

Inspection of a good school: Ash Trees Academy

Bowes Road, Billingham TS23 2BU

Inspection dates:

13 and 14 December 2022

Outcome

Ash Trees Academy continues to be a good school.

What is it like to attend this school?

Ash Trees Academy is a special school which caters for pupils with communication and interaction difficulties, sensory and physical needs or cognitive impairment. Leaders and staff have high expectations for all pupils. Strong and caring relationships underpin all learning activities. Leaders make sure that the outcomes in pupils' education, health and care (EHC) plans are integrated carefully in all curriculum planning. Pupils learn within one of three learning pathways: informal, semi-formal and formal. Teachers have an expert understanding of how to adapt learning to meet the individual needs of all pupils.

Staff manage behaviour well. Leaders have established consistent behaviour expectations. These are grounded in positive interactions between all staff and pupils. Staff help pupils to recognise and manage their emotions. When pupils struggle to regulate their behaviours, staff provide them with the support and guidance they need to feel safe. Every pupil has a bespoke pastoral plan. These provide staff with the information they need to meet pupils' individual behaviour needs.

Leaders prioritise the development of pupils' communication skills. Staff make effective use of objects, symbols and Makaton to enable all pupils to have a voice. Staff know the pupils well. They quickly identify even the smallest communication attempt and respond positively. Pupils working in the formal learning pathway confidently communicate their views. They feel safe and happy in school.

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

Leaders have developed a carefully sequenced programme for the teaching of early reading. Most pupils are working at a pre-phonics level. Leaders have designed a curriculum that develops pupils' awareness and interaction with sounds in their environment. Adults help pupils to respond to and identify sounds. In addition, with the support of the trust, leaders have introduced a structured phonics programme across the school. All staff have benefited from high-quality training to enable them to deliver this programme effectively. Pupils are engaged in these sessions and make good progress.

They read books that are matched well to the sounds that they know. However, there is a gap in the provision for pupils who are ready to move on from the pre-phonics programme but are not ready to start the more structured programme. This limits the progress that these pupils make.

There is a well-established curriculum for teaching mathematics. This begins from the start of Reception and is tailored to pupils' learning needs. Leaders have identified the essential knowledge that pupils should understand and apply. Broader mathematical concepts are broken down into smaller steps of learning. Teachers use these effectively to personalise the curriculum for each pupil. Lessons provide regular opportunities for pupils to repeat and overlearn concepts. Teachers use a range of sensory and practical activities to help engage pupils in lessons. Leaders ensure that teachers use assessment information well to identify any gaps in pupils' knowledge.

Leaders have integrated the teaching of personal, social and health education (PSHE) within all aspects of the school day. Leaders and teachers share the same ambition to prepare all pupils for adulthood. Teachers involve parents and carers in the design of pupils' personal learning goals. These provide the focus for individualised PSHE sessions, which link closely to pupils' EHC plan targets. However, there are less opportunities for pupils to learn and remember the specific knowledge that will prepare them for the next stage in their education. For example, the importance of healthy relationships, fundamental British values and a knowledge of other religions and cultures. In addition, until very recently, pupils have had limited opportunities to take part in events and activities that would foster interests in areas, such as the arts, drama and sport.

The headteacher and senior leaders have developed a positive staff team. They care about the well-being of all staff. Leaders are taking steps to reduce unnecessary workload, such as burdensome assessment systems. Staff feel supported and are proud to work in the school. Most parents are positive about the support the school provides for their child. The chief executive officer (CEO) of the trust considers parents' views on school developments well within local advisory board meetings. Trustees and the CEO hold leaders to account effectively. They share leaders' high ambition for every pupil in the school.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

The designated safeguarding lead (DSL) ensures that the safety of all pupils is a constant priority. All staff receive regular safeguarding training and updates. Staff are vigilant and raise concerns promptly. The DSL works closely with families and external professionals to help keep pupils safe. The DSL conducts regular home visits to help support parents with behaviours and routines in the home. Leaders check that all staff who work in school are safe to do so. The nominated trustee for safeguarding monitors all safeguarding procedures thoroughly.

The focus on developing pupils' communication skills contributes to pupils' safety. Staff notice small changes in pupils' mood or appearance. They listen carefully to what pupils

are telling them. Pupils following the formal learning pathway learn how to keep themselves safe online.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- The curriculum for early reading does not provide sufficient opportunities to prepare pupils for more structured phonics learning. As a result, some pupils spend too long on the pre-phonics curriculum when they are ready for greater challenge. This limits the progress that these pupils make. Leaders should ensure that they identify the additional steps in learning necessary to support pupils transition between the two programmes.
- Leaders have not identified explicit opportunities for teachers to introduce and revisit the most important knowledge that pupils need to learn in PSHE. Pupils have a limited understanding of areas, such as the fundamental British values, different family structures, cultures and religions. Curriculum leaders should ensure that these explicit teaching opportunities are planned for alongside the personalised PSHE curriculum.
- Leaders have only recently begun to reinstate the range of activities and visits that were in place prior to the pandemic. Pupils have limited opportunities to foster interests outside of the taught curriculum. Leaders should identify further opportunities to enrich the curriculum and ensure that pupils are supported to develop their interests and talents.

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 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 first ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be good in September 2017.

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

Unique reference number	141345
Local authority	Stockton-on-Tees
Inspection number	10242167
Type of school	Special
School category	Academy special sponsor-led
Age range of pupils	3 to 11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	171
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Lynn Watson
Headteacher	Graeme Musson
Website	www.ascenttrust.org/ash-trees
Date of previous inspection	26 and 27 September 2017, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- Ash Trees Academy is part of the Ascent Academies Trust, which comprises four special schools in the North East of England.
- The school has two sites which are a short distance from each other. The Rievaulx site caters for children in the early years and a small number of key stage 1 pupils. The Bowes site caters for the remainder of the key stage 1 pupils and all key stage 2 pupils.
- The school admits pupils from the Stockton-on-Tees area and a small number of pupils from neighbouring counties.
- All pupils have an EHC plan. Most pupils have communication and interaction difficulties, cognitive impairment or sensory and physical needs.
- Most pupils access local authority transport to and from school.
- The school does not make use of any alternative providers.

Information about this inspection

- 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, the deputy headteacher (pastoral) and the deputy headteacher (teaching & learning). Inspectors met with trustees, the CEO and a representative of the local authority.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: reading, mathematics and PSHE. For each deep dive, an inspector 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.
- Inspectors met with the special educational needs coordinator and the EHC plan coordinator. Inspectors evaluated a sample of EHC plans, personal learning goals and examples of pupil and parent contributions to the EHC plan reviews.
- To judge the effectiveness of safeguarding, inspectors scrutinised the record of recruitment checks and met with the DSL to discuss case studies of specific concerns raised by staff and any subsequent actions and support.
- Inspectors observed pupils' behaviour and relationships in lessons and at break and lunchtime. Inspectors discussed pupils' individual pastoral plans with leaders.
- Inspectors considered the responses to Ofsted's survey, Parent View, including free-text responses. Inspectors also considered the responses to Ofsted's survey for school staff.
- Inspectors reviewed several key documents, including minutes of the meetings of the local advisory board and board of trustees.

Inspection team

Alex Thorp, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Angela Spencer-Brooke

Ofsted Inspector

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at <http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/>.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates:
<http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

© Crown copyright 2022