

Marchbank Free School

Mowden Hall, Barnes Road, Darlington, County Durham DL3 9BL

Inspection dates

9–10 July 2019

Overall effectiveness	Inadequate
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
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an inadequate school

- Leaders and governors have not established a culture of safeguarding in the school. Some pupils in need of support wait too long to receive it.
- A significant turnover in leadership and experienced staff has overwhelmed and destabilised the school in the last 12 months.
- The school is too dependent on external support as leadership and management responsibilities are not distributed effectively throughout the school.
- The management of behaviour is inadequate. A high incidence of serious behavioural incidents has resulted in a high volume of accidents and violence to pupils and staff. The use of restraint has been excessive and wider strategies to improve behaviour have been ineffective. Some pupils feel unsafe at school.
- Teaching is variable in quality. Expectations of what pupils can achieve are not consistently high. Work planned is not adjusted well enough to reflect pupils' varying needs and abilities. Not all pupils make good progress.
- Checks on the quality of the school's work have broken down. The trust and governors identified concerns. They took some action, but it was not sufficiently rapid or sustained to arrest the decline in the school's performance.
- Leaders and governors have not ensured that additional funding for disadvantaged pupils is targeted precisely enough to ensure that gaps in pupils' learning and progress close.
- Most parents and carers who responded to Parent View want to see better communication with the school, especially in relation to their children's progress. Older pupils like their school and want it to improve.

The school has the following strengths

- Current interim leaders are developing a secure understanding of where improvements are needed in the school.
- Pupils continue to come to school and regular attendance has been maintained.
- Dedicated staff provide much-valued opportunities for pupils to participate in sport and cultural events.
- Current Year 6 pupils achieve well in reading, writing and mathematics.

Full report

In accordance with section 44(1) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires special measures because it is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the school are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Urgently ensure that leadership and management meet their responsibilities to establish a culture of safeguarding, by:
 - acting promptly to ensure that children in need receive the support they require in a timely way including, where necessary, working with external agencies
 - managing behaviour consistently and reducing incidents of violence to pupils and staff
 - developing staff skills in defusing situations and reviewing and minimising the use of restraint of pupils so that it is only used as a last resort
 - ensuring accidents are recorded fully so that it is clear that those injured have received first aid and that their parents have been informed.
- Rapidly improve the effectiveness of leadership and management, by:
 - establishing a senior leadership team to ensure that middle leaders are clear about their responsibilities, skilled in carrying these out and held to account for the effectiveness of their actions
 - improving communication with parents about actions to improve behaviour and safety, and their children's learning and progress, to rebuild their trust in the school
 - reviewing the curriculum to ensure that it is planned to develop pupils' knowledge and understanding progressively as they move through the school
 - ensuring that governors receive the timely information required to effectively hold leaders to account for pupils' progress and their safety and well-being
 - ensuring that pupil premium funding is spent effectively, leading to rapid improvements in the academic progress of disadvantaged pupils.
- Improve the quality of teaching and learning so that all pupils make good progress in a wide range of subjects, by ensuring that:
 - teachers have consistently high expectations of what all pupils can achieve
 - teachers assess pupils' progress closely and use this information to plan work that deepens pupils' knowledge and understanding
 - pupils are clear about what is expected of them in lessons through clear targets and effective feedback
 - targeted support for disadvantaged pupils is well planned and effective in helping pupils to catch up quickly.

- Improve behaviour and attitudes to learning in the school, by ensuring that:
 - pupils receive the support they need, including access to therapy and specialists, to help them to learn how to control and manage their behaviour well
 - staff are trained to calm or de-escalate behavioural situations effectively
 - leaders carefully check the quality of the school’s work to secure improvements in pupils’ learning, behaviour and well-being.

