

Inspection of Alchemy School

72 Station Road, Teynham, Kent ME9 9SN

Inspection dates: 21 to 23 February 2023

Overall effectiveness **Good**

The quality of education **Good**

Behaviour and attitudes **Good**

Personal development **Good**

Leadership and management **Good**

Sixth-form provision **Insufficient evidence**

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection Good

Does the school meet the independent school standards? **Yes**

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils agree that this is a good school and are not afraid to tell visitors why they think so. Most pupils are very happy here. This is particularly the case with those who have settled after being out of education for a long time. Pupils see the school as a safe place. They readily admit that relationships can be strained sometimes but feel that bullying is not an issue.

Pupils appreciate the support they get from staff. Inspectors witnessed strong, respectful interactions throughout the inspection. Pupils say that staff understand them and give them time when they need it. Classroom visits showed this to be true, although staff are also skilled and unwavering when persuading pupils what is in everyone's best interests.

One unique aspect of the school is its outreach programme. This is multi-faceted and caters for pupils with complex social and emotional needs. These are often linked to mental health or other circumstances that impact negatively on their engagement with education. Leaders are relentless in their advocacy of pupils who attend the programme. Parents are positive about the impact it has on their children. Pupils themselves provide powerful testament to the difference it has made to their lives.

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

Leaders have created a school ethos that is highly aspirational for all pupils, no matter what their backgrounds. Pupils follow personalised pathways that are designed to address their individual needs. Many have not attended school for long periods of time prior to coming here. Some follow a curriculum that is delivered through the school's successful outreach programme.

The curriculum is based broadly on the national curriculum at key stage 3. Older pupils, many of whom join the school during key stage 4, follow bespoke programmes of study. These are designed to fill gaps in knowledge quickly so that pupils gain meaningful qualifications in preparation for their next steps in education. Although the school has a small sixth form, students use this facility to consolidate their GCSE or functional skills qualifications prior to moving on.

Teaching and support staff are successful in delivering the school's core English and mathematics programmes. Pupils enjoy these subjects because staff tailor their lessons well. This results in classrooms that are generally purposeful places where pupils know what is expected of them. Just occasionally, some staff are less confident when delivering other curriculum subjects such as science. This means that pupils do not always make the progress they might. However, in some subjects, including physical education and sport leadership, pupils benefit from staff with specialist knowledge and respond enthusiastically to the challenges that are set for them.

Despite the school's success at reintegrating pupils back into education, the curriculum, while acceptable, does not have the breadth leaders would like. The delicate balance between pupils gaining the qualifications they need to obtain college places and providing a wider range of subjects needs to be refined. While mathematics and English are rightly given a high priority, leaders know that the wider curriculum, including the vocational offer, needs to be developed further.

The school's pastoral programme is a strength. Relationships between staff and pupils are strong, but they often take time to become established. Staff acknowledge that, sometimes, pupils need to go backwards before moving forward again. This includes in the crucial area of building pupils' confidence and self-belief. Additionally, despite the best efforts of staff, some pupils still do not attend as much as they should.

Promoting pupils' well-being and emotional security has a high priority. Their personal development goes hand in hand with their academic progress. Pupils are encouraged to understand the differing aspects and complexities of life in modern Britain in a way that is relevant to their own lives. They learn about equalities, diversity and the importance of having respect for others on a day-to-day basis. Much of this work is delivered through the school's personal, social and health education curriculum. This incorporates the school's relationships and sex education programme. Mostly, this work is very tailored to individual need. Often, it relates closely to pupils' own personal circumstances, based on local contextual information. This means that pupils show increasingly good attitudes to school over time. Because of this, many achieve well enough to make successful next steps to college or employment-based training after leaving.

Pupils who attend the school benefit from appropriate careers information and guidance. School leaders take this aspect of the school's work very seriously due to the complex backgrounds of some pupils.

The school's directors and other leaders are knowledgeable and understand the requirements of the independent school standards well. Elements such as fire risk assessments and maintenance of the premises are given a high priority. Recruitment checks are carried out in line with current government guidance. Policies and other requirements, such as those linked to the provision of information, are in place and sound. All aspects of the independent school standards relevant to this school are met.

Those few parents who responded to Ofsted Parent View are extremely positive about the school. None had anything negative to say in their free-text responses. Staff are equally happy about all aspects of their work and the support they receive from leaders.

Leaders have also fostered positive relationships with professionals and other stakeholders from outside the school. This includes members of the advisory committee, who provide the directors and other leaders with an external independent view of the school's work.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

The culture to keep pupils safe is strong here. All staff take safeguarding seriously. Daily briefings and ongoing communication between school, families and outside agencies keep the profile of safeguarding high.

