

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
www.gov.uk/ofsted



19 April 2021

Caroline Green
Executive Principal
Marchbank Free School
Mowden Hall
Barnes Road
Darlington
County Durham
DL3 9BL

Dear Mrs Green

Additional, remote monitoring inspection of Marchbank Free School

Following my remote inspection with Tracey Ralph, Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI), of your school on 25 March 2021, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions that have been taken to provide education to all pupils during the current circumstances.

This monitoring inspection was conducted under section 8 (2) of the Education Act 2005 (as amended) and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for visiting schools while routine inspections remain temporarily suspended. It was additional to the usual monitoring process for schools that are judged to require special measures.

This monitoring inspection was carried out remotely. As such, the range of evidence available to inspectors was narrower than would normally be the case during an on-site inspection. As a result, this letter provides a more limited level of assurance than our usual monitoring reports.

The inspection took place because the school was judged to require special measures at its previous section 5 inspection. The school's most recent section 5 inspection took place in July 2019.

Having considered all the evidence and taking into account the impact of COVID-19 (coronavirus) on the school, I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and those responsible for governance are taking effective action to provide education in the current circumstances.

Leaders and those responsible for governance should take further action to:

- consolidate leadership capacity and embed the work done on curriculum development.

Context

- The executive principal and head of school took up post in September 2019. Two middle leaders were given whole-school roles. All these appointments were from within the Education Village Academy Trust and, initially, for two years. A deputy headteacher left in January 2021. Trustees are currently consulting with staff on a proposed leadership structure for September 2021 onwards.
- The school is a special school catering for pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs. All pupils have an education, health and care (EHC) plan. At the start of the spring term, 87% of pupils were attending on site.
- At the time of this inspection, 94% of pupils were on site. Two pupils were isolating and accessing education remotely.

Main findings

- School leaders know the needs of their pupils well and have shown they can manage change effectively. Parents, carers and pupils are very happy with the school. Parents have confidence in the staff and speak highly of the education their children are receiving.
- Senior leaders have broadened the curriculum to include a wider range of subjects than was previously the case. The current curriculum is ambitious. Leaders have developed staff's understanding of the subjects they teach. They have also trained staff in how to plan for pupils' individual needs. Teachers are skilled at using observation and assessments to check what pupils know. Pupils' assessment grids show what they have learned in different subjects. Staff also record how pupils are doing against the broader outcomes identified on their EHC plans.
- Pupils are proud of their work and can explain what they have learned. For example, pupils talked us through examples of writing in their books to show what they had changed and why. Pupils shared a wide range of work from subjects which included science, geography and art. They delighted in recalling subject knowledge and what they had done in lessons.
- Many pupils have had gaps in their primary education prior to joining the school. Pupils in all year groups need help to catch up in reading and mathematics. Staff show secure subject knowledge in the teaching of early reading and phonics. As a result, pupils learn to read sounds quickly and with

confidence. Teachers are delivering the full mathematics curriculum. They use short, regular assessment tasks to check what pupils know.

- This special school stayed open to all pupils during periods when other schools were only open to some children due to COVID-19 restrictions. There is a clear remote education offer for use when needed. Teachers provide live online teaching and put work for pupils on the class page of the school's virtual learning tool. Pupils get extra help via a chat function and timely feedback from teachers on written work.
- Pupils have a wide range of additional needs, some of which are only identified after the pupil has joined the school. Leaders use specialist assessors and therapists when needed. For example, specialists identify additional communication needs or sensory issues. Staff know how to use information from these assessments alongside their own observation of pupils' needs. As a result, staff develop individual plans that meet pupils' needs well.
- Teachers help pupils to recognise and understand their emotions. Pupils were clear about the range of things they can do for themselves that help them keep calm. For example, some pupils use the sensory area to play music and dance. Leaders understand the wider vulnerabilities of their pupils. There is a family welfare team in school which supports parents. Leaders are quick to refer to external agencies when extra help is needed.
- Leaders have produced careful transition plans for pupils who are due to leave the school at the end of Year 6. They work hard with local authorities to get pupils additional support to help them move on successfully.
- Trustees and governors know the school well. The executive principal provides governors with regular and detailed reports. Governors meet with senior leaders frequently to check and challenge the information provided. The governor responsible for safeguarding is knowledgeable and monitors the school's safeguarding arrangements diligently.
- Trustees appointed an external adviser who has been working with school leaders since September 2019. She has a clear understanding of the significant progress that has been made in the school since that time.

Evidence

This inspection was conducted remotely. We spoke to you, other senior leaders, the multi-academy trust chief executive officer, pupils, staff, representatives of those responsible for governance and the school's external adviser to discuss leaders' actions to provide education to all pupils during a national lockdown.

We also heard pupils reading to their teacher and looked at safeguarding records and other school documents. We looked at responses to Ofsted's online

questionnaire, Parent View, including 19 free-text responses, and 16 staff questionnaires.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer of the Education Village Academy Trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Darlington Borough Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Patricia Head
Her Majesty's Inspector