An external review of the school’s use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Inadequate

- The school has gone through many changes in the last year following the departure of the principal and the founder in summer 2018, along with several experienced staff. The school is overly dependent on external support to provide leadership and guidance to staff and to re-establish processes and procedures. Many practices around behaviour management, expectations of teaching and learning, and safeguarding have broken down over the past year.
- Leadership is not distributed effectively throughout the school. The few staff remaining with senior leadership or subject leadership responsibilities have not been supported with clear expectations and accountability processes. Teachers and support staff have had insufficient guidance or training to carry out their responsibilities.
- The trust and governors know the school has declined since the last inspection, particularly in the last year. They know that pupils have been unsafe and that education, especially for some vulnerable pupils, broke down at key points. The trust has acted to temporarily move some of the most vulnerable pupils to another school site so that these pupils are able to learn in a calm and supportive environment. It is too early to see the impact of this change on pupils' learning.
- The trust, and temporary interim leaders, acknowledge the inconsistent quality of teaching and learning. No programme of regular checks of the school's work has taken place since January 2019. Monitoring has been intermittent, conducted largely by externally commissioned consultants, with little evidence of the effect on pupils' learning or achievement.
- Although the school receives significant amounts of funding to support disadvantaged pupils, leaders are not able to account for how it has been used to secure improvements. The trust and interim leaders acknowledge that additional support and interventions for pupils who have gaps in their learning are not taking place.
- Curriculum plans are intended to provide pupils with access to a broad range of subjects. They are not developed to include progression in pupils' knowledge, understanding and concepts. Classroom teachers are given choice about how the curriculum is implemented, including choice about how much time to spend on a subject and when to teach it. Leaders, including subject leaders, have yet to check the quality of the curriculum.
- Most parents are concerned about the changes to school leadership and lack of information about their children's progress. Around three quarters of those who responded to Parent View would not recommend the school to another parent.
- Interim leaders have been in the school for a short period but are already developing a secure understanding of the issues and have plans to fix them. These leaders are beginning to talk to governors, parents, pupils and staff and to build positive relationships. However, it is too early to see evidence of the effects of their actions.
- It is recommended that the school does not appoint newly qualified teachers.

Governance of the school

- Governors and the trust have not ensured that safeguarding arrangements are effective. Agendas and minutes show that governors and the trust have not focused sufficiently on the effect of staff changes and other events on the safety of vulnerable pupils. Although an external audit of safeguarding found compliance, governors and the trust have not responded sharply enough to some of the concerns raised by staff.
- Although minutes of meetings show that governors ask appropriate questions, these are not always followed through. For example, governors did not probe sufficiently when therapy services were cut at a time when pupils were joining the school with increasingly complex needs.
- Governors have tried to fulfil their responsibilities to keep oversight of the quality of education. However, they have not always had information from senior leaders to help them to provide challenge and exercise their role fully. Some governors have found this frustrating.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are not effective.
- A culture of safeguarding is not embedded within the school. Pupils told inspectors they do not feel safe at school.
- The safety of staff and pupils has been placed at risk by poor behaviour. At one point, incidents of violence and assault increased by 300%. After a temporary decline, these incidents have steadily risen over the last few months.
- The use of restraint is extensive and sometimes excessive. Prior to the training of all staff in May 2019, staff who lacked experience or appropriate training regularly restrained pupils. Although incidents are recorded, it is clear that this practice was of little help to some pupils who repeatedly lost control and lashed out at others.
- A high volume of accidents and injuries are recorded in the accident book. However, no evidence of consistent follow-up of first aid or medical attention for injured pupils or staff was provided when requested by inspectors.
- Staff have undertaken child protection training. They know the school's procedures for referring disclosures and concerns to a designated safeguarding leader. However, some pupils in need of support do not receive it in a timely way.
- The school's processes and procedures to check on the suitability of adults to work with children meet requirements.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- Frequent changes of teachers during the year and disruption due to behavioural incidents have slowed some pupils' learning in Years 3, 4, 5 and 6. Some pupils have found it difficult to concentrate on their work due to the noise this disruption has caused, and their progress has declined, particularly in literacy and handwriting.
- Teachers do not consistently make use of information about pupils or use opportunities

to find out what pupils know and understand, and where earlier learning is insecure. Consequently, some pupils struggle with the content of some lessons, while others find content too easy. A pupil said, 'We go over the same thing so many times, we get annoyed.' Some Year 6 pupils said that they find their work challenging, but others said, 'Sometimes it is all the same, so some of us find it really easy.'

