

Inspection of an outstanding school: The St Christopher School

Mountdale Gardens, Leigh-on-Sea, Essex SS9 4AW

Inspection dates:

13 and 14 September 2022

Outcome

There has been no change to this school's overall judgement of outstanding as a result of this ungraded (section 8) inspection. However, the evidence gathered suggests that the inspection grade might not be as high if a graded (section 5) inspection were carried out now. The next inspection will therefore be a graded inspection.

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils arrive excited and keen at the beginning of the school day. They and their parents value the smiles and warm welcome given by school staff when they arrive. When pupils feel anxious, staff are readily available to provide reassurance, and help make the start of the day a positive one.

Pupils look forward to their lessons and enjoy learning new things. They are enthusiastic about the things they are learning. Pupils' communication and early reading skills develop significantly over time. However, in some areas of their learning, pupils are not as well supported to develop their knowledge and understanding.

Pupils enjoy the range of facilities, resources, and opportunities provided for them. Many access trips, clubs and work-related learning opportunities. A few parents would like a wider range of after-school clubs, as available pre-pandemic. Pupils, including the small group of students who access the school's sixth-form provision, receive high-quality, one-to-one support that prepares them to become more independent as they move into adulthood.

Pupils feel safe because they build positive relationships with staff. Pupils learn a range of strategies to support them to manage their feelings and behaviours and access their learning. Bullying is rare and staff deal with it promptly and sensitively when it occurs.

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

Over the last year, leaders and staff have worked to further develop the breadth and scope of the curriculum that is available to pupils. In some subjects, such as physical education (PE) and personal, social, and health education (PSHE), leaders provide high-quality guidance and training for staff to deliver the intended curriculum. In these

subjects, pupils learn well. Staff have a precise understanding about what pupils know and can do.

A few subjects are less well developed. In these subjects, teachers are not clear on the precise content or concepts that pupils need to learn. Leaders' monitoring in these subjects is less well developed. Leaders do not know enough about how well pupils are learning the intended curriculum.

Staff support pupils' early communication needs very well. The speech and language team provides high-quality specialist expertise on a day-to-day basis. Staff are well trained in using a range of different communication aids. Staff know pupils' specific needs. They skilfully interweave opportunities to practise new learning throughout the school day. Staff routinely review pupils' evolving speech, language and communication needs to ensure that they get the right help at the right time.

Pupils of all ages and abilities enjoy rhymes, stories and reading. Starting in Reception, staff deliver the school's chosen phonics programme effectively. Books and resources that pupils access closely match the sounds they are learning. Pupils access daily phonics sessions, one-to-one reading with adults, and wider reading opportunities. Many pupils go on to read fluently and independently. As pupils get older, they have many opportunities to read, including in the school's sixth form.

The youngest children in Reception and new pupils to the school settle quickly. Most pupils are kind to each other, and value the 'family' community. Over time, many pupils learn strategies to manage their emotions and behaviour. Pupils who exhibit some of the most complex behaviour issues begin to make friends, engage in clubs and trips, achieve accreditation and qualifications, succeed on work experience, and secure part-time jobs around their studies.

The provision for pupils' well-being is exceptional. Over time, led by the chief executive officer (CEO), leaders have worked tenaciously to expand the facilities and curriculum on offer to pupils. Leaders use these areas in creative ways to offer pupils opportunities to develop independence and confidence. For example, adapting the school caravans so that pupils can practise being on residential trips.

Leaders' diligence in supporting pupils' well-being is also evident in the development of the school's sixth-form annex. Leaders have invested significantly in a curriculum offer that supports a small number of students with extremely specific needs. This well-thought-through provision, like other aspects of the school, makes meaningful differences to the life chances of students.

Pupils, parents, staff, and leaders feel they are part of a community that supports and helps each other. Parents are overwhelmingly positive. Almost all staff are positive about working at the school. They value the support they receive from leaders and feel that leaders are considerate of their workload.

The new headteacher and the CEO have a clear understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement in provision. A number of leaders are new to post this year. They are

working on how to improve the precision of what they know about aspects of the school's work. This includes leaders' monitoring of lower-level behaviours that do not require significant intervention, and staff's delivery of the wider curriculum.

