

# Inspection of The Downley School

Faulkner Way, Downley, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire HP13 5AL

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Inspection dates: 22 and 23 March 2022

## **Overall effectiveness**

**Inadequate**

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The quality of education

**Inadequate**

Behaviour and attitudes

**Requires improvement**

Personal development

**Requires improvement**

Leadership and management

**Inadequate**

Early years provision

**Inadequate**

Previous inspection grade

Outstanding

This school was last inspected 15 years ago and judged 'Outstanding' under a previous inspection framework. This reflected the school's overall effectiveness under the inspection framework in use at the time.

From then until November 2020, the school was exempted by law from routine inspection, so there has been a longer gap than usual between inspections.

Judgements in this report are based on the current inspection framework and also reflect changes that may have happened at any point since the last inspection.

## **What is it like to attend this school?**

Most pupils enjoy coming to school here, although some are saddened by the very high turnover of staff. Pupils' observations that, 'We just need to know that the teacher will be here for the whole year,' and, 'The teacher left without saying goodbye to us. I hate that when that happens,' are sentiments shared by others, including parents.

Older pupils love the school's curriculum and are happy to debate the key features of their favourite subjects. Pupils also enjoy their time in the school's extensive grounds, especially in the Dell. They like the fact that the school has sheep, a single chicken, and is frequently visited by a fox or two. However, inspectors' visits to lessons in the outdoor environment showed that time is often wasted, and pupils are not always as engaged in their learning as they might be. This is because the expectations of some staff are not high enough.

Some pupils are worried about the behaviour of others and what they see as bullying. They also think that not all staff act when they should to solve problems. Despite this, relationships overall are positive, and staff are dedicated and work hard to provide a safe and caring environment for pupils.

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

The school has lost its way in the last few years. Pupils often demonstrate a real hunger and total delight in learning. However, relationships between leaders, parents and staff are strained and trust and respect are in short supply. Crucially, despite the school offering an appropriately designed and sequenced curriculum in subjects, such as computing and mathematics, its implementation is not good enough. This is especially for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and children in early years.

The underlying cause of these problems is weak leadership. Governors have not held leaders to account in recent years. There have been five different chairs of the governing body in the last two years, and three since January 2021. Despite their good intentions, governors have not been able to get to the heart of what they think is wrong at the school. One governor told the lead inspector that, 'It is scary to be a governor at Downley at the moment.' Another said that leaders were 'defensive' and would not acknowledge even the smallest weakness, reflecting that, 'The gate comes down and we can't get in' whenever difficult questions are asked.

The lack of trust has also impacted on teaching and support staff. Many have left recently. Others are about to leave. While some leave to develop their careers or for other personal reasons, it is clear that some do not. A significant proportion of staff who completed the staff survey have negative views about their work. Discussions with staff revealed a fear of 'speaking out of line'. Recent departures include early years leaders, special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs), family liaison

officers, curriculum leaders including English and personal, social and health education leads. Those left behind, including long-serving and dedicated teachers or support staff, are struggling to deliver the consistently good quality of education pupils deserve.

Provision for pupils with SEND is disjointed and inconsistent. This means that they often cannot access the intended learning in lessons and their progress through the curriculum is hindered. While some parents of pupils with SEND are happy with the support their children are getting, many are not. Parents feel increasingly frustrated because things do not seem to improve. Classroom visits showed support for pupils with SEND to be very variable with some staff not knowing about or understanding the specific needs for some pupils.

The school's programme to teach pupils to read is of poor quality because key staff are not expert enough to deliver it. They have not been trained well enough to teach phonics, nor are they using resources in a way that supports pupils to read fluently or quickly enough. Recent training that some staff received has not been useful or pitched at the right level. This is particularly the case for early years. Here, phonics lessons are chaotic and staff who are supporting pupils with SEND do not have the expertise to do much more than control behaviour. Other aspects of provision in the early years are similarly weak. Well-intentioned but inexperienced staff struggle to keep children on task or provide the opportunities for them to learn across all areas of learning.

Pupils enjoy a range of extra-curricular activities. However, their broader personal development is not supported well because of the constant turnover of staff. Pupils in some classes struggle to build trusting relationships with adults as a result. Additionally, aspects of the school's work to promote pupils' understanding of fundamental British values, such as the rule of law or individual liberty, are not developed or deepened as pupils move through the school. Furthermore, the personal, social and emotional development of children in the Reception Year is not supported well.

## **Safeguarding**

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Staff understand their responsibilities to keep children safe. Leaders act when there are concerns. Aspects such as ongoing safeguarding training and checks on staff and other adults at the school are in place and updated as required. Minor aspects identified as needing attention by the local authority at a recent safeguarding audit have been acted on. Systems for staff to report concerns are effective. The school's work to support families, including in partnership with other professionals, is having a positive impact on keeping pupils safe.

