, lessons are generally calm and orderly. However, too often, pupils are not encouraged to work cooperatively when they are ready to do so.
- The teaching of literacy and numeracy across the school is more effective than in other subjects. In particular, reading is promoted effectively, including phonics development for the youngest pupils. Pupils are confident to read aloud to staff. Pupils take part in activities to improve their reading skills and comprehension.

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is inadequate.
- The long-term vigilance and support for those few pupils with the most complex needs is poor. Leaders do not ensure that these pupils receive timely external professional support. The pupils continue to experience crisis in their personal development with little sign of relief or essential support.
- For pupils with the most complex ongoing needs, there has been an extensive and frequent use of physical restraint over the past two years. Leaders do not share this information explicitly in annual reviews, or with local authorities who are funding pupils' places. Leaders do not reflect on whether the extensive use of physical restraint indicates that some pupils' needs are not being met well.
- Pupils are not supported well enough to give their views about their provision, aspirations and interests. Pupils' views are not well gathered in their annual reviews and are too often interpreted by staff. On occasion, staff exhibit a lack of understanding about the importance of this work for those pupils who face challenges in communication.
- Staff have only recently begun to look at the possible appropriateness of independent advocacy for some pupils.
- Pupils who are members of the school council are articulate and keen to be active role models in the school. However, they do not feel that their views are considered well enough by leaders or that they receive feedback on their concerns.
- Leaders, acknowledging weaknesses in the provision for pupils, have recently invested in on-site drama and art therapeutic support. It is too early to see the impact of this work on pupils' development and well-being.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils requires improvement.
- In lessons, pupils have positive relationships with the staff who support them. However, often this support for pupils does not encourage them to work cooperatively. In many lessons, pupils are not encouraged to build these important social and learning skills.
- On occasion, staff do not challenge pupils to concentrate and engage with their learning for longer periods of time, even when they are ready to do so. Leaders have identified that some pupils are opting for too much 'down time' which could be used more effectively.
- The majority of pupils conduct themselves appropriately around the school site, and when they are attending alternative provision and/or work experience placements. The school is generally calm. Staff intervene quickly and many exhibit considerable patience with pupils when they are struggling to regulate their behaviour.
- Breaktimes and lunchtimes are calm and orderly. Some pupils engage with one another, often with enthusiasm, when well supported by confident staff.
- Most pupils value their education and attend well. For most pupils, their attendance and

behaviour at the school have improved significantly compared with their experiences at previous schools.

Outcomes for pupils

Requires improvement

- Leaders have implemented a system to measure pupils' personal, social and emotional health and development in the school. Over time, the majority of pupils progress well against these standards. However, for the significant minority of pupils with the most complex needs, this progress is too slow.
- From their starting points, the progress made by pupils across the school is uneven. Pupils make better progress in English and mathematics across all key stages. However, this progress is not mirrored in other subjects.
- The most able pupils do not make the strong progress over time of which they are capable. Leaders have identified this and are looking to widen the qualification options available to these pupils within the school's pathway 3 and 4 curriculum. Currently, these pupils are not fully prepared to achieve well in more challenging qualifications by the time they reach key stage 4.
- The least able pupils who access the school's pathway 1 and 2 curriculum are well supported over time to develop literacy and numeracy skills. Pupils in key stages 2 and 3 make strong progress in their development of reading and writing.
- Last year, pupils in Years 11, 12 and 13 achieved some accreditation and qualifications, most notably in functional skills qualifications. These pupils also experienced opportunities to undertake work experience. Leaders are also looking to widen the work experience and alternative provision options available to this groups of pupils.
- In 2018, many of the pupils went on to gain a place at an appropriate employment or education destination when they left the school. Not all these pupils sustained these places though.

Sixth form provision

Requires improvement

- This year, leaders have created the 'transition hub' to support those pupils and students in both key stages 4 and 5 who are preparing to leave the school at the end of the year or key stage. Leaders have identified that this provision was not fully ready to meet the varied needs of sixth-form students who access it.
- As with teaching, learning and assessment throughout the school, students are not routinely accessing lessons that challenge them to achieve more when they are ready. Often, activities focus on developing students' independent living skills. Staff do not routinely consider whether this is challenging students who have already developed required skills in this area.
- Staff have positive relationships with students. Most students listen to staff requests and adhere to these. They trust in staff to keep them safe.
- Students access routine work experience opportunities, including in local hotels, garages and cafes. However, these opportunities are not always in line with students' specific aspirations and interests. Leaders are in the early stages of seeking more creative and

wider opportunities for students to access.

- Leaders are keen to secure a wider variety of opportunities for students in qualifications and accreditation, especially for the most able students in the sixth form. They are also seeking to widen students' opportunities for employment, training or education when they leave the school. This is because, although most students go on to a variety of employment and training, leaders are not confident that these courses offer sufficient progression from their learning at the school for some students.

School details

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| Unique reference number | 115426 |
| DfE registration number | 881/6032 |
| Inspection number | 10056555 |

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.

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| Type of school | Other independent special school |
| School category | Independent residential special school |
| Age range of pupils | 3 to 19 |
| Gender of pupils | Mixed |
| Gender of pupils in the sixth form | Mixed |
| Number of pupils on the school roll | 49 |
| Of which, number on roll in sixth form | 12 |
| Proprietor | Autism Anglia |
| Chair | Andrew Beavers |
| Headteacher | Alison Smart |
| Annual fees (day pupils) | £54,714 to £79,902 |
| Telephone number | 01206 771234 |
| Website | www.doucecroft.org.uk |
| Email address | doucecroft@autism-anglia.org.uk |
| Date of previous inspection | 7–9 February 2017 |

Information about this school

- This is a residential special school. Around one third of pupils who access the school are also boarders or access temporary respite at the residential provision.
- The most recent inspection of the residential provision was in May 2018. At that time, the overall experience of children and young people was judged as good. There was one national minimum standard not met and four recommendations. The report for the inspection can be found on Ofsted's website.

