

Inspection of The Downs Primary School and Nursery

The Hides, Harlow, Essex CM20 3RB

Inspection dates: 10 and 11 January 2023

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

The quality of education

Requires improvement

Behaviour and attitudes

Good

Personal development

Good

Leadership and management

Requires improvement

Early years provision

Requires improvement

Previous inspection grade

Not previously inspected under section 5
of the Education Act 2005

What is it like to attend this school?

This school is a happy place for pupils. Pupils delight in undertaking the new and established roles and responsibilities that develop their leadership skills. The pupil leadership team canvass pupils' opinions, helping to shape things like the lunchtime menu. The house captains oversee events, such as designing greetings cards for the school community. These opportunities allow pupils from different year groups to work and socialise together. Doing so helps older pupils to mentor younger ones. These positive interactions are typical of pupils' everyday experiences.

Pupils are safe because staff spring into action, listening attentively to pupils' concerns. Working together, they come up with sensible next steps to solve problems. This includes with bullying. Pupils know staff will investigate allegations of bullying carefully, putting in place support for those involved. This keeps bullying to an absolute minimum.

Pupils respond to the high expectations of how they should behave. They are fond of the staff in school. While they enjoy lessons because their teachers and teaching assistants are enthusiastic and kind, pupils do not learn as much as they should. This is because there is too much variability in how well they are taught.

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

Recent appointments galvanised school leadership. Leaders, with support from the trust, have successfully raised staff morale. Leaders have resounding support from staff, parents and pupils. This stands leaders in good stead to effect the necessary improvements. However, not all of leaders' changes are having the impact that they intend.

Leaders are revising the curriculum. Curriculum thinking now sets out what pupils will learn from the Nursery to Year 6. However, how leaders introduce and then monitor this does not ensure that all staff understand what is expected. It means some teachers give pupils confusing instructions or organise activities that are not best placed to help pupils embed the knowledge and skills leaders want pupils to learn. Some teachers are too slow to pick this up. Consequently, some gaps in pupils' knowledge persist.

The teaching of early reading varies because some staff have not been sufficiently trained. Currently, guidance for staff is piecemeal, relying on discussions between staff. So, not all staff know the best ways to help pupils learn to read. For example, they may have their backs to pupils while saying sounds, meaning pupils do not benefit from seeing how the mouth moves to form sounds to help pupils learn how to do this. Staff are also not quick to spot and support those pupils who find reading hard, whether it be within lessons or through the catch-up support staff arrange. It means some pupils are further behind the pace of the programme than they should be.

Recently appointed leaders are improving their systems for identifying and supporting pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Leaders understand how to devise support finely tuned to pupils' needs. Now, more effective plans are being produced. However, leaders have not checked that staff are using these plans effectively. Consequently, the day-to-day experience for pupils with SEND from the early years to Year 6 varies.

Leaders acted swiftly to better pupils' behaviour. The new systems, including different zones for activities at lunchtime, encourage pupils to behave sensibly and with consideration for others. Staff in the early years start to build positive relationships with children that continue throughout the school. For some time now, systems for attendance have been working well. Staff who oversee attendance expect all pupils to be in school. They work quickly and closely with families to ensure this happens.

There is a suitable programme in place that promotes pupils' personal development. Leaders provide an external counselling service. Pupils like how they can access the counsellors if they want to talk about something that is playing on their mind. Leaders have introduced a new scheme of work to strengthen personal, social and health education (PSHE). Even before this, pupils had already learned to be respectful towards others. For example, pupils describe different family structures positively.

Through extra-curricular activities, pupils realise their talents and interests. Pupils can compete in cross-school sporting events, including futsal and swimming galas. There is a growing range of after-school clubs, including cookery, dance and origami, to broaden pupils' experiences.

