

Inspection of a good school: The Walnuts School

Admiral Drive, Hazeley, Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire MK8 0PU

Inspection dates: 11 and 12 May 2022

Outcome

The Walnuts School continues to be a good school.

What is it like to attend this school?

This is a nurturing school that puts pupils' care at the forefront. Adults know how to support pupils' special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Pupils are looked after well. They say that they feel safe, and that they trust staff to care for them and enjoy coming to school.

Staff promote positive working relationships between pupils effectively. Any disagreements between pupils are quickly resolved and used as a learning opportunity. Pupils behave well and engage readily with learning activities. This is because they are provided with experiences that are right for them.

Leaders have high expectations of what pupils can achieve. They believe that SEND should not be a barrier to pupils achieving well. As a teacher said, 'We are pushing pupils towards academic success and not limiting them.' Consequently, pupils do well at this school.

Sixth-form students are prepared well for their next steps. They all have the opportunity to gain suitable qualifications. Leaders ensure that students learn about the workplace. There is an effective focus on developing their independent living skills.

The majority of parents and carers are highly complimentary about the school. One parent, typical of many, commented, 'The Walnuts School has changed my child's life for the better.'

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

Leadership has strengthened considerably since the previous inspection. Governors have a wide range of appropriate skills and they provide effective challenge and support to school leaders. Leaders at all levels are highly strategic and evaluative. Senior leaders provide clear direction to staff and have raised expectations successfully for the curriculum. They manage staff workload effectively.

Pupils' learning of mathematics is highly effective. This is because teaching makes sure that new learning builds precisely on previous learning. Staff have received helpful training and have sound mathematical subject knowledge. Teachers guide pupils through the steps in learning very well.

Pupils learn to read well. Leaders have developed an effective phonics programme. Children start to learn to read immediately a child joins the school in Reception or key stage 1. Those pupils who are able to, read books that are matched to their phonics ability. Teachers keep a close eye on pupils' progress and provide extra support if needed. Teachers read books to pupils regularly. If pupils are not ready to follow written text, then teachers simplify the story with the use of symbols.

Other subjects, such as science and art, also have ambitious curriculum content. However, teachers' implementation of the curriculum across all subjects and ages is not as consistent as it could be. This is because the small steps needed to make sure that pupils' learning always builds on existing learning are not yet precise enough. This is mainly due to leaders not yet having had time to develop teachers' detailed knowledge of all subjects.

Staff provide pupils with helpful feedback about their learning and constant reassurance if it is needed. Leaders check regularly that pupils are making sound progress towards their goals on their education, health and care plans. Staff members, including therapists, meet often to review pupils' progress and share expertise. They make sure that successful strategies are shared effectively and any problems are nipped in the bud.

Staff work out how to support pupils if they have behavioural difficulties associated with their needs. If a pupil loses concentration on a task or becomes distracted, staff take effective action to help them rebalance and get back on track. Staff report that pupils' behaviour has improved significantly over recent years. Any disturbance to learning is kept to a minimum.

Leaders make sure that the development of pupils' social and personal skills is a priority. Much emphasis is placed on how to help pupils to communicate and develop independent living skills. There are numerous examples of previously non-verbal pupils learning to speak and forming friendships. Pupils learn how to support others in the school. They also learn well about health issues, including age-appropriate sex and relationships education. The curriculum weaves in cultural issues well, such as preparing for the Queen's Platinum Jubilee.

In Reception and key stage 1, well-planned opportunities for role play develop pupils' understanding of the world around them. Pupils thoroughly enjoy dressing up and pretending to be working in a shop or using a café. Trips and visits also provide rich opportunities for pupils to learn social and personal skills, such as using money and travelling on public transport.

Older pupils learn about possible careers pathways. Students in the sixth form have opportunities for work-related placements so that they can learn about the world of work. Leaders have reinvigorated careers education and it is integrated into the curriculum. Pupils are prepared very well for their next steps after The Walnuts School.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

There is a strong safeguarding culture in the school because staff know pupils well and keep an eye out for their welfare. Staff are suitably trained and receive regular safeguarding updates. Pupils learn about keeping themselves safe in the modern world, including when online.

Staff know how to report concerns about pupils should any arise. Designated safeguarding leads follow up and record their actions carefully. Leaders are persistent in seeking help from external partners should pupils need it.

Recruitment procedures are thorough, and leaders and governors review these checks regularly.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- In some subjects, leaders have not ensured that staff are clear about the small, precise steps needed to ensure that pupils' learning builds on existing learning. As a result, teachers' implementation of the curriculum across all subjects is not as consistent as it could be. Leaders should continue to put their plans in place to provide subject-specific knowledge training for staff to enable them to steer pupils through the small steps needed to achieve the best they can in all subjects across the curriculum.

Background

When we have judged a school to be good, we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains good. This is called a section 8 inspection of a good or outstanding school, because it is carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. We do not give graded judgements on a section 8 inspection. However, if we find evidence that a school would now receive a higher or lower grade, then the next inspection will be a section 5 inspection. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the section 8 inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour or the quality of education, we will deem the section 8 inspection a section 5 inspection immediately.

This is the second section 8 inspection since we judged the school to be good in June 2012.

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	110584
Local authority	Milton Keynes
Inspection number	10203123
Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	4 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	185
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	31
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governing body	Amanda Farr
Headteacher	Lisa Munro Jonathan Budd (Executive Headteacher)
Website	www.walnutsschool.com
Date of previous inspection	6 July 2016, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- Since its previous inspection, the school has federated with Slated Row School to form The Aspire Federation.
- The school caters for pupils with autism spectrum disorder and a range of social and communication difficulties. Some pupils have moderate learning difficulties. All pupils have an education, health and care plan.
- The school uses no alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

- This was the first routine inspection the school had 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 met with the headteacher, senior leaders, staff and pupils. The lead inspector spoke with governors and a local authority representative.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in reading, mathematics, science, and art and design. For each deep dive, inspectors met with subject leaders to discuss the curriculum, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- Inspectors viewed the school's website and looked at a number of policies and documents. They also considered views of staff and pupils by looking at their responses to Ofsted's online surveys.
- The lead inspector spoke with a number of parents on the telephone and considered parents' responses to Ofsted Parent View. She also took into account an additional written communication from a parent sent to Ofsted.
- To inspect safeguarding, the lead inspector checked the single central record of recruitment checks and other safeguarding records. Inspectors also met with the designated safeguarding lead and spoke to staff and pupils.

Inspection team

Sue Child, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

Felix Rayner

Ofsted Inspector

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