- Learning intentions are sometimes not clear in each lesson and particularly in topics where a series of activities take place. The focus in some aspects of the curriculum is on completing a task with no clear purpose or link to previous or subsequent work. Sometimes, pupils' concentration falters and they lose interest quickly. In some lessons, pupils worked when an adult worked alongside them, but could not sustain concentration to work independently when the adult moved away.
- In a few classes, pupils know precisely what is expected of them. Academic targets are reviewed and updated regularly to provide clear next steps. For example, pupils in Year 2 worked hard to master their next steps, such as remembering to use capital letters at the beginning of sentences.
- In all classes, teachers and support staff praise pupils for their efforts and give rewards to encourage them. Pupils like this and respond positively. However, occasionally this practice gives mixed messages about the expectations that teachers have of pupils and the quality of their work. Sometimes untidy, slapdash work, well below the standard of a pupil's previous work, is rewarded.
- Pupils' books show that there is enthusiasm for science and mathematics. Pupils in Year 5 were able to talk through science with understanding. They could explain how they had studied the placement of planets, recalled features about them and used vocabulary such as 'axis' and 'rotation' correctly.
- Effective questioning by some teachers checks pupils' understanding of mathematical procedures, such as partitioning, place value and the vocabulary they had been learning.
- Pupils' books generally show stronger progress in mathematics. This progress is supported by an external scheme and resources. This is helping to introduce pupils to a range of activities and opportunities to practise their skills and embed knowledge.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Inadequate

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare requires improvement. Some pupils find it difficult to regulate their behaviour and to stay in control. They do not always have access to the specialist support or therapy they need to help them do this.
- Pupils' attitudes to learning vary. Some who joined the school this year have found it difficult to settle. The arrangement to educate a small group of pupils off site is helping to give them the space they need to adjust to being members of the school.
- Building work has restricted pupils' access to the school grounds and outdoor spaces during much of the past year and pupils have found it difficult to adjust to this.

- Older pupils, and those who have been at the school for some time, are dismayed to see what has happened to their school. One pupil explained, 'I like school and don't want it to close, but I want it to improve.'
- Pupils like the opportunities to earn rewards for good work and undertake tasks, such as feeding the rabbits and chickens. Some pupils find this soothing and relaxing.
- Pupils' social and cultural development is well planned through trips, visits and visiting theatre productions. Some useful work, focused around moral issues and dilemmas, has taken place in workshops.
- Pupils are taught about the risks of social media and how to stay safe online.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is inadequate.
- Pupils' behaviour in lessons varies greatly in the way it is managed and this has a negative effect on their learning and progress.
- Pupils report that behaviour around the school sometimes makes them feel unsafe. Shouting, screaming, arguing and damage contribute to some pupils reporting that they feel unsafe and do not enjoy being a pupil at the school.
- There is no consistent overview of behaviour or strategies to reduce incidents. The recorded rates of serious behavioural incidents, restraints and exclusions over the last year have increased significantly. Behavioural incidents occur daily and some pupils told inspectors they have begun to get used to it.
- Some pupils feel that bullying is dealt with well by some staff, but others say it is not. A pupil explained that, 'They just do it over and over and over.'
- In recent months, ABC plans, developed for each pupil, are being used across the school. These plans focus on providing staff with key information about individual pupils, triggers for their behaviour, and actions to help them when the pupils' behaviour reaches a crisis. More training is required to enable staff to calm or de-escalate situations and use such techniques consistently. Some classes are beginning to make use of calm areas and spaces to help pupils 'take a minute' to calm themselves down, but this is not embedded fully across the school.
- Pupils attend school regularly and are supervised throughout their time when in school.