Staff understand the potential dangers faced by pupils in school and in the local community. Systems to report concerns are fit for purpose. Leaders know pupils and their families well. Routines to respond quickly when there are concerns are well rehearsed. The oversight of the directors is strong. As a result, all aspects of protecting the welfare, health and safety of pupils and staff are strong.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and proprietor)

- As an alternative provision, the school's curriculum is adequate but lacks breadth. This means that pupils do not access as rich a curriculum as they might. This is partly due to the context of the school and the imperative that pupils gain the qualifications in mathematics and English that they will need for the next stage of their education. Leaders need to develop the wider curriculum, particularly the vocational education strand, so that pupils can learn across a wider range of subjects in preparation for post-16 education.
- Not all staff are experts in the subjects that they teach. Although relationships in classrooms are positive and pupils engage positively, in some subjects, staff lack the confidence to deliver the curriculum as well as they might. Leaders are aware of this. Additional training and support need to be put in place so that all staff are as well-equipped as possible to deliver the school's intended curriculum.
- Not all pupils attend school or engage with the outreach programme as often as they should. There are many reasons why this is the case. These include pupils' emotional barriers to school, often exacerbated by complex mental health issues. Leaders know that pupils need to be in school if they are to make the progress required to make successful transitions to the next stage of education. More should be done to reduce absence, including motivating the pupils themselves so that they fully understand why they need to attend more often.

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	146736
DfE registration number	886/6153
Local authority	Kent
Inspection number	10275964
Type of school	Other independent school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	11 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	50
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	5
Number of part-time pupils	30
Proprietor	L & P Educational Services Limited
Chair	Paul Bowles
Headteacher	Lisa Bowles
Annual fees (day pupils)	£29,250 to £37,440
Telephone number	01795 521 941
Website	www.alchemyschools.co.uk
Email address	enquiries@alchemyschools.co.uk
Dates of previous inspection	9 to 11 July 2019

Information about this school

- The school caters for pupils in need of alternative education programmes. All pupils attending the school have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Most have social, emotional and mental health difficulties. All pupils currently attending have education, health and care (EHC) plans. Many have not attended any school for extended periods prior to joining Alchemy.
- The school offers provision for full- and part-time pupils. Leaders pride themselves on making their offer truly bespoke for each pupil. Part-time pupils attend the school's outreach programme.
- Although registered to provide for pupils from 11 to 19 years of age, students in Years 12 and 13 do not follow a traditional sixth-form programme of study. At the time of the inspection, there were too few students in Years 12 and 13 to make a meaningful judgement on sixth-form provision.
- The school's proprietor is L&P Educational Services Limited, which has two directors. One of the directors is the head of school. The directors and other school leaders are supported by an 'advisory council' made up of stakeholders from the local community.
- The school's last standard inspection took place in July 2019. The school was subject to a material change inspection in February 2021, when the proprietor applied to increase pupil numbers from 30 to 50.
- The school does not use alternative provision.

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's education provision received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation.

- Inspectors held a wide range of meetings with the head of school, senior leaders, curriculum leaders and teaching and support staff.
- The lead inspector met with the school's directors. He also held telephone conversations with an officer from a local authority which places pupils at the school and the chair of the school's advisory committee.
- Inspectors talked informally and formally to different groups and individual pupils to gain their views about the school.

- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: English, mathematics, sports leadership and science. Deep dives included visiting lessons, looking at pupils' work, and talking to leaders, teachers and pupils about how teaching in these subjects builds on pupils' knowledge over time.
- Inspectors toured the school's premises and accommodation. They checked a range of policies and documents, including the school's single central record. They also reviewed the school's website and other records regarding the welfare, health and safety of pupils and staff linked to the independent school standards.
- Inspectors gathered evidence to explore the impact of pupils' behaviour, the school's wider curriculum offer and how leaders support staff with their workload.
- Inspectors considered the views of parents submitted through Ofsted Parent View, a confidential online survey for parents. Ofsted's surveys for staff and for pupils were also considered.
- In addition, inspectors considered the proprietor's application to make amendments to the registration of the school.

The school's proposed changes to the maximum number of pupils and to admit pupils who have special educational needs

The school has applied to the Department for Education (DfE) to make 'material changes' to its registration. At the DfE's request, we checked whether the school is likely to meet the relevant independent school standards if the DfE decides to approve the changes. This part of the inspection was carried out under section 162(4) of the Education Act 2002.

- The outcome of this part of the inspection is: **the school is likely to meet the relevant independent school standards if the material changes relating to the school provision are implemented and that the application is amended from up to 125 pupils to up to 100 pupils.**
- The proprietor has applied to increase the number of pupils it is registered for from up to 50 to up to 125. To facilitate the additional numbers, the proprietor has prepared two additional properties, one in Sittingbourne, one in Gillingham. Both properties were visited during the inspection. Both are likely to meet the relevant independent school standards in part 5, but only if the numbers asked for are reduced to up to 100 across the three sites of the school. After discussions with His Majesty's Inspector, the directors agreed that this is a sensible compromise in light of the accommodation available and the complex needs of pupils who will attend the school if the material change is approved. All other relevant parts of the independent school standards are also likely to be met if the DfE approve this particular material change, but only with amended numbers.
- The proprietor has also applied to change the registration from independent school to independent special school. The school has always admitted pupils with SEND. Over time, a growing number of pupils attending the school have had an EHC plan. At the time of this inspection, all pupils attending had an EHC plan. The proprietor has carefully considered the impact the material changes applied for would have on current pupils.

Information about the material change inspection

- Inspectors considered all relevant aspects of the independent school standards relating to the material changes as part of the linked standard inspection. These included considerations associated with pupils with SEND.
- The lead inspector visited and assessed the premises and accommodation of both the proposed additional sites of the school.

Inspection team

Clive Close, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Alan Johnson

Ofsted Inspector

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