

Inspection of Blue Skies School

126 Maidstone Road, Chatham, Kent ME4 6DQ

Inspection dates: 28 to 30 June 2022

Overall effectiveness

Inadequate

The quality of education

Good

Behaviour and attitudes

Good

Personal development

Good

Leadership and management

Inadequate

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Requires improvement

Does the school meet the independent school standards?

No

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils feel at home at Blue Skies School. For some pupils this is the first time they feel calm in a school environment. As a pupil said, 'Staff understand us and know what to do and when to do it if we are stressed.'

Pupils usually behave well. They enjoy each other's company and talk about their interests. Pupils say that if there are disagreements or bullying that staff help pupils to work out what has gone wrong and sort it out. The school's 'wish list' system works well in rewarding pupils' engagement in learning and acts of kindness.

Leaders have reviewed the curriculum and have increased their expectations of what pupils can achieve. Frequent off-site visits contribute greatly to pupils' experience. The curriculum is rich, and pupils enjoy learning and do well.

Despite many strengths, proprietors have not ensured that leaders have sufficient knowledge and skills to ensure that all the independent school standards are met consistently. Leaders do not always follow their own policies to do with exclusion, partly because they are not as clear as they could be. As a result, some pupils may have been at risk when not in school.

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

Proprietors have not ensured that leaders know the independent school standards well enough. Nor do they check the impact of leaders' actions sufficiently well. There are a number of policies that have fallen short of the standards. This means that proprietors are currently not following statutory requirements for independent schools.

Leaders do not call staff to account fully for their work. Leaders' plans for improvement are not well understood by staff. Staff say leaders' communication is not clear enough. Consequently, staff morale is low.

The proprietors did not ensure that they consulted with parents before putting the relationships and sex education (RSE) policy in place. Despite this oversight, leaders make sure that the curriculum for RSE meets pupils' needs.

The complaints policy does not meet standards as it does not state the timescales for managing complaints. Nor does it state that the complainant can be accompanied during the formal part of the complaints process.

Proprietors have not ensured that there is clear enough information in policies about excluding pupils from school. Consequently, leaders' use of exclusion to manage pupils' behaviour is problematic. This means that standards to do with suitability and implementation of the behaviour policy are not met.

Despite shortcomings in meeting the independent school standards, leaders have successfully improved the quality of education that pupils receive. Leaders provided a comprehensive online curriculum offer during the recent pandemic for those students that were not able to come to school.

Leaders have planned a rich curriculum that matches the scope and ambition of the national curriculum. It is adapted well to meet pupils' individual special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). It provides memorable learning experiences through plentiful trips and visits into the community. Leaders carefully plan links for the development of transferable skills such as using mathematics to support shopping trips.

Teaching ensures that pupils learn step by step. Teaching staff know how to motivate pupils with interesting activities. Teaching staff ask questions and probe pupils' understanding, using communication strategies should a pupil be non-verbal. Teachers carefully build new knowledge and skills on previous learning. Over time, pupils know more and can do more.

Teachers are adept at ensuring that pupils are ready to learn. They help pupils to settle down after their journey to school. There is a purposeful atmosphere in the school as pupils engage readily with learning activities. Pupils are polite and courteous.

The vast majority of pupils join the school with reading abilities appropriate to their age. Pupils enjoy reading and have access to a variety of books and reading material. Books promote interest, with texts chosen to initiate discussion about subjects such as war or identity. In this way pupils talk and learn about issues in modern Britain. Teaching staff keep a close eye on pupils' reading and writing skills and provide well-focused support should pupils fall behind.

Leaders have ensured that pupils develop personal and social skills well. Individual pupil well-being and pastoral support plans help staff to cater appropriately for pupils' individual needs. Regular extra-curricular trips are mapped to the taught curriculum, and this deepens pupils' personal development. Visits to places such as local historical sites, community facilities and local colleges all provide pupils with experiences which alleviate anxiety in preparation for their future lives.

Pupils in key stage 4 and the sixth form have weekly taster sessions at a local college to help them try out a variety of vocational experiences, including animal care, building trade skills, horticulture and others. Pupils and sixth-form students are helped to consider their next steps through a stable careers programme. In the past, pupils have gone on to local colleges to do a variety of courses and apprenticeships. Pupils are helped to develop independent living skills. Pupils and parents are particularly appreciative of a successful cooking programme run at the school.

The vast majority of parents are positive about the education their children receive. They say their children are doing well at the school. One parent, voicing the sentiment of most, said, 'We love the school, I cannot praise them enough.'

Proprietors ensure that they follow equality legislation, including ensuring that there is a suitable accessibility plan in place.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are not effective.

Proprietors do not have robust oversight to ensure that policies linked to excluding pupils are appropriate. Leaders do not follow these policies consistently. Consequently, there is a potential risk to pupils' safety and welfare. An up-to-date safeguarding policy that follows government requirements was not published on the website at the start of the inspection.

Staff know pupils well and look after them. Pupils learn how to keep themselves safe, including when online. Any concerns are reported promptly to leaders. If necessary, leaders liaise with police and social services, making suitable records.

Leaders make appropriate checks on staff and visitors, recording their checks carefully.

