

Inspection of ISP Polar Restart Centre

ISP Centre, Regent Street, Whitstable, Kent CT5 1JD

Inspection dates: 29 November to 1 December 2022

Overall effectiveness	Good
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The quality of education	Good
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Behaviour and attitudes	Good
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Personal development	Good
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Leadership and management	Good
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Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Not previously inspected
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Does the school meet the independent school standards?	Yes
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What is it like to attend this school?

ISP Polar Restart Centre opened this year to provide an education to pupils who have been out of education and who have struggled with school in the past. Often, pupils were struggling before the pandemic and then found that once schools reopened, they were unable to reintegrate. ISP Polar Restart provides a small and nurturing environment, where pupils are carefully supported to return to education.

Pupils learn together in a large classroom, where each pupil has their own 'pod'. Pupils are encouraged to personalise their pods, and staff help them to build their own unique workstation that addresses and supports pupils' individual needs. Pupils can also choose to work alongside others at a large central table in the classroom. Behaviour in the centre is very calm, and pupils feel safe and secure.

When pupils start, they immediately begin the school's 'Learning to Learn' programme. Through this programme, they reflect on their previous experiences of school and work out what they might have found difficult in the past. They also learn about the skills and understanding that they will need to be successful at school this time around, and in their futures. For example, pupils learn about confidence and resilience, and why these are important qualities to develop.

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

ISP Polar Restart Centre opened to pupils on 12 September 2022. The school had initially been conceived to provide pupils who were out of education with an intensive, six-week 'Learning to Learn' course. The intention was for them to transition back into another school after the six weeks. However, leaders quickly recognised, from the referrals that they were receiving, that some pupils would need a longer-term placement.

Leaders have rapidly adapted the school's curriculum offer to ensure that alongside the 'Learning to Learn' course, pupils also receive an education in English, mathematics, personal, social and health education and physical education. There are clear and well-sequenced curriculums in place for these subjects. All pupils are currently taught by the school's lead teacher, who carefully adapts the learning for each individual pupil.

Once pupils have 'graduated' from the initial stages of the 'Learning to Learn' programmes, the plan is for them to transition to a broad and balanced curriculum, plans for which are already in place. As most pupils on roll have joined the provision in the last six weeks, none have yet got to this stage. Leaders recognise that for most pupils, there will be aspects of the 'Learning to Learn' programme that pupils will need to continue to work on over time to become confident, resilient and self-motivated learners. They are continuing to review and plan what the curriculum will look like for pupils in the longer term.

Leaders have also rightly recognised that while the 'Learning to Learn' programme is the right thing for pupils to be studying, there are aspects of the curriculum that still need some work. For example, when pupils learn about how to speak in front of others, it is not clear how those who lack confidence will learn to improve, or what pupils are working towards. Leaders are now in the process of reviewing and refining some aspects of the programme.

Pupils at an early stage of learning to read regularly read with an adult. Leaders have also selected the texts for the wider English curriculum. They were careful to ensure that they engage pupils and expose them to a wide range of genres, including poetry. Text choices reflect the high ambition that leaders have for pupils. Pupils also regularly visit the local library. However, staff are not assessing the gaps in pupils' knowledge of the alphabetic code quickly enough and because of this, books are not matched closely enough to the sounds pupils know. This inadvertently encourages pupils who cannot read fluently to guess, rather than sound out, unfamiliar words. Leaders recognise that this needs to be addressed.

Leaders provide all staff with a wide range of professional development and have ensured, through targeted training, that staff have the expertise they need to provide what is set out in pupils' education, health and care plans (EHC plan), and to understand pupils' needs and presenting behaviours. As a result of this careful work, pupils' needs are very well understood and managed in the setting. Pupils are learning to regulate their own behaviour. There have been no incidents of physical restraint since the school opened. Leaders know that the next step is to closely align the school's professional development programme with the intended curriculum to ensure that all staff are confident and knowledgeable about each subject they teach.

The school is led capably by the headteacher. Expertise from within the ISP group has greatly supported the school to establish its systems and curriculum offer. However, because of the number of different leaders supporting the school, reporting lines between the lead teacher and headteacher are not as clear as they might be. This sometimes leads to miscommunication or confusion.

