

Inspection of an outstanding school: The Brier School

Bromley Lane, Kingswinford, West Midlands DY6 8QN

Inspection dates:

3–4 December 2019

Outcome

The Brier School continues to be an outstanding school.

However, inspectors have some concerns that standards may be declining, as set out below.

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils and staff work in harmony with one another at The Brier. Staff really care for pupils. They work hard to make sure pupils' special needs are met so that they are ready to learn. From school councillors to playtime door monitors, pupils take on responsibilities to make their community safe and happy.

The school's motto, 'Preparing for life, building our strengths', underpins the sensitive approach staff take to help pupils manage their own behaviour. Pupils and parents and carers agree that this is successful. Pupils trust staff and confide in them if they are worried about something. Bullying hardly ever happens, but if it does, staff deal with it quickly. The positive relationships between staff and pupils means there is a calm and peaceful atmosphere across the school.

Pupils' academic progress is not as strong as it should be. For example, in phonics, some teachers do not help pupils to learn letter sounds well enough. This means that some pupils do not learn to read as well as they could. The headteacher has developed new ways to help pupils to learn really well, but some teachers are not yet using these new approaches well enough to enable pupils to make strong progress in all subjects.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

The recently appointed headteacher quickly identified the weaknesses in previous curriculum planning. He also recognised that staff had not received enough training to help them teach some subjects well enough, especially phonics. The headteacher has taken swift action to begin to put these things right. New curriculum planning now sets out what pupils should learn and in what order. Staff have received training to improve their teaching skills. The headteacher has also reorganised the leadership team. He has provided leaders with support and time to develop their skills. Leaders are beginning to check how well the new curriculum planning is being taught, but they have not yet fully

identified and tackled some remaining weaknesses. Because of the changes made by the headteacher, pupils are making better progress. Even so, it will take more time before pupils are doing as well as they could in their different subjects.

Teachers promote a love of reading across the school very well. Pupils enjoy the many opportunities they have to read in school. The school's online reading system also provides pupils with opportunities to follow up their reading at home, but the school does not yet have a consistent approach to the teaching of phonics. The quality of teaching is variable. Some teachers do not provide pupils with suitable activities to practise the letter sounds. Some staff pronounce letter sounds incorrectly. This means that pupils do not make as much progress as they should in reading.

In mathematics, the revised curriculum planning is now matched to pupils' needs. Teachers have a better understanding of what should be taught in each year group. Some teaching is very effective and helps pupils to make strong progress, but some teachers move pupils on too quickly, which means they have gaps in their learning. For example, some pupils move on to learning larger numbers before having a secure understanding of numbers to five.

The personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) curriculum provides pupils with a range of opportunities to help prepare them for life after school. For example, every week, key stage 4 pupils go to the local college to develop independent living skills such as home care. Pupils learn about community responsibility through visits to the local food bank and elderly people's homes, but some teachers do not have a detailed enough understanding of what should be taught and when. This means that some pupils do not have enough knowledge to prepare them for the next stage of the subject.

Leaders make sure that they pay careful attention to what pupils' education, health and care (EHC) plans say about what pupils need to help them to be successful. They work with external agencies to make sure that pupils receive the right support so they can access the learning. Teachers make sure that pupils and their families are involved in putting the plans into action. This is a strength of the school and means that pupils' special educational needs and/or disabilities are very well met.

Pupils have many opportunities to develop their confidence and independence outside school. From visits to the Sea Life Centre to local supermarkets, well-planned trips develop pupils' awareness of the world around them. Pupils visit the Sycamore outdoor education centre weekly. They also take part in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme. Staff make sure that any barriers are overcome to enable pupils to take part in a wide range of challenging activities.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Staff are very alert to any changes in pupils' moods or communications that may indicate they may be suffering harm. Staff report any concerns quickly. Leaders follow up any concerns and work with external agencies to make sure pupils receive the help they need.