## What does the school need to do to improve?

### (Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- The school's provision for pupils with SEND is weak. The high turnover of teaching and support staff, including those who lead this important area of provision, does not help. Some parents are angry and frustrated. Some of their criticisms are justified. Some pupils' support plans are not updated in a timely manner, nor are they consistently well written or followed through in the classroom. Some of the provision outlined in pupils' education, health and care plans is not currently in place. The SEND policy is outdated and does not reflect current practice. Some staff do not understand individual pupils' needs and are not sufficiently trained in terms of universal inclusive practice, or specific areas of need, including social, emotional and mental health support. Leaders need to review all aspects of the school's provision for SEND urgently. This review should be led by suitably experienced and qualified professionals. Because weaknesses are so wide ranging, a focused plan needs to be put in place to improve provision, so that pupils with SEND get the help and support they need, and parents regain confidence in the school.
- Children in the early years do not benefit from high-quality provision. This includes those with SEND. Their learning and developmental needs are not being met. Staff are inexperienced and demoralised. They have not had appropriate training, including to help them teach children to read. The planned curriculum does not meet the needs of children. This means that many are not getting the best possible start to their time in school. Leaders should act quickly to strengthen leadership in the early years. Staff need appropriate training and ongoing support and guidance to improve their practice. An effective environment needs to be established so that children quickly gain the foundations of the broad range of knowledge and skills they need to become successful learners as they move through the school.
- The school's provision to support pupils develop their early reading skills is poor. Some staff do not have the knowledge or expertise to deliver the school's current phonics programme. Resources are not used properly. The books that pupils read are not matched well to what they learn in phonics lessons. Pupils with SEND are not supported well to learn to read. Interventions to help pupils in danger of falling behind are ineffective because staff are not expert enough to know what to do to help. Leaders' long-term plans to update the school's phonics programme and provide staff with the training and resources required should be acted on without any further delay.
- The poor behaviour of some pupils, including incidents of bullying, is not being addressed in a consistent way. Much of this is caused by the ever-changing workforce and the time it takes new staff to develop strong and trusting relationships with pupils. This is also having a negative impact on pupils' personal development, particularly in classes with the highest repeated turnover of staff. Leaders need to act to stem the high turnover of staff. They need to raise expectations of the way some pupils behave, support staff more effectively in

dealing with poor behaviour, and ensure that problems with bullying, either real or perceived, are dealt with swiftly, openly and effectively.

- Leaders and governors at the school have been out of step with each other for some time. The governing body does not fulfil its core functions well enough. Governors do not hold leaders to account or have strong oversight of the school's strategic direction. Some school leaders are not reflective or willing to acknowledge the growing problems at the school. Senior leaders have lost the confidence of a significant proportion of staff and parents, resulting in high-staff turnover and a multitude of parental complaints. Furthermore, a significant proportion of staff are dissatisfied with the way leaders support them with their workload or take their well-being into account. Leaders and those in positions of governance need to re-establish effective professional relationships. Partnerships and trust need to be rebuilt. Only then will leaders and governors be in a position to address the deep-rooted problems highlighted by this inspection successfully, allowing the school to move forward once more.
- Leaders and those responsible for governance may not appoint early career teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

## 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

<b>Unique reference number</b>	131908
<b>Local authority</b>	Buckinghamshire
<b>Inspection number</b>	10211817
<b>Type of school</b>	Primary
<b>School category</b>	Community
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	4 to 11
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	414
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	The governing body
<b>Chair of governing body</b>	Christopher Stanley
<b>Headteacher</b>	Fiona Taylor
<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.downley.bucks.sch.uk">www.downley.bucks.sch.uk</a>
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	9 October 2007

## Information about this school

- The school has seen a significant turnover in membership of the governing body in recent years.
- The school does not currently use alternative provision.

## Information about this inspection

The inspectors carried out this inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

In accordance with section 44(1) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires special measures because it is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the school are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school.

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

- Inspectors held a wide range of meetings with the headteacher, deputy headteacher, curriculum leaders, the SENCo and teaching and support staff. The lead inspector met with the chair of governors accompanied by one other governor. He also held separate telephone calls with two other governors and a representative of the local authority.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: reading, mathematics, science and computing. Deep dives included visiting lessons, looking at pupils' work, and talking to leaders, teachers and pupils. The lead inspector heard pupils read to a known adult.
- Inspectors checked a range of policies and documents, including the school's single central record. They also reviewed the school's website and other records regarding the welfare, health and safety of pupils and staff.
- Inspectors gathered evidence to explore the impact of pupils' behaviour, the school's wider curriculum offer and how leaders support staff with their workload.
- Pupils were talked to throughout the inspection to gain their views about the school. Three different meetings were held with representative groups of pupils. Inspectors also talked to staff individually or in small groups.
- Inspectors considered the views of parents submitted through the Ofsted Parent View survey. The views of pupils and staff were also considered through Ofsted's pupil and staff surveys.

## Inspection team

Clive Close, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Tracey Brunton

Ofsted Inspector

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Her Majesty's Inspector

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