

Inspection of Marchbank Free School

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

Inspection dates: 15–16 June 2021

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

The quality of education

Requires improvement

Behaviour and attitudes

Good

Personal development

Good

Leadership and management

Good

Previous inspection grade

Inadequate

What is it like to attend this school?

Marchbank Free School is a warm, caring school community. At its heart is a belief in treating one another with kindness and respect.

Since the previous inspection, leaders have transformed the school. They want the best for every pupil. Staff share this vision. Leaders' ambition for their pupils is typified by the creation of the forest school, which the pupils love.

Every pupil who attends the school is treated as an individual. Lots of care is taken to make sure pupils are in the appropriate classes, getting the right support. Staff make sure that they know their pupils well, so that they understand how to help them the best. Leaders know that they have a little more work to do to fully rebuild the curriculum, such as maximising the help it gives with pupils' reading and mathematics. They are already getting on with this.

When pupils are feeling overpowered by their emotions, staff manage the situation well. They know what to do to help the pupil and to minimise the disruption to others.

The school is a safe place. Pupils told inspectors that they feel safe. Bullying is not tolerated. Pupils told us that if bullying happens, it gets sorted out.

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

Since taking charge, leaders have introduced a new curriculum. It is an ambitious curriculum and includes all national curriculum subjects, organised into topics. These include, for example, 'Land Ahoy!', (history), and 'Bottoms, burps and bile', (science). In each topic, subject plans set out what pupils should learn, and in what order. There is work still to do, so that all subjects have the same level of detail about the precise knowledge and skills to be taught. Leaders have also created a forest school to help pupils with their social skills, as well as linking with subjects across the curriculum.

In mathematics, leaders are using a temporary mathematics curriculum until a new curriculum is introduced in September 2021. This temporary curriculum is not as effective as it needs to be.

Leaders have made reading a priority. They have changed the culture of reading for the better. For instance, working with the school council, leaders have invested time, money and love into creating a reading room. Teachers use a phonics scheme to help the weakest readers. However, there is variation in the quality and consistent use of the scheme between staff. This means pupils' reading skills are not improved as much as they need to be.

Leaders make sure that pupils' needs are assessed when they join the school. Staff's planning takes account of the strategies in pupils' education, health and care (EHC) plans. Leaders track how well pupils are doing. Staff are enthusiastic in their teaching. Sometimes, though, their subject knowledge and confidence limits how much they enable pupils to learn more.

Systems for managing pupils' behaviour and supporting them when they are having a difficult time, are well established. So, when disruption occurs, it is handled quickly, calmly and effectively. Pupils are eager to learn.

Leaders have introduced a wider curriculum to support pupils in their personal development. Pupils learn about democracy, diversity, respect and tolerance. Through themed days, such as 'Earth Day', they learn about the world around them and their place in it.

Leaders have transformed the way that staff feel about the school. Staff can see the benefit of what has been asked of them. They feel well supported by school leaders and the trust. Leaders have worked hard, and continue to do so, to rebuild the trust of parents.

The multi-academy trust (MAT) has taken effective action to improve its monitoring of the school. It has strengthened the links between the trust and the governing body. The MAT secured the services of experienced senior leaders from a neighbouring local authority and another MAT to hold leaders to account.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders acted swiftly after the last inspection to sort out safeguarding weaknesses. They started from scratch and overhauled systems and policies. Leaders have made sure that staff are trained in safeguarding awareness. Leaders know their legal responsibilities for safeguarding. Staff know what to do to raise a concern about a pupil, or the conduct of other staff. Leaders keep appropriate records of safeguarding cases, the use of restraint and accidents. They make referrals to external agencies in a timely way, when required.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- The extent to which the school's chosen phonics system is applied consistently is variable. At times, pupils struggle to read words in their phonics books. Staff do not use a phonics-based approach effectively to help pupils. There are missed opportunities to reinforce sounds and grapheme-phoneme correspondences with a consistent approach. As a result, the teaching of phonics is not helping pupils as much as it could. Leaders should ensure a consistent approach to staff's correct articulation of sounds; in their teaching and modelling of blending and

segmenting; and in seizing opportunities to reinforce phonics-based reading skills when they present themselves.

- The current mathematics curriculum is not as effective as it needs to be. Teachers are focused on the completion of tasks. Opportunities are not being taken to emphasize the essential knowledge of mathematics, or for pupils to apply rules, concepts and formal written methods. Leaders should ensure that pupils are presented with such opportunities, including for the temporary curriculum.
- A substantial body of curriculum plans are very detailed in specifying what precise subject content and skills are to be taught. This is less well developed in some plans, such as geography, design and technology and music. As a result, at times, teachers lack confidence in delivering subject knowledge and in supporting pupils to acquire subject-specific ways of thinking and working. Leaders should continue to draw on the trust's capacity in their ongoing work to develop their subject plans.

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 school and 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	139691
Local authority	Darlington
Inspection number	10184606
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	42
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Helen Radcliffe
Headteacher	Caroline Green
Website	www.educationvillage.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	9-10 July 2019, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The school has undergone significant change since the previous inspection. An executive headteacher, head of school and assistant headteacher joined the school shortly after the last inspection. A new assistant headteacher has been appointed to take up post in September 2021.
- All of the pupils who attend the school have an EHC plan for behaviour, emotional and social difficulties.
- The school is part of the Education Village Academy Trust (EVAT).
- The school does not use any alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

We carried out this inspection under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. We deemed the inspection a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

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.

In accordance with section 13(4) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that the school no longer requires special measures.

- We met with the executive headteacher, the head of school, the leader for the quality of education and the assistant headteacher. We also met the chief executive officer of EVAT, a trustee of EVAT, and members of the governing body, including parent governors. We spoke with the school's external school improvement partner.
- As part of this inspection, we did deep dives in these subjects: English, mathematics, science and reading. This involved visiting lessons, talking to pupils, looking at pupils' work, and talking to teachers. We listened to pupils reading. We visited the forest school.
- To inspect safeguarding, we met with the senior leaders with responsibility for safeguarding, attendance and behaviour. We scrutinised the school's records of restraint, accident logs and other documents. We sampled records of how leaders identify safeguarding cases and help the pupils concerned. An inspector met with one of the trust's human resources team to check the school's recruitment processes. We spoke with a number of pupils and with staff. We asked them about their feelings of safety in school.
- We took into account 24 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire for parents, Parent View, and the eight free-text comments, and the 17 responses to Ofsted's staff survey.

Inspection team

Steve Shaw, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Phil Riozzi	Ofsted Inspector
Chris Smith	Her Majesty's Inspector

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