

Inspection of Birtenshaw School Merseyside

82 Higher Lane, Liverpool, Merseyside L9 7AB

Inspection dates:

5 to 7 May 2021

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

The quality of education

Requires improvement

Behaviour and attitudes

Good

Personal development

Good

Leadership and management

Good

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Good

Does the school meet the independent school standards?

Yes

What is it like to attend this school?

Adults and pupils are caring and friendly in this school. Classes are small, which means that staff get to know pupils very well. Staff skilfully help pupils to build their confidence. There are positive relationships between staff and pupils. Such features mean that pupils have a much more settled school experience than in schools they have attended in the past. Teachers expect pupils to try hard to behave well and be successful in their learning.

Pupils are generally happy to come to school. They make big steps forward in their communication skills and in understanding how to interact with others. Despite this, the school does not make sure that pupils make the strongest possible progress in learning and remembering subject knowledge.

Staff help pupils to improve their behaviour. Pupils usually behave well. Sometimes, staff need to give immediate help when pupils suddenly become extremely upset or anxious. When this happens, staff provide sensitive and helpful support to make sure that pupils calm down, regain control and are safe. Pupils told us that there is no bullying in the school.

The COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic made it harder for staff to offer pupils the normal wide range of enjoyable learning experiences out of school. However, staff are now starting to provide these again.

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

Leaders have started to redesign the school's curriculum. They have identified important aspects of what pupils should know and remember in different subjects. They expect class teachers to decide on the details of what pupils should learn and when this will happen. However, the framework for the curriculum provided by leaders is not precise enough. It does not ensure that pupils' knowledge builds up in a sensible order. Leaders have plans to further review the curriculum and to appoint teachers to be responsible for each subject.

The curriculum includes reading for those pupils whose communication skills are well enough developed. Pupils have lots of opportunities to hear books being read by adults. Teachers use books that pupils know and enjoy to support learning in other subjects. Older pupils, who are confident readers, told us that they enjoy independent reading. However, different teachers have experience of different phonics programmes. This means that pupils may not build up their phonics knowledge systematically. Some staff told us that they lack confidence in teaching reading. Some training for teachers about phonics has been delayed because of the pandemic. However, even without this complication, leaders' work to develop a consistent approach to phonics teaching is at an early stage.

Leaders ensure that classroom staff and therapists work together to support pupils' special educational needs and/or disabilities. Parents and carers told us about the

significant improvements they had seen in their children's communication and social skills as a result. Staff use signing effectively to help some pupils to learn. Leaders' and staff's success in this kind of work helps pupils to be ready for learning in other subjects.

Staff use an electronic system to record how successful pupils are in a wide range of skills. This system gives a helpful record of what pupils can do. It is less useful in identifying the detail of what pupils still need to learn and how this links to what they know already.

The school is generally calm. However, from time to time, there are situations when pupils become unsettled and show extremes of behaviour. Staff are well trained in how to respond. This training allows them to understand when physical restraint is, or is not, appropriate. Leaders record any serious behavioural incidents. The school's records show that such incidents tend to reduce as each school year progresses.

Staff plan opportunities to add to pupils' learning through visits and other activities in the wider community. These include visits to museums, the local area and further afield, for example to the beach. The COVID-19 pandemic restricted these activities. However, when such activities happen, they add to pupils' understanding of the wider world and how people fit into this. Teachers build on these experiences back in the classroom. For example, pupils in one class talked enthusiastically about their visit to a local park on the day before. We saw pupils learning about being kind to each other as part of personal, social and health education (PSHE). Leaders have checked that pupils learn about relationships and sex education as expected by the latest government guidance.

Leaders have worked closely with their colleagues from the proprietor group in order to respond to recent challenges. They have successfully managed the recent rapid increase in the number of pupils and staff. They maintained onsite education for most pupils during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Leaders are aware of the independent school standards (ISS). The school's premises are purpose built and well equipped, including with specialist facilities. Clear information about the school is available on the school's pages of the proprietor's website. This includes the safeguarding policy. Leaders made some small improvements to documents and some of the school's arrangements so that all the ISS were met by the end of this inspection.

Leaders have prepared a detailed plan setting out how they will increase access to the facilities and opportunities offered by the school to cater for any future needs of pupils or staff. This plan includes a commitment to providing specialist training for staff so that they can meet pupils' needs even more effectively.

The proprietor body and the governing body are well organised. The systems that the proprietor body has set up ensure that trustees and governors have clear details about the work of the school. This allows them to assure themselves that leaders are doing the best job possible. Leaders from the proprietor body work with the

headteacher to check that the school is effective. Their joint work and plans provide useful information for the school's future development.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders provide effective training for staff about safeguarding. This means that staff are confident about what they must do if they have any safeguarding concerns about a pupil. When needed, leaders keep in close contact with professionals from outside the school who are involved in pupils' welfare.