Executive leaders within the ISP group, and those responsible for governance, have a very clear understanding of their roles. They are knowledgeable and committed. Together with school leaders, they have a clear and ambitious vision for pupils of ISP Polar Restart Centre. Decisions are taken with the very best interests of pupils in mind. Leaders have ensured that the independent school standards are met and that the school complies with schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders and staff recognise that the pupils of ISP Polar Restart are particularly vulnerable. There are information gathering and sharing processes in place to ensure that staff understand what is already known about the risks that face each pupil when they join the school.

Leaders have ensured that all staff are trained to identify when a new risk might be emerging. Staff know how to record their concerns. Leaders have not yet needed to make a referral to external safeguarding partners.

Safer recruitment procedures are well understood and followed. Leaders clarified their process for reporting and recording any concerns about staff and leaders during the inspection.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and proprietor)

- Leaders have not ensured that pupils at an early stage of learning to read get the right support quickly enough. The books they read are not matched closely enough to the letters and sounds that they know. This leads to some developing unhelpful reading habits, such as guessing or skimming past words they struggle to read. Leaders need to ensure that once pupils are settled, phonics assessments are carried out for non-fluent readers so that they can then begin at the right point of the school's phonics curriculum. Alongside this, leaders should ensure that these pupils get regular practice reading decodable books. Only once pupils are reading fluently and confidently, should they transition to the school's comprehension programme.
- The 'Learning to Learn' curriculum has been organised into four pathways and several different themes, including confidence, resilience and communication. However, within each pathway, it is not always clear what the intended learning is and how pupils will get there. Pupils sometimes move on to the next theme without having developed their competence and understanding in the previous topic fully enough. Leaders need to review and refine the 'Learning to Learn' programme, considering the school's change in context from a six-week programme to a long-term placement for most pupils.
- At present, professional development for staff is not closely enough aligned with the school's intended curriculum. This means that staff do not always have the subject knowledge that they need to explain learning consistently and clearly. Leaders need to ensure that over time, they strategically build staff's subject knowledge across the subjects that they teach.
- Several leaders from within the ISP group are supporting the school. The role of the headteacher and the role of the lead teacher are very clear. However, between them, there is some lack of clarity about exactly who is responsible for what. Leaders need to ensure that roles and responsibilities are clear at all levels.

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.

School details

Unique reference number	148557
DfE registration number	886/6162
Local authority	Kent
Inspection number	10232327
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	7 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	4
Proprietor	Integrated Services Programme
Chair	Jo August
Headteacher	Carole Cox
Annual fees (day pupils)	£47,000
Telephone number	01795 523 900
Website	https://ispschools.org.uk/polar-re-start-centre/
Email address	Carole.Cox@ispschools.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this school

- The school opened to pupils on 12 September 2022.
- All pupils on roll have an EHC plan. Most pupils have been out of education for some time, often since the start of the pandemic. They have a range of complex and differing needs, but all have a social, emotional or mental health need. This frequently sits alongside autism spectrum disorder. Many pupils have had a negative experience of education, prior to joining the school, and arrive with high levels of anxiety about education. ISP Polar Restart Centre aims to provide pupils with a new start in a different type of educational environment.
- The headteacher is also the headteacher of another school within the ISP school group.
- The school is not using any external alternative provision.
- The school is registered to take pupils aged seven to 16. However, at present, most referrals relate to pupils in Years 8 and 9.

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. The inspector discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school and has taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.

- The inspector met with the headteacher and the director of education from the ISP group. The inspector met with the chair of the proprietor body and the chair of the governing board.
- The inspector carried out deep dives in these subjects: English, mathematics and 'Learning to Learn'. For each deep dive, the inspector met with subject leaders, looked at curriculum plans, visited lessons, spoke to the lead teacher, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work. The inspector also spoke to leaders about the quality of education provided in other subjects.
- The inspector carried out other activities to check that the school meets the independent school standards. These included a check of the school premises and wider work to comply with health and safety laws (including fire safety). The inspector considered the school's approach to risk management and also checked the relevant policies and the school website.

- The inspector judged the effectiveness of safeguarding by meeting with leaders, discussing records of concerns and subsequent actions, and speaking with pupils and staff about this aspect of the school's work. The inspector confirmed that the right checks are being made to ensure that all staff, supply staff and members of the proprietor body are suitable for the posts they occupy.
- The inspector considered three free-text responses from Ofsted Parent View and two responses to the staff survey. The inspector also telephoned parents and carers to seek their views about the school.

Inspection team

Alice Roberts, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

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