

Inspection of St. John's School (Seaford)

Firle Road, Seaford, East Sussex BN25 2HU

Inspection dates: 10 and 11 January 2023

Overall effectiveness

Inadequate

The quality of education

Inadequate

Behaviour and attitudes

Requires improvement

Personal development

Requires improvement

Leadership and management

Inadequate

Previous inspection grade

Good

What is it like to attend this school?

All pupils at St. John's have a diagnosis of autism, and a range of other complex needs. Staff work hard to build positive relationships with pupils, and to engage them in school life. There are, however, very high levels of staff absence, and this impacts negatively upon pupils' experience of school, particularly for primary aged pupils.

Pupils are generally well supported. Each pupil has an individual behaviour plan that helps the adults working with them to support them in the right way. However, pupils are sometimes unsettled by the all too regular staffing shortages and disruptions. Staff told inspectors that the most serious behaviour incidents happen when pupils are with a less familiar adult.

Pupils told inspectors that bullying and unkindness do happen, but most were clear about who they would report to. They felt confident that adults would address their concerns. Older pupils were confident in talking about how staff had helped them to understand why discriminatory language was never acceptable.

Parents have very differing views of the school. Some feel their children's needs are very well understood, and that their children are getting opportunities they otherwise would not. Other parents feel that their children are being let down by the absence of clear routines, inconsistent support and by a poor quality of education.

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

Over time, pupils have been 'kept occupied' within the school day but have not received a high-quality education that prepares them well for the next stage of their lives. Leaders have not taken any impactful steps to improve the education that pupils receive.

There is no coherent curriculum in place for any subject, other than phonics. Furthermore, not enough staff have adequate expertise to teach reading effectively. Consequently, pupils do not learn to read as well as they should. While senior leaders recognise that the quality of education pupils receive needs to improve, neither school leaders, nor those responsible for governance, understand the extent of the weaknesses. For example, leaders were not clear if pupils in key stage 2 were regularly being taught mathematics.

Leaders have not ensured that pupils' education, health and care plans (EHC plans) are well understood by staff or used effectively to plan the curriculum. For example, senior leaders were unaware of what pupils' communication and interaction targets had been last term, or how these had been supported through the planned curriculum. No targets had been set for the current term. Planned strategies to support pupils with their learning, such as visual timetables, and planning boards,

are not used effectively by classroom staff. The therapy team ensure that pupils receive the therapeutic provision set out within their EHC plans.

Some individual specialist teachers ensure that pupils have a positive experience of learning in some subjects. Pupils also benefit from the school's outdoor learning programme, which has been developed by a specialist teacher. Many pupils have learned to ride bikes through this programme and gained confidence in a wide range of outdoor pursuits, including hiking and motor boating. This work is having a positive impact on pupils' lives.

More widely, however, pupils are not being adequately prepared for the next stage of their education, employment or training. Leaders have weak oversight of how programmes of study in the sixth form contribute to pupils' readiness for the next stage. Next steps are not coherently planned or understood. The school's careers programme is being developed, but at present, pupils do not get the chance to explore a wide range of appropriate future pathways.

Leaders have worked to improve behaviour over the past year. The school's specialist behaviour team has been successful in reducing the number of incidents of poor behaviour and suspensions. Despite this, not all staff feel well supported by leaders in managing behaviour. Leaders' strategies to improve pupils' attendance have not been effective and pupils' attendance remains too low. Where this is because pupils are on part-time timetables, leaders are working to build up these pupils' hours.

Governors and leaders have an inaccurate understanding of the important areas of the school that need to improve. Consequently, their plans for improvement lack coherence and clarity. Governors have not held leaders to account effectively. Furthermore, leaders do not have a clear picture of the lived experience of school staff. High staff absence and turnover puts a great deal of pressure on staff who are at work. Staff describe being frequently hurt by pupils who are unable to regulate their emotions. Leaders are not engaging with staff well enough or supporting them to manage the pressures they face.

