

Inspection of Stepping Stones School

Mortimer House, 17 Victoria Road, Tamworth, Staffordshire B79 7HS

Inspection dates:

30 November–2 December 2021

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

The quality of education

Requires improvement

Behaviour and attitudes

Good

Personal development

Good

Leadership and management

Requires improvement

Sixth-form provision

Requires improvement

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Good

Does the school meet the independent school standards?

Yes

What is it like to attend this school?

Building positive relationships between staff and pupils is the hallmark of this school. Staff consider it a privilege to work with the pupils. They greet pupils warmly at the start of each day. Pupils appreciate the warm welcome. Parents also value the positive relationships that exist between staff and pupils.

The school's main aim is to re-engage pupils with their learning. Leaders and staff work well together to build pupils' self-esteem, raise their confidence and improve their social skills. The homely feel of the school supports this.

The proprietor's vision for the school is that it is 'a place to rebuild confidence and to maximise learning'. Leaders and staff share this vision. However, there is more work to do to make sure that the quality of education improves. In some subjects, the curriculum needs to be developed and the teaching of early reading needs to improve.

There is a calm atmosphere around the school. School leaders have introduced 'AABLE' (attendance, attitude, behaviour, learning and effort) points to reward pupils for their work and behaviour. This encourages pupils to behave well.

Incidents of bullying are not common. Pupils have confidence in staff to resolve any issues straight away.

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

Leaders have high expectations for pupils to achieve their full potential. They have recently introduced GCSEs for some pupils in the core subjects, including English and mathematics. Teachers follow the GCSE syllabus and pupils' learning builds on what they have learned in the past. As a result, pupils are achieving well in these examination subjects. However, this is not the case for pupils who do not study GCSE courses. In these instances, pupils' learning is not well ordered and at times disjointed. Consequently, pupils do not achieve as well as they could in these curriculum areas.

Some pupils are at the early stages of reading. A phonics curriculum plan is in place. However, staff do not teach phonics consistently well. As a result, some pupils fall behind with their reading. This has a knock-on effect to their learning in other areas of the curriculum, such as spelling. Pupils' reading books are not matched well to their phonic ability. This hinders their ability to read with confidence and fluency. Currently, pupils do not display a love of reading.

All pupils have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). These are linked mainly, but not exclusively, to social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs. When pupils join the school, teachers check what pupils know, and identify any gaps in their learning. External agencies support this process when required. Staff work

hard to engage pupils in their learning and fill these gaps. However, because the curriculum is not well ordered in some subjects, new gaps in knowledge and skills appear.

In some subjects, teachers display good subject knowledge. They explain concepts in a clear, systematic way, using appropriate subject-specific vocabulary. In these instances, pupils make good progress. However, this is not always the case. Where teachers' subject knowledge is less secure, pupils do not achieve as well as they could.

There is a tangible sense of pastoral care and nurture across the school. Teachers and teaching assistants are visibly thrilled to see pupils arrive at the start of each day. All members of staff work together as a team to support pupils in the school. Staff say, 'The school feels like a family'. Staff know pupils very well. Leaders and staff support pupils' well-being effectively.

Pupils have careers education, information and guidance sessions as part of the personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) curriculum. For pupils in Year 9 and above, a careers adviser comes into school to provide bespoke support. Leaders and staff help pupils to discover their chosen career, so that pupils can explore suitable pathways.

Due to the very small number of sixth-form students, reporting on this provision is limited due to confidentiality. Time in the sixth form gives students more time to complete their education and secure qualifications. The quality of the curriculum in the sixth form mirrors the quality of the curriculum in the rest of the school.

Leaders and staff broaden pupils' knowledge and experiences to support their personal development. This helps pupils to prepare for life after school. Staff work well with pupils to make them realise how their behaviour, both positive and negative, impacts on those around them. Pupils have a good understanding of healthy lifestyles, including a developing understanding of mental health. Pupils talk articulately about how mental health problems present themselves. Pupils also have leadership opportunities in the school. For example, the headteacher recently worked with pupils to create a student handbook. It was during this process that pupils shared their wish to change the name of the school. Pupils are keen to talk about the different types of relationships and families that exist in their own lives and in the local community.

The headteacher, supported by the governors and the proprietor, has clear plans in place to develop the school further. This includes strengthening the leadership capacity of the school. However, these plans are in the very early stages of development and are yet to have an impact.

Staff value the training they receive. For example, they speak enthusiastically about how the recent autism training has helped them to understand pupils' needs and behaviours better. Teachers say that workloads are now more manageable. Staff add that leaders are supportive and considerate of their well-being.

