

Inspection of Polam Hall School

Grange Road, Darlington, County Durham DL1 5PA

Inspection dates: 5 and 6 October 2021

Overall effectiveness **Good**

The quality of education	Good
Behaviour and attitudes	Good
Personal development	Good
Leadership and management	Good
Early years provision	Good
Previous inspection grade	Requires improvement

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils describe coming to the school as being part of a community. Overall, pupils feel happy and safe. Children in the early years settle quickly into the routines of school. As they progress through school, they receive teaching to guide and nurture them. The school's philosophy of 'know thyself' permeates the school.

Leaders, staff, trustees and the local academy council share high expectations for every child. They have set up a curriculum which enables pupils to succeed academically. Leaders continue to take steps to improve pupils' reading knowledge. The school has a strong focus on the development of pupils' character and personal qualities.

Pupils behave well in lessons and at social times. Their conduct around school is exemplary. There is a calm, positive learning atmosphere around school. The school takes incidents of bullying seriously. Most pupils and parents believe that staff deal with bullying effectively. Leaders and staff have a determined approach to encouraging high levels of pupil attendance.

The school offers opportunities for an extensive range of clubs. Pupils are enthusiastic about these. Leaders check pupils' involvement in clubs to ensure that there is something of interest for all pupils. Pupils receive extensive guidance on next steps for careers and education.

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

Leaders have planned a well-sequenced curriculum. This starts at Reception and builds as pupils progress through the school. Pupils in Year 10 and 11 follow a broad range of GCSE subjects.

Teachers successfully tailor the planned curriculum to meet pupils' needs. They use a range of relevant resources and textbooks to support pupils' learning. Teachers make suitable adaptations to lessons. Reception children receive both direct adult teaching and opportunities to practise their learning. The school uses assessment effectively to check that pupils gain the required knowledge. Regular revisiting of learning helps pupils to cement their knowledge and understanding. This helps with their next stage of learning in the subject. Parents are positive about the school's remote learning offer.

Leaders, in this all-through school, have prioritised reading. They have improved the quality and range of reading materials for pupils. From Reception, children are regularly taught phonics. Teachers demonstrate secure knowledge of how to teach phonics. However, the teaching of early reading needs further development. Teaching assistants have not received the sufficient training to enhance their expertise. On occasion, staff do not match books to pupils' phonics knowledge carefully. Some younger pupils do not read regularly enough at home to practise

their reading. Leaders have identified that these aspects need to be addressed promptly. They have clear plans to improve this aspect of the curriculum. Primary-aged pupils read frequently. They can express views about books and authors. Teachers use quality texts to enrich pupils' vocabulary and improve their writing. In key stage 3, pupils read often. These pupils regularly complete online assessments to check their comprehension.

The school has a clear behaviour management approach. Pupils understand the approach and staff apply this consistently. Pupils display positive attitudes to learning. They listen to staff and engage well in lessons. Presentation in books shows that pupils take pride in their work. Movement around school is calm and orderly. Lunchtimes and breaktimes are friendly and sociable times. Most pupils and parents believe that staff deal with bullying appropriately. A small number of pupils and parents expressed concerns about bullying. Leaders are reviewing how to address these concerns. This includes considering how to refine current systems of recording bullying.

Improving pupils' attendance is a focus for the school. A range of strategies are in place to encourage and support high attendance. However, the attendance of some disadvantaged pupils is too low. These pupils are missing vital parts of their education.

The school's 'Concordia Crescimus' curriculum aims to support pupils' personal development. This is a strength of the school. It helps prepare pupils to contribute to society and develop citizenship qualities. The school meets its statutory obligations regarding relationships, sex and health education. Understanding about the world of work begins with primary-aged pupils. Secondary-aged pupils receive useful careers information, advice and guidance. The school meets the requirements of the Baker Clause.

The school's curriculum meets the needs of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). These pupils receive good support in lessons for their academic and social needs. Most parents of pupils with SEND believe that their child receives the support that they need. The leaders for SEND are improving the quality of support plans for pupils with SEND.

The headteacher, well supported by other school leaders and the trust, has brought much improvement to the school. The trustees and local academy council are passionate about improving pupils' outcomes. They fulfil their statutory roles and responsibilities effectively. Leaders take account of staff workload and well-being. Staff have belief in the leadership and morale is high. Staff training is well targeted to improve the quality of teaching. Leaders make good use of support from the trust, other schools and external providers. Early career teachers generally receive appropriate development. However, this term there has been slippage in receiving the required development time. Senior leaders have plans to address this.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

The school promptly identifies pupils who may need help. Leaders and staff work in a determined fashion with other agencies and families to secure support. Leaders have set up suitable procedures for the safe recruitment of staff and volunteers. Allegations of safeguarding concerns about staff follow due process. Leaders have taken account of national research about sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online sexual abuse. Staff receive regular training on safeguarding. They have recently received training on peer-on-peer abuse. Suitable systems are in place for recording safeguarding incidents. Leaders have sharpened procedures for recording actions taken following incidents of sexual harassment.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- The teaching of phonics and early reading needs further development. Teaching assistants' skills to support pupils with phonics and early reading are variable. Staff do not consistently match the reading books for some younger pupils to pupils' phonics knowledge. Some pupils do not practise reading regularly at home. This is reducing the impact of the school's efforts to ensure that all pupils are successful readers. Leaders should act promptly to address these shortcomings.
- Leaders have not fully aligned systems for recording incidents of bullying and the actions taken to address these. This makes it difficult for leaders to analyse patterns of bullying and assure themselves of resolution of the issue. Leaders should review how this information could be centralised.
- The attendance of disadvantaged pupils has remained below that of other pupils. This disjointed attendance affects their continuity of education. Leaders should continue with their determined approach to address this issue.

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 information from Ofsted Parent View 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	142174
Local authority	Darlington
Inspection number	10200704
Type of school	All-through
School category	Academy
Age range of pupils	4 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	745
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Patricia Pritchard
Principal	Kate Reid
Website	www.phs.woodard.co.uk
Dates of previous inspection	18 and 19 April 2018, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The age range of the school has changed since the last inspection. The school no longer has a sixth form provision.
- The school uses two registered alternative providers.
- The school meets the requirements of the Baker Clause, which requires schools to provide pupils with information about approved technical education, qualifications and apprenticeships.

Information about this inspection

The inspectors carried out this inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with school leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation.

- The inspectors met with the headteacher and the members of the senior leadership team.

- The lead inspector met online with two trustees and the chair of the local academy council. He also met with the trust's chief executive officer and director of school improvement.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: early reading, mathematics, history and languages. For each deep dive, inspectors met with subject leaders, looked at curriculum plans, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work. Inspectors also looked at curriculum plans alongside pupils' books and spoke to leaders about some other subjects.
- Safeguarding was inspected through discussions with a wide range of leaders, staff and pupils. The lead inspector scrutinised a range of safeguarding documentation alongside school leaders. Where the inspectors needed further information, they held follow-up meetings with leaders.
- Inspectors met with pupils, staff and leaders to discuss the school's provision to support pupils' personal development. Inspectors held some meetings with single-sex groups of secondary pupils.
- The lead inspector analysed the responses to the pupils', parents' and staff's surveys. He considered parental information emailed to Ofsted. Inspectors met with parents at the start of the day to consider their views.
- An inspector met with early career teachers and their mentors.

Inspection team

Michael Reeves, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Shelley Heseltine	Ofsted Inspector
Olie Flitcroft	Ofsted Inspector
Jean Watt	Her Majesty's Inspector

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