Leaders rely too much on external support to help them to improve the school. Over time, leaders have not focused on strengthening crucial aspects of the school, including the curriculum, staff well-being and attendance effectively enough.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

In the past, there have been weaknesses in the school's safeguarding practice. Over the past year, leaders have worked hard to improve safeguarding. Staff are well trained to spot any signs that a pupil might be at risk. They know how to bring their concerns to the attention of the safeguarding team. Staff have very high levels of confidence in the safeguarding team and say that when they raise a concern, they know that it will be immediately addressed. Safeguarding leaders share concerns

with external safeguarding partners and refer cases appropriately. They are confident to escalate their concerns if they do not feel external partners are responding appropriately.

Senior leaders recognise that in the past, safer recruitment was not as strong as it needed to be. Leaders have carefully reviewed this area of their work and learned important lessons. Safer recruitment procedures have been adapted in light of this and are now stronger. Leaders and staff clearly understand how to manage allegations about adults appropriately.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Leaders have not ensured that there is a clear and coherent curriculum in place for any subject other than for phonics. As a result, pupils frequently experience a disconnected series of lessons that do not build their knowledge, skills or understanding. The absence of an intended curriculum means that lessons often contribute weakly to pupils' learning. Leaders need to construct a curriculum that is ambitious for all pupils, and which gives them the knowledge, cultural capital and life skills they need to succeed in life.
- A number of staff do not feel well supported by leaders in their role. This contributes to a high level of staff absence and turnover. Day to day, this has a significant impact on the well-being of staff who are at work. It hampers leaders' ability to make much needed improvements, and also has a detrimental impact on pupils. Younger pupils in particular have experienced ongoing changes to teaching staff since September. Leaders need to address the underlying concerns that staff have and work to improve staff attendance and retention to stabilise the school.
- Leaders and those responsible for governance do not have a clear and accurate picture of the quality of education that pupils receive. Consequently, leaders have been ineffective in addressing the school's weaknesses. This is exacerbated by the lack of a shared and coherent vision for providing high-quality education to all pupils, and by an overdependence on external support. School leaders, leaders within the wider organisation, and those responsible for governance must ensure that they have an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses and that their improvement planning indicates clearly how and when improvements will be achieved.
- Too many pupils are persistently absent. This means that those pupils who do not attend regularly miss too many lessons and get behind in their learning. Leaders' work to address pupils' poor attendance has not been strategic or effective over time. Leaders need to employ strategies that ensure that pupils attend school regularly.

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	114677
Local authority	East Sussex
Inspection number	10256246
Type of school	Special
School category	Non-maintained special
Age range of pupils	7 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	28
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Simon Smith
Headteacher	Anthony Carlo
Website	www.st-johns.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	25 January 2017, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The school is part of St. John's School and College, a charity for young people with learning disabilities.
- All pupils on roll at the school have a diagnosis of autism, and other needs. They often have complex social, emotional and mental health needs and communication needs.
- The headteacher took up post at the school in February 2022.
- There are two assistant headteachers. Both are new to their current roles, but not to the school.
- The school is using one unregistered alternative provider.

Information about this inspection

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

In accordance with section 44(1) of the Education Act 2005, His Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires special measures because it is

failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the school are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school.

- 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 and the assistant headteachers.
- Inspectors met with the chief executive officer of St. John's School and College.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: reading, mathematics, communication and interaction and personal, social and health education. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with subject leaders, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at any existing samples of pupils' work.
- Inspectors also spoke to leaders about curriculum development in a range of other subjects.
- To inspect safeguarding, inspectors checked the single central record and spoke to school leaders, staff and pupils. Inspectors considered the safeguarding education that pupils receive. Throughout the inspection, leaders considered and checked the culture of safeguarding within the school.
- Inspectors reviewed a range of documentation, including school improvement plans and minutes from recent meetings of the board of trustees and from school governor meetings.
- Inspectors talked to pupils about their learning, what behaviour is like at school and whether they felt safe at school.
- Inspectors reviewed responses to the staff survey and responses to the parent survey, including the associated free-text comments.

Inspection team

Alice Roberts, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Frances Nation

Ofsted Inspector

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