Leaders made some small changes to the school's safeguarding policy during the inspection. Similarly, leaders added a few details to the school's record of the checks made on the suitability of staff to work with pupils. These changes brought these documents up to date with the latest government requirements.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and proprietor)

- The recent curriculum development in the school has provided a composite, top-level view of planned curriculum content. However, this does not give a clear picture of how pupils' knowledge will build up in sequence. This means that leaders cannot be sure that pupils know and remember their learning as much as they should. In addition, teachers have an insecure base on which to build their planning. Leaders must ensure that the school's curriculum provides for coherent, sequential learning of knowledge.
- Senior leaders are at an early stage in developing subject leadership in the school. The potential contribution of the whole teaching team to developing and checking the impact of the curriculum is not harnessed. This means that it is harder for those involved to secure necessary improvement to the curriculum. Senior leaders must ensure that leadership at all levels allows for the fastest possible development of the curriculum.
- While pupils learn to read, this part of the curriculum does not focus sufficiently on a consistent, systematic, synthetic phonics programme. Various approaches are used by different teachers, depending on their knowledge, experience and confidence. This means that leaders cannot be assured that pupils learn to read as securely as possible. Leaders must ensure that they quickly implement a consistent approach to teaching phonics.
- While leaders provide much helpful training for teachers, teachers told us that they lack confidence in some respects, including in the teaching of phonics and some curriculum subjects. This means that it is harder to be assured that teaching is as effective as possible. This will become an increasingly significant issue as pupils become older and move into key stages 3 and 4. Leaders must develop strategies, including providing appropriate training, to build teachers' confidence in all aspects of their work.

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

School details

Unique reference number	145182
DfE registration number	341/6011
Local authority	Liverpool
Inspection number	10177184
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	3 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	80
Number of part-time pupils	None
Proprietor	Birtenshaw
Chair	Ryan Armitage
Headteacher	Catherine Davis
Annual fees (day pupils)	£60,158 to £89,977
Telephone number	0151 317 8277
Website	www.birtenshaw.org.uk
Email address	merseyside.school@birtenshaw.org.uk
Dates of previous inspection	13 to 15 November 2018

Information about this school

- The school's previous standard inspection took place in November 2018. Ofsted completed a material change inspection in May 2019.
- Following the material change inspection, the DfE increased the school's authorised capacity to 80 pupils. The school's roll has rapidly increased to that number.
- The school roll currently includes pupils in Years 1 to 7. Leaders expect most of these pupils to remain at the school in the long term. Leaders are planning for the school to educate pupils in Years 2 to 8 during the next school year, and so on.
- The current headteacher was appointed to the school roughly two years ago.
- The school does not use any alternative provision.
- The DfE's public record of details about schools, 'Get information about schools', does not include the name of the proprietor. There have been no changes to the school's proprietor since the school opened.

Information about this inspection

We carried out this inspection under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008. The purpose of the inspection is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

The school meets the ISS. These are the requirements set out in the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

This was the first routine inspection the school received since the 2020/21 COVID-19 pandemic. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation.

- During this inspection, we did deep dives in art, reading, mathematics and PSHE. We talked with senior leaders, members of staff and pupils. We examined plans for the curriculum, including some of the schemes of work used at the school. We visited lessons and looked at samples of pupils' written work.
- We gathered evidence about pupils' behaviour and attitudes, their personal development, and the school's leadership and management throughout the inspection. We observed the arrival of pupils to school.
- We met with the headteacher and the assistant headteacher to consider the work of the school, held discussions with representatives of the proprietor, including the executive headteacher, the assistant director of education and the chair of the governing body. We talked with pupils during formal learning and at other times. We met with some parents, and with a representative of the local authority. Some meetings were conducted remotely.
- We examined the school's approach to safeguarding pupils. To do this, we used our discussions with leaders, other staff and pupils to find out about how well

staff keep pupils safe. We looked at the school's safeguarding policy, the record of safeguarding checks on staff and other documents about safeguarding.

- We checked the school's compliance with the ISS. As part of this, we toured the school's premises accompanied by leaders.
- We scrutinised documents, such as school policies, risk assessments and minutes of meetings of the school's governing body.
- We were not able to use Ofsted's questionnaires for pupils and staff in order to gather evidence about their views, because we received no responses. We considered 16 responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online survey for parents, including 15 written comments.

Inspection team

David Selby, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Mark Quinn

Her Majesty's Inspector

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