Outcomes for pupils

Requires improvement

- During the last 12 months, information available to teachers has not been used effectively to set work that is at the right level and challenge to enable pupils to make better progress.
- Pupils' progress in learning has been hindered by turbulence in staffing and inconsistencies in assessment, support and guidance to pupils. This has had a negative effect on some groups more than others. Internal progress measures show that the progress of current pupils is not good enough, particularly in Years 3 and 4.
- Leaders acknowledge that additional support and interventions for disadvantaged

pupils who have gaps in their learning are not taking place.

- Reading was a strength of the school in 2017 and 2018. Many pupils made good progress in reading by the end of key stage 2.
- Reading for pleasure is not firmly established. In some year groups, pupils receive guidance and have practice in selecting their own books. Year 5 pupils read them well, without stumbling over difficult words and knew the meaning of words such as 'faction' and 'patiently'. Some pupils do not and told inspectors they 'don't really read'.
- Pupils' needs are assessed well in some classes and this leads to very clear targets to guide their next steps in mathematics and writing, but this is not established across the school.
- Internal progress measures show that progress is good in upper key stage 2. Unvalidated results from the 2019 statutory assessment tests in reading, writing and mathematics are broadly in line with the school's internal assessments.

School details

Unique reference number	139691
Local authority	Darlington
Inspection number	10088980

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	Special
School category	Academy free school
Age range of pupils	5 to 11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	45
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Liz McAllister
Principal	Tessa Fenoughty
Telephone number	01325 254670
Website	www.educationvillage.org.uk
Email address	enquiries@marchbankfreeschool.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	2–3 June 2015

Information about this school

- Marchbank is smaller than the average school providing primary education and specialist support to pupils who have social, emotional and mental health difficulties. Approximately 17% of pupils have autism spectrum disorder. A small proportion of pupils have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and some pupils have pathological demand avoidance (PDA).
- All pupils attending the school have an education, health and care (EHC) plan or are being assessed for one.
- Most pupils are from White British backgrounds, with a small number of pupils from a range of mixed heritage.
- The proportion of pupils who are disadvantaged, and who are eligible for support through pupil premium funding, is much higher than the national average.
- In the 12 months preceding this inspection, the school has had three different

principals, one of whom was an interim, and has experienced significant turbulence to staffing through absence and resignations.

- The current principal was on sickness absence at the time of the inspection. The principal and assistant principal from Beaumont Hill Academy were providing on-site interim leadership support to the school at the time of the inspection. This had commenced four working days prior to the start of the inspection.
- Since May 2019, a group of seven pupils have relocated to Beaumont Hill Academy. They are taught by staff from Marchbank and remain on the roll of the school.
- There are no pupils aged five currently on the roll of the school.
- The school is undergoing repairs to the building and is clad in scaffolding. This has reduced pupils' access to outside space and play facilities for much of the current year.
- The school is part of The Education Village Academy Trust. The trust delegates the governance oversight of the academy to the education standards committee.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed learning in all classes on site and undertook scrutiny of the work of pupils in all classes, including those based off site. Joint observations and scrutiny of pupils' English, mathematics and other books were undertaken with the interim leaders. Inspectors' reviews of pupils' work looked at their progress over time. A sample of pupils' individual profiles and plans was also reviewed.
- Meetings were held with pupils to discuss their learning and their views of the school. Inspectors also talked to pupils informally at break- and lunchtime and observed their arrival to school. Inspectors took account of 13 responses from a survey of pupils during the inspection.
- Meetings were also held with governors from the school's education standards committee and the chief executive of The Education Village Academy Trust to discuss their roles and the effect of their work.
- Inspectors met teachers to discuss their work and support. Inspectors also took account of the four responses received from Ofsted's survey of staff during this inspection.
- Inspectors examined a range of school documents, including information on pupils' progress across the school, improvement plans, curriculum plans and checks on the quality of teaching. They also examined school records relating to safety and behaviour.
- Inspectors took account of 15 responses to Parent View, Ofsted's questionnaire for parents, along with seven free-text responses from parents.

Inspection team

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In the report, 'disadvantaged pupils' refers to those pupils who attract government pupil premium funding: pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years and pupils in care or who left care through adoption or another formal route. www.gov.uk/pupil-premium-information-for-schools-and-alternative-provision-settings.

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