- The school's previous standard inspection was in February 2017 when the provision was judged as requires improvement. The inspection judged the education provision and the residential provision. Three independent school standards were not met, including one relating to unmet national minimum standards. Six national minimum standards for residential special schools were not met.
- Since the previous standard inspection, the school has had two progress monitoring inspections. The purpose of the inspections was to review the progress the school had made in meeting the previously unmet standards from February 2017. At the first progress monitoring inspection, in October 2017, the two independent school standards relating to education not met at the February 2017 inspection remained not met. At the progress monitoring inspection in March 2018, all of the independent school standards checked at that time were met.
- The school provides full-time education to pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Each pupil has an education, health and care (EHC) plan. All pupils have a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder.
- Some pupils in the school's 'transition hub' in key stages 4 and 5 access work experience and alternative provision. This includes Chelmsford and Otley Colleges, Mercury Theatre in Colchester, the Arts Café in Colchester and Rally Sports.
- All school placements are funded by local authorities and admission is through local authority referral. Currently, most pupils who attend the school are funded by Essex and Suffolk local authorities.
- Pupils typically enter the school with achievement significantly below the national average or after periods of turbulence in their previous schooling.
- The school does not receive additional funding for disadvantaged pupils.
- Although the school is registered to have children from the age of three years old, it has not had anyone in the Nursery or Reception provision for a number of years.

Information about this inspection

- The inspector conducted learning walks and reviewed pupils' work alongside senior leaders. She also held meetings with the headteacher, the assistant headteachers, other leaders, and governors and trustees.
- The inspector reviewed a range of the school's documentation, including that relating to safeguarding pupils, achievement, attendance and behaviour.
- The inspector reviewed the 17 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including free-text responses. The 19 responses to Ofsted's survey of staff were also taken into consideration.
- The inspector reviewed the four responses to Ofsted's survey of pupils and met with a small group of pupils from the school's student council while on site. She also spoke with pupils informally around the school and observed pupils' conduct at breaktimes and lunchtimes, as well as between lessons.
- This inspection did not include an inspection of the residential provision.

Inspection team

Kim Pigram, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex. Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school must meet the following independent school standards

Part 1. Quality of education provided

- 3 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that the teaching at the school:
 - 3(a) enables pupils to acquire new knowledge and make good progress according to their ability so that they increase their understanding and develop their skills in the subjects taught;
 - 3(b) fosters in pupils self-motivation, the application of intellectual, physical and creative effort, interest in their work and the ability to think and learn for themselves;
 - 3(c) involves well planned lessons and effective teaching methods, activities and management of class time;
 - 3(d) shows a good understanding of the aptitudes, needs and prior attainments of the pupils, and ensures that these are taken into account in the planning of lessons;
 - 3(e) demonstrates good knowledge and understanding of the subject matter being taught;
 - 3(f) utilises effectively classroom resources of a good quality, quantity and range;
 - 3(g) demonstrates that a framework is in place to assess pupils' work regularly and thoroughly and use information from that assessment to plan teaching so that pupils can progress;
 - 3(h) utilises effective strategies for managing behaviour and encouraging pupils to act responsibly.

Part 3. Welfare, health and safety of pupils

- 9 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor promotes good behaviour amongst pupils by ensuring that:
 - 9(b) the policy is implemented effectively.
- 16 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that:
 - 16(a) the welfare of pupils at the school is safeguarded and promoted by the drawing up and effective implementation of a written risk assessment policy; and
 - 16(b) appropriate action is taken to reduce risks that are identified.

Part 5. Premises of and accommodation at schools

- 25 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that the school premises and the accommodation and facilities provided therein are maintained to a standard such that, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare of pupils are ensured.
- 28(1) The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that:

- 28(1)(c) cold water supplies that are suitable for drinking are clearly marked as such.

Part 6. Provision of information

- 32(1) The standard about the provision of information by the school is met if the proprietor ensures that:
 - 32(1)(b) the information specified in sub-paragraph (3) is made available to parents of pupils and parents of prospective pupils and, on request, to the Chief Inspector, the Secretary of State or an independent inspectorate;
 - 32(1)(h) where a pupil wholly or partly funded by a local authority (except where funding is solely for free of charge early years provision in accordance with the duty contained in section 7 of the Childcare Act 2006) is registered at the school, an annual account of income received and expenditure incurred by the school in respect of that pupil is provided to the local authority and, on request, to the Secretary of State;
 - 32(1)(i) where a pupil with an EHC plan wholly or partly funded by a local authority or other body through public funds is registered at the school, such information as may reasonably be required for the purpose of the annual review of the EHC plan is provided to the responsible local authority.
- 32(3) The information specified in this sub-paragraph is:
 - 32(3)(b) particulars of educational and welfare provision for pupils with EHC plans and pupils for whom English is an additional language;
 - 32(3)(e) particulars of the school's academic performance during the preceding school year, including the results of any public examinations;
 - 32(3)(f) details of the complaints procedure referred to in paragraph 33, and the number of complaints registered under the formal procedure during the preceding school year.

Part 8. Quality of leadership in and management of schools

- 34(1) The standard about the quality of leadership and management is met if the proprietor ensures that persons with leadership and management responsibilities at the school:
 - 34(1)(a) demonstrate good skills and knowledge appropriate to their role so that the independent school standards are met consistently;
 - 34(1)(b) fulfil their responsibilities effectively so that the independent school standards are met consistently; and
 - 34(1)(c) actively promote the well-being of pupils.

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