Trustees and local governors are suitably skilled. They arrange for external specialists to check the impact of leaders' actions. They use this and their own checks to build an accurate picture of the school's provision. However, some of the improvements they have begun to bring about have taken longer than they should have.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Trustees and local governors oversee safeguarding audits. These assure them that systems, including for checks on staff, are fit for purpose. Appropriate training ensures that all staff stay vigilant to the local risks pupils and families face. Staff raise and record concerns promptly, knowing how to escalate these, were it needed. Leaders tenaciously address any concerns. They consult with external agencies fast. Leaders sensibly question advice given, ensuring that pupils get the right support.

Pupils are taught age-appropriate messages relevant to their community about keeping themselves safe. These come from staff in school and from local agencies, such as the police.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- The school's curriculum is at an early stage of implementation in some subjects. Leaders have not addressed the inconsistencies in teaching and so pupils do not learn and remember the curriculum as well as they should. Leaders need to ensure that their monitoring of the curriculum accurately identifies areas of weakness and informs staff training to rectify these.
- Assessment does not identify gaps in pupils' learning in a timely way. Therefore, some pupils do not receive the support they need to catch up with their learning quickly enough. Leaders should train teachers in how to identify pupils' gaps in learning to inform the future teaching and additional support that pupils receive.
- Some staff do not possess the expertise needed to teach early reading well. As a result, some pupils do not learn to read as quickly as they should. Leaders should ensure that all staff are trained to teach and support pupils in early reading, particularly those pupils who require additional support to catch up.
- Provision and support for pupils with SEND is not as good as it needs to be. Some pupils' support is not well matched to their needs where plans have yet to be updated, while other pupils' support has been updated on plans but is not in place in the way leaders intend. Leaders should ensure that staff understand their systems for identifying and supporting pupils with SEND. This includes the expectation that specified support is in place and monitored closely to ensure that pupils are receiving the support they require.

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	146157
Local authority	Essex
Inspection number	10255050
Type of school	Primary
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	3 to 11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	404
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Neil Lawson
Headteacher	Rob Calderwood
Website	www.downsschool.com
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this school

- The Downs Primary School and Nursery converted to become an academy school in September 2018. The school joined The Passmores Co-operative Learning Community, a multi-academy trust. When its predecessor school, The Downs Primary School and Nursery, was last inspected by Ofsted in January 2016, it was judged to be good overall.
- There is before-school childcare for pupils attending the school. It is run by school staff and managed by school leaders.
- Currently, school leaders do not make use of alternative provision for any pupil.
- At the time of the inspection, the headteacher had been in post for one term.

Information about this inspection

The inspectors carried out this graded inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

- 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 held meetings with leaders, including the chief executive officer, executive headteacher, headteacher, deputy headteacher, assistant headteachers, early years lead, special educational needs coordinator, Passmores Co-operative Learning Community strategic lead for special educational needs, two trustees, six local governors and a school improvement adviser engaged by trust leaders.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: early reading, mathematics, science, geography and religious education. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with leaders, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to staff, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work. The lead inspector also listened to a sample of pupils read to a familiar adult.
- Inspectors also reviewed curriculum documentation for three other subjects: history, physical education and PSHE.
- To inspect safeguarding, the lead inspector met with the designated safeguarding lead (DSL) and a deputy DSL to review records. The lead inspector met with the human resources manager to scrutinise the single central record of recruitment and vetting checks. To further evaluate safeguarding, inspectors also spoke to trustees, local governors, staff, pupils and parents, as well as reviewing surveys.
- Inspectors reviewed a range of other school documentation and policies, including minutes of trust board and local governors' meetings and the school development plan.
- To gather pupils' views, inspectors spent time observing and speaking to pupils. Inspectors also took account of the 63 responses to Ofsted's pupil survey.
- To gather parents' views, inspectors reviewed the 45 responses and 20 free-text responses submitted to the online survey for parents, Ofsted Parent View. Inspectors also spoke to some parents.
- To gather staff's views, inspectors spoke to many staff and reviewed the 42 responses to Ofsted's staff survey.

Inspection team

Daniel Short, lead inspector	His Majesty's Inspector
Mike Wade	Ofsted Inspector
Brenda Watson	Ofsted Inspector

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