Leaders are very successful at identifying and providing pupils and their families with support. Their early intervention helps to prevent difficulties from escalating.

Staff take every opportunity to teach pupils how to keep themselves safe. They help pupils to recognise dangers and learn how to protect themselves, especially when they are outside school. For example, through the work to achieve the Diana Award, pupils developed the confidence and skills to tackle bullying if they experience it, including online bullying.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Leaders have identified that there is variability in the teaching of phonics. The phonics planning does not set out how phonics should be taught. This means that there is no coherent approach to the teaching of phonics. Leaders have provided staff with updated training to develop their phonic teaching skills, but some staff still require further support to ensure they are sufficiently skilled to teach phonics. Leaders should develop a whole-school approach to the teaching of phonics. They should check carefully that the teaching of phonics enables pupils to embed and develop their understanding of letter sounds progressively. Leaders should continue to provide further support and training to ensure that all staff teach phonics accurately and effectively to enable pupils to make better progress.
- Leaders have sequenced curriculum planning in a logical order in all subjects. Planning sets out how pupils' knowledge and skills should be built on from one year to the next. The planning is based on the national curriculum and is suitably ambitious. However, leaders have not checked how well teachers are using the planning carefully enough. Leaders need to monitor the delivery of the curriculum in greater detail. They should identify where the weaknesses in teaching are and provide support and training to improve the implementation of the curriculum where needed. This is especially so in English and mathematics.

Background

When we have judged a special school to be outstanding we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains outstanding. This is called a section 8 inspection of a good school or non-exempt outstanding school. We do not give graded judgements on a section 8 inspection. However, if we find some evidence that the school could now be better than good or that standards may be declining, then the next inspection will be a section 5 inspection. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the section 8 inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour or the quality of education, we will convert the section 8 inspection to a section 5 inspection immediately.

This is the second section 8 inspection since we judged the school to be outstanding in January 2016.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use Ofsted Parent View information when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

If you are not happy with the inspection or the report, you can [complain to Ofsted](#).

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

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.

School details

Unique reference number	103878
Local authority	Dudley
Inspection number	10088597
Type of school	Special
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	4 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	154
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr P Hill
Headteacher	Mr D Stanton
Website	www.brier.dudley.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	8 December 2015

Information about this school

- A new headteacher took up his post in September 2019.
- The school caters for pupils with moderate learning difficulties. However, the school has recently admitted pupils with more complex learning needs including autism spectrum disorder and pupils with speech, language and communication needs.

Information about this inspection

- We met with the headteacher, the deputy headteacher, two assistant headteachers, the designated safeguarding leader and the leaders for English, phonics, PSHE and mathematics.
- The lead inspector met with five members of the governing body and two representatives from the local authority.
- We focused on reading and phonics, mathematics and PSHE as part of this inspection. We discussed the curriculum design with the headteacher and subject leaders, reviewed pupils' work in these subjects, spoke to teachers about pupils' learning, and visited a number of lessons, including phonics and reading sessions. The lead inspector listened to key stage 4 pupils reading. She also spoke to Year 9 pupils about their

reading.

- We reviewed a range of documentation provided by the school. We looked at school policies, curriculum documents and documents relating to behaviour and attendance.
- We reviewed a range of safeguarding information, including the checks that leaders make on staff prior to employment. We checked the school's safeguarding policy and spoke to staff about the school's safeguarding procedures. We checked staff's safeguarding training. We also checked the school's procedures for keeping pupils safe when in school, including when using computers.
- The lead inspector took into consideration two free-text responses. There were two responses to Parent View. The team inspector spoke to parents before school.
- The lead inspector considered the 21 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire and 14 responses to Ofsted's pupil questionnaire.
- The team inspector met formally with the school council and both inspectors spoke informally to pupils throughout the inspection.
- We met with staff to discuss their views about the school.

Inspection team

Ann Pritchard, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Chris Pollitt

Her Majesty's Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
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