Leaders ensure that school meets the requirements of schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010 as a suitable accessibility plan is in place.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Safeguarding is the school's top priority and everyone's responsibility. It is the driving force behind everything that leaders and staff do. The proprietor has made sure that all staff, including those responsible for the leadership of safeguarding, are well trained. As a result, everyone knows what to do if they have a concern about a pupil's welfare. Training includes updates from government guidance, but there is also a focus on specific areas, such as peer-on-peer abuse. All aspects of health and safety are managed effectively. There are sufficient staff trained in first aid. Pupils say they feel safe in school.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and proprietor)

- In some subjects, including English and mathematics, well sequenced curriculum plans are not in place. In these curriculum areas, what pupils learn does not build on what they have learned before. As a result, pupils do not achieve as well as they could. In these subjects, leaders need to design and implement curriculum plans that map out the knowledge and skills that pupils need to learn over time.
- Some subject leaders are new to their roles and some subject leadership roles are being covered on a temporary basis. Consequently, some subject leaders do not have a clear understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement in their curriculum areas. Senior leaders need to make sure that newly appointed and current subject leaders have the time, support and expertise to improve their curriculum areas.
- Some teachers do not have the necessary subject knowledge to meet the wide and varied learning needs of the pupils in the school. As a result, some teachers are not delivering parts of the curriculum well. This means that some pupils do not achieve as well as they could in these areas. Leaders need to provide teachers with relevant support and training to improve their subject knowledge.
- Some staff do not deliver the phonics curriculum consistently well for pupils at the early stages of reading. As a result, pupils fall behind with their reading and require extra help. Leaders need to provide all staff with the relevant support and training so they can deliver the phonics programme effectively.
- Many pupils do not display a love of reading. Pupils say they do not like reading and they are not keen to discuss books or authors. Leaders need to develop the reading curriculum and the wider curriculum, so that it encourages a love of reading.

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

School details

Unique reference number	135259
DfE registration number	860/6105
Local authority	Staffordshire
Inspection number	10205089
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	12 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	10
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	1
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	Young Foundations Limited
Chair	Niall Kelly
Headteacher	Rebecca Bhageerutty
Annual fees (day pupils)	£55,000 to £75,000
Telephone number	01827 337998
Website	No website
Email address	info@youngfoundations.com
Date of previous inspection	3–5 October 2017

Information about this school

- Stepping Stones School is a small school in Tamworth catering for up to 18 pupils. There is an additional 'learning hub' situated in the grounds of Valley House children's home, Nuneaton Road, Fillongley, Warwickshire CV7 8DL. The 'learning hub' has been used in the past to support pupils' transition into Stepping Stones School. At the time of the inspection, no pupils were being educated in the 'learning hub'.
- All pupils on roll have an education, health and care (EHC) plan. The school caters predominantly for pupils with SEMH needs.
- The school was registered by the Department for Education (DfE) in May 2007.
- The school undertook a material change inspection on 12 November 2018 to increase the number on roll from six to 18.
- The new headteacher has been in post since the start of the autumn term 2021.
- The school does not use any alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors 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 independent school standards. 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 COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with school leaders and have taken this into account in the evaluation.
- During the inspection, school leaders submitted a material change request to the DfE to extend the age range from 12 to 18, to 11 to 18. They also asked to change the name of the school to Mortimer House, which is the name of the school building. The outcome of this part of the inspection is that the school is likely to meet all of the relevant independent school standards if the material changes are granted.
- The lead inspector held regular meetings with the headteacher, the compliance officer and the school improvement partner, who is also a governor.
- Inspectors held meetings with leaders who are responsible for attendance, behaviour and careers education.
- The lead inspector met with the chair of the proprietor body and the chair of the governing board.

- As part of the inspection, inspectors focused on English, mathematics, science and PSHE education. They met with subject leaders and teachers to talk about the quality of education at the school.
- Inspectors made visits to lessons.
- Inspectors spoke with pupils about their learning and experiences at school. They looked at pupils' work in a range of different subjects to see how well the curriculum is applied.
- The lead inspector met with a group of teaching assistants to discuss their views about the school.
- The lead inspector toured the school premises to check their suitability. He also visited the 'learning hub' to check the suitability of the premises there.
- Safeguarding documents were checked, including the checks that leaders make on staff's suitability to work with children prior to employment. Inspectors checked that staff implement safeguarding policies and procedures effectively.
- The lead inspector considered the free-text responses received during the inspection. There was a limited response to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Ofsted Parent View, which meant it could not be accessed.
- The lead inspector considered the responses to Ofsted's staff survey.

Inspection team

Wayne Simner, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Sarah Ashley

Ofsted Inspector

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