

Inspection of Doucecroft School

Abbotts Lane, Eight Ash Green, Colchester, Essex CO6 3QL

Inspection dates: 21 to 23 June 2022

Overall effectiveness

Good

The quality of education

Good

Behaviour and attitudes

Good

Personal development

Good

Leadership and management

Good

Early years provision

Insufficient evidence

Sixth-form provision

Good

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Inadequate

Does the school meet the independent school standards?

Yes

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils enjoy being at Doucecroft School. Meeting pupils' needs and helping them to navigate well through life is at the heart of leaders' decision-making. Pupils appreciate the efforts staff make to give them opportunities and experiences they would not ordinarily have. For example, younger pupils talk enthusiastically about entering engineering competitions with other schools. Older pupils recently had the opportunity to give presentations to external organisations. At the time of the inspection, a group of pupils went by train to see a musical in London.

Staff teach pupils the skills they need to manage their own behaviour well. The school is a calm place where pupils feel safe. Bullying does not happen often and if it does, teachers deal quickly with any issues. Staff listen to pupils and their views, making changes suggested by the student ambassadors. Relationships between staff and pupils are warm and friendly.

Many parents are pleased with the provision at the school. They are of the view that their children are 'happy, healthy and settled'. All pupils secure their next steps in education, employment or training.

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

Leaders have made significant improvements in a short space of time. They have sharply focused on improving systems and processes. This is so that staff are well supported to make a difference to pupils' education.

Leaders ensure that pupils, including those of sixth-form age, follow a broad and ambitious curriculum. All pupils have education, health and care plan (EHC plan). These plans, as well as staff's baseline checks, are the starting points for planning pupils' bespoke curriculums. Pupils learn a wide range of subjects and undertake life skills programmes which help prepare them well for adulthood.

Curriculum planning is logical and develops pupils' knowledge in small steps over time. The focus is on making sure that pupils understand how their learning applies to the wider world. Teachers make valuable connections across curriculum areas. For example, pupils learn mathematics at the same time as animal care when they calculate buying pet food. There are many opportunities for pupils to revisit their learning to embed knowledge. As a result, pupils are developing their confidence as learners.

Leaders have thought carefully about how pupils who have the most complex needs develop their ability to communicate and pay attention. Therapists and learning assistants work alongside teachers effectively so that pupils are ready to learn. This is also the case for pupils who need to develop their phonics knowledge. Leaders ensure that staff have ongoing phonics training and resources that match pupils' reading abilities. Pupils enjoy the daily reading sessions, talking about the books

they like and those they do not like so much. Pupils experience success with learning to read.

Due to extensive training, staff are more confident in managing behaviour. Staff teach pupils how to express how they are feeling, recognising when they are becoming anxious and need time to be quiet. As a result, incidents of physically restraining pupils have substantially reduced. Adults are also more comfortable with undertaking more interesting experiences, taking pupils out on day trips and exposing them more often to a variety of public settings. Leaders are developing opportunities for sixth-form students to engage in local community activities. This includes travelling on public transport independently.

Staff promote pupils' personal development well. The personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education programme is well-planned and implemented. Staff tailor the programme to pupils' needs. Pupils learn how to handle emergency situations and how to keep themselves safe online. They learn essential knowledge about relationships and their own place in the world. Pupils receive helpful and impartial careers advice and guidance. They also visit colleges and workplaces that they have an interest in. This helps pupils to choose next steps that are suitable for them.

While leaders have strengthened the school's provision, not all pupils are making full use of their placements. Some pupils are not attending as often as they should. Through the checks they make, leaders know this is the case. They have actions in place to address this. However, leaders do not have a sufficiently clear overview of trends of attendance over time nor the impact of their strategies for improvement.

Since the last inspection, there has been some staff turnover and change. The proprietor and the governors have kept a close eye on the workload and well-being of staff. They challenge and support leaders appropriately on how they are delivering the school's improvement plan. They also ensure that they receive external views on the school's provision to help inform their understanding of the school's effectiveness. This includes systematically checking that all the independent school standards are met. Governors make sure that the school complies with its statutory obligations, such as following government guidance for relationships and sex education. The school complies with schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders take their responsibilities seriously. They make sure that staff hear pupils' concerns whether this is through verbal or non-verbal means. Staff receive extensive training, so they recognise cues and changes in pupils' behaviour. They know pupils well and promptly report concerns as they arise.

Leaders have developed strong relationships with external agencies, which helps them to protect pupils. Record-keeping is detailed and well organised. Risk assessments are reviewed regularly and updated.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and proprietor)

- Leaders have effective systems in place to follow up on pupils' absence on a day-to-day basis. However, leaders do not make sufficient use of information to look at overall trends and patterns with attendance to inform the actions they take. Some pupils' absence is too high. Leaders need to make better use of their information on attendance so they can have greater impact on reducing persistent absenteeism.
- Some improvements to systems and processes are new, such as procedures for reviewing pupils' targets in their EHC plans. This, coupled with some changes with staffing, means that some improvements are fragile. Leaders need to ensure a stable staff team embed systems and procedures so the good provision is sustained.

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	115426
DfE registration number	881/6032
Local authority	Essex
Inspection number	10214796
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	3 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	62
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	26
Number of part-time pupils	4
Proprietor	Autism Anglia
Chair	Andrew Beevers
Headteacher	Louise Parkinson
Annual fees (day pupils)	£57,905 to £85,180
Telephone number	01206 771234
Website	doucecroft.org.uk
Email address	doucecroft@autism-anglia.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	12 to 14 February 2019

Information about this school

- Doucecroft School is an independent special school registered to provide education for pupils with autism spectrum disorder. All pupils have an EHC plan.
- All school placements are funded by local authorities and admission is through local authority referral. Currently, pupils who attend the school are funded by Essex and Suffolk local authorities.
- The school does not use alternative provision.
- Although the school is registered to have children from the age of three years old, it has not had anyone on the Nursery or Reception provision for a number of years. Hence, insufficient evidence and amnesty granted for the judgment of early years.
- The last standard inspection took place in February 2019. At this time, the school was judged as inadequate. There were unmet standards and the school was served with a notice by the Department for Education (DfE), which required an action plan to be drawn up. This action plan was assessed and found to be acceptable with modifications in June 2019. A progress monitoring inspection took place in November 2019 where the school did not meet all of the independent school standards that were checked at that time.

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 the school leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors met with the proprietor, the chair of governors and several members of the governing body, the headteacher, senior leaders and staff. The lead inspector held telephone conversations with representatives from Essex and Suffolk local authorities.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: English, mathematics, computing and PSHE education. 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.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, inspectors met with the designated safeguarding leads and the safeguarding governor. They spoke to a range of staff

and pupils. Inspectors scrutinised safeguarding records, including those related to risk assessments, health and safety checks and the safer recruitment of staff.

- Inspectors spoke to a few parents by telephone. There were 22 responses to Ofsted Parent View. They considered the views of staff through conversations and scrutiny of the 68 responses to the Ofsted online staff survey. Inspectors spoke to pupils in class and around the school, held meetings with groups of pupils and considered 17 responses to the Ofsted online pupil survey.
- Inspectors toured the school premises, checked the school's website, scrutinised the admissions and attendance registers and a range of other documentation to check that the school complies with the independent school standards.

Inspection team

Liz Smith, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

John Lucas

Her Majesty's Inspector

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