What does the school need to do to improve?

Information for the school and proprietor

- Currently, proprietors have not put a reliable system in place to ensure standards are met consistently. Proprietors should ensure that training is put in place to help leaders understand the independent school standards. There should also be a robust system of checks to guarantee that standards are met at all times.
- Currently, roles and responsibilities of leaders and staff are unclear. Staff are not held to account for their work well enough. As a result, staff feel they do not get sufficient praise for their successes. Nor do they consider that they receive focused professional development. Proprietors should ensure that all staff job descriptions and responsibilities are up to date. A coherent performance management strategy should be put in place. This is so that staff feel there is clarity around their responsibilities and they can prioritise their work.
- There are currently different versions of the school improvement plan in place. This adds to staff feeling that communication about initiatives is haphazard. Ambiguity in plans means that staff do not know who is doing what, when it happens and what success will look like. In addition, the current action plan without success criteria makes it difficult for proprietors to use it to call leaders to account for the impact of their actions. Proprietors and leaders should ensure that the action plan addresses all areas needing improvement. It should show clearly how staff and leaders will be called to account for the impact of their actions. In this way, improved communication about plans will help build staff morale.
- The current behaviour policy is not precise enough about the use of exclusion. This has meant that there is ambiguity and no clear guidelines for leaders to use in the case of serious misbehaviour that falls outside of pupils' education, health

and care plans. Proprietors should make clear how and when sanctions should be used, including exclusion. They should also explicitly state how proprietors will monitor the success of the policy in managing pupils' behaviour.

- A number of up-to-date policies either are not published or do not meet the requirements of the independent school standards, such as the complaints policy and the RSE policy. These should be redrafted and a system of effective policy checks put in place to ensure that standards are met consistently.

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	135576
DfE registration number	887/6130
Local authority	Medway
Inspection number	10232313
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent School
Age range of pupils	11 to 25
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	21
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	Blue Skies Limited (Jonathan and Lauren Higgins)
Headteacher	Graham Richards
Annual fees (day pupils)	£33,046
Telephone number	01634 357770
Website	www.blueskiesschool.co.uk
Email address	info@blueskiesschool.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	29–31 October 2019

Information about this school

- Blue Skies School is an independent day special school. It caters for pupils aged 11 to 25 who have autism spectrum disorder or social and communication difficulties.
- Pupils are placed in the school by Medway and Kent local authorities. All pupils have an education, health and care plan. They have often experienced a disrupted education prior to joining the school.
- The school is registered for 38 pupils. There are 21 pupils on roll, including four in the sixth form. There are currently no pupils in the 19 to 25 age group.
- The previous standard inspection took place in October 2019.
- The school uses Mid-Kent College to provide alternative provision for all key stage 4 and 5 students once a week.
- The headteacher joined the school in January 2020.

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 has failed to meet the independent school standards. These are the requirements of 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 leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors met with the headteacher, other leaders, staff and pupils. The lead inspector spoke with the proprietors.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: english, mathematics, science and lifeskills. For each deep dive, inspectors met with subject leaders to discuss the curriculum, carried out lesson visits where appropriate, spoke to teachers, spoke to pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- Inspectors viewed the website and looked at a number of policies and documents. They also considered views of staff by looking at their responses to Ofsted's online surveys.
- Inspectors spoke with a number of parents and considered parents' responses to Ofsted's online survey, Ofsted Parent View.
- 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 leader and spoke to staff and pupils.

- The lead inspector spoke with a representative from the local authority.

Inspection team

Sue Child, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

Alan Johnson

Ofsted Inspector

Annex. Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school failed to meet the following independent school standards

Part 1. Quality of education provided

- 2A(1) The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor–
 - 2A(1)(f) consults parents of registered pupils at the school before making or revising a statement under sub-paragraph (e).

Part 3. Welfare, health and safety of pupils

- 7 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that–
 - 7(a) arrangements are made to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils at the school; and
 - 7(b) such arrangements have regard to any guidance issued by the Secretary of State.
- 9 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor promotes good behaviour amongst pupils by ensuring that–
 - 9(b) the policy is implemented effectively.

Part 6. Provision of information

- 32(1) The standard about the provision of information by the school is met if the proprietor ensures that–
 - 32(1)(c) particulars of the arrangements for meeting the standard contained in paragraph 7 are published on the school's internet website or, where no such website exists, are provided to parents on request.

Part 7. Manner in which complaints are handled

- 33 The standard about the manner in which complaints are handled is met if the proprietor ensures that a complaints procedure is drawn up and effectively implemented which deals with the handling of complaints from parents of pupils and which–
 - 33(c) sets out clear timescales for the management of a complaint
 - 33(h) allows for a parent to attend and be accompanied at a panel hearing if they wish.

Part 8. Quality of leadership in and management of schools

- 34(1) The standard about the quality of leadership and management is met if the proprietor ensures that persons with leadership and management responsibilities at the school–
 - 34(1)(a) demonstrate good skills and knowledge appropriate to their role so that the independent school standards are met consistently
 - 34(1)(b) fulfil their responsibilities effectively so that the independent school standards are met consistently; and

- 34(1)(c) actively promote the well-being of pupils.

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