Trustees and governors lack clarity about their roles and responsibilities. Governance of the school relies too much on the work of the CEO. Too often, trustees and governors do not question leaders on the information provided to them. While there is a strong focus on financial management and care for pupils, in other areas, trustees and governors lack precise knowledge to hold the CEO and leaders to account.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders work tenaciously to provide support for the most vulnerable pupils. Staff are well trained and refer all concerns about pupils to leaders. Leaders piece together this information to ensure that pupils get access to the right services.

Until recently, safeguarding records had not been collected centrally. Leaders have moved to a system that centralises all information but are still in the process of transferring records from the old to the new system.

Pupils are taught about how to keep themselves safe. Staff are adept at supporting pupils who struggle to understand some of this learning, so that it is accessible to them. Leaders work hard to ensure that pupils have regular opportunities to give their feedback on how safe and secure they feel.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- There is a lack of clarity between trustees and governors about roles and responsibilities. They do not know enough about aspects of the school's work such as behaviour, attendance, and curriculum. They rely too much on the information provided by leaders and the CEO, without question or query. Trustees should clarify the roles and responsibilities for the trust and governors. They should ensure that they have precise systems for monitoring, reviewing, and challenging all aspects of leaders' work.
- Some areas of the curriculum are not precisely planned, delivered, and monitored. Where this occurs, teachers make decisions about the content that is taught. Pupils who should be learning the same content and concepts are not doing so. Leaders do not know how well pupils are faring in these areas. Leaders should ensure that the curriculum clearly lays out the knowledge and concepts that pupils need to learn in these areas. Leaders should ensure they check that pupils are learning the curriculum well.

Background

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

This is the second ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be outstanding in March 2014.

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.

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

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| Unique reference number | 138044 |
| Local authority | Southend-on-Sea |
| Inspection number | 10240435 |
| Type of school | Special |
| School category | Academy special converter |
| Age range of pupils | 3 to 19 |
| Gender of pupils | Mixed |
| Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision | Mixed |
| Number of pupils on the school roll | 243 |
| Of which, number on roll in the sixth form | 10 |
| Appropriate authority | Board of trustees |
| Chair of trust | Mr. Barry Levitt |
| Headteacher | Mr. Dan Woodman |
| Website | www.thestchristopherschool.co.uk |
| Date of previous inspection | 8 June 2017, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 |

Information about this school

- The St Christopher School is part of the SEN Trust Southend.
- The headteacher joined the school on 1 September 2022. There is a new senior leadership team, most of whom were already working at the school but are now in promoted positions. The CEO has stepped back from her role as executive headteacher this year. She now remains solely as CEO.
- All pupils have an education, health, and care plan.
- Pupils have a range of needs, but most notably autism spectrum disorder, speech, language, and communication needs, moderate learning difficulties and some associated social, emotional and mental health needs.
- Leaders offer a significant outreach support programme to other specialist and mainstream schools, supporting pupils' development, early reading and communication.

- At the time of the inspection, there were no children accessing the school's Nursery classes.

Information about this inspection

- This is the first routine inspection the school has received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in the evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors conducted deep dives in early reading and communication, PSHE, PE and physical development, and history. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with the subject leaders, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to adults teaching and/or supporting pupils, and where possible reviewed pupils' work and spoke to pupils about their learning. Inspectors also observed pupils reading to a familiar adult. The inspector also considered aspects of other subjects on the school's curriculum.
- Inspectors considered the views of 34 parents and carers expressed through Ofsted's online survey of parents, Ofsted Parent View. This includes the comments received via a free-text facility. The inspectors also reviewed responses to Ofsted's survey for staff. There were no responses to Ofsted's pupil survey. Inspectors spoke to pupils on site. Inspectors also reviewed the school's own surveys of pupils and parents.
- Inspectors held discussions with the CEO, the headteacher and other senior leaders. They spoke to two of the school's speech, language, and communication specialist team. Inspectors also spoke to a local authority school improvement commissioner and the local authority designated officer (LADO) for Southend.
- The lead inspector met with a number of trustees and members of the local governing body.
- Inspectors considered a range of documentation provided by school leaders, including minutes of trustees and governors' meetings, and documentation related to safeguarding.

Inspection team

Kim Pigram, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

Katherine Douglas

His Majesty's Inspector

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