

Inspection of The Sittingbourne School

Swanstreet Avenue, Sittingbourne, Kent ME10 4NL

Inspection dates: 21 and 22 March 2023

Overall effectiveness	Good
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The quality of education	Good
Behaviour and attitudes	Good
Personal development	Good
Leadership and management	Good
Sixth-form provision	Good
Previous inspection grade	Good

What is it like to attend this school?

Staff have high aspirations for what all pupils can learn and achieve. This level of ambition is evident throughout the school. This includes in the specially resourced provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), which includes specially designed courses. Here, as across the rest of the school, leaders adapt the curriculum effectively to meet pupils' needs.

Pupils are proud of how tolerant and supportive their school is, giving examples such as the active LGBTQ+ society. They are confident to report instances of what they call 'DRB' (discrimination, racism and bullying). Leaders challenge any perceived intolerance through 'character education' and personal development lessons. Pupils can and do request topics they want to learn more about in these sessions, which are used by leaders to develop the personal development programme further, for example in the recently introduced learning about personal finance.

The vast majority of pupils behave well in school. Movement around the site is settled and there are few incidents of bullying. Where this does happen, the majority of pupils are confident that staff deal with it swiftly. Staff set clear routines in lessons and around the school, such as having year group zones in the playground. This helps to ensure that pupils feel safe in school.

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

Leaders have planned a carefully considered curriculum across their subject areas, plotting carefully the knowledge and skills that all pupils, including those with SEND, need to learn. This is planned effectively from Year 7 upwards and into the sixth form, where students are able to study an increasingly broad range of both academic and vocational subjects, including at the school's 'Skills Centre', where pupils access a range of different vocational courses.

Leaders ensure that pupils have access to a wide range of courses. In the past, too few pupils have studied a modern foreign language, but leaders have succeeded in increasing the numbers of pupils continuing with these courses. However, currently, too few pupils study the ambitious range of subjects required for the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) performance measure.

In lessons, staff use a variety of methods to assess what pupils know and understand, adapting their teaching well to address any misconceptions. Assessment is used precisely across a number of subject areas, where leaders carefully review the gaps in pupils' knowledge so that future teaching can be more specifically targeted to help fill these gaps. This is especially well developed in English and mathematics, and is becoming embedded across other areas of the curriculum. In the sixth form, students receive even more tailored support and, consequently, are clear on what they need to do to improve. Across the school, pupils benefit from these activities. Current pupils are making good progress through the planned curriculum and are well prepared for their next steps.

Leaders have prioritised reading in the school, and leaders ensure that pupils who struggle to read fluently receive a range of support to help develop these essential skills. Leaders provide weekly opportunities for all pupils to develop their reading as part of their personal development provision. This is beginning to show developing confidence in reading skills as it becomes more embedded.

Pupils are well focused in lessons, and staff generally manage any issues well. Pupils are praised and rewarded for demonstrating the school's values. However, suspensions from school and persistent absence both impact on some pupils' learning. Leaders use suspensions appropriately, but they continue to be too frequent. Similarly, while staff are taking appropriate steps to support pupils in attending school more regularly, this work is ongoing.

The programme for pupils' personal development is extensive and detailed. 'Character education' lessons help pupils to learn about and discuss important ethical issues. Teachers guide pupils to explore sensitive topics such as coercive relationships. This supports pupils to be well informed and well prepared for life in modern Britain. Leaders plan specific activities to develop pupils' resilience, and a range of support for mental health and well-being. Some pupils have the opportunity to demonstrate leadership skills, for example as ambassadors to support school events. However, this is not yet fully developed, and there are limited opportunities for pupils to contribute to the wider community. A well-considered careers programme, including in the sixth form, ensures pupils are informed about an increasingly wide range of career options.

Leaders are reflective, and continually evaluate their practice to continue to develop provision for pupils, particularly in response to disappointing examination outcomes in 2022. This is evident in work to develop the curriculum, as well as to support pupils' behaviour. Leaders, both in school and in the multi-academy trust, are outward-looking, and regularly use external expertise to confirm their practice and identify areas for ongoing improvement.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

There is an effective culture of safeguarding at the school. Staff receive appropriate training, which is regularly updated, meaning that they know how to identify and refer any pupils who might be at risk. They know their pupils well, and there are detailed records kept of any concerns.

Concerns are acted on quickly, and leaders liaise well with external agencies as needed. Pupils are taught how to keep themselves safe, including online.

Leaders complete appropriate checks to ensure that adults are safe to work with children. Governors know their safeguarding responsibilities and hold leaders to account.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- While they are reducing, the rates of persistent absence remain too high. As a result, too many pupils are missing out on their education. Leaders need to continue to identify the barriers to pupils' attendance, to ensure these pupils attend school more regularly and benefit from the education the school provides.
- More pupils are now studying a modern foreign language, but not enough are encouraged to take the more rigorous combinations of subjects that make up the EBacc suite of qualifications. Leaders need to ensure that pupils are given the information they need to understand the range of options available to them, thereby strengthening the number of pupils taking these more challenging and ambitious qualifications.
- Suspensions are used appropriately, but the number of suspensions in school are high and not reducing quickly enough. As a result, some pupils are missing out on time in school. Leaders need to continue to work with pupils who struggle to regulate their own behaviour, to support them to be in school and in lessons more consistently.

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	137687
Local authority	Kent
Inspection number	10256405
Type of school	Secondary comprehensive
School category	Academy sponsor-led
Age range of pupils	11 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1,558
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	183
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Paul Goodson
Headteacher	Nick Smith
Website	www.thesittingbourneschool.org.uk
Dates of previous inspection	21 and 22 November 2017, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The Sittingbourne School was known as Sittingbourne Community College at the time of the previous inspection.
- There have been a number of changes to staffing and leadership since the last inspection, including the headteacher.
- The school joined Swale Academies Trust in 2012.
- The school currently uses two registered alternative providers. Some pupils attend an off-site provision called 'RADAR' in partnership with another school in the trust. Some sixth-form students study at a vocational centre called the Skills Centre, run by the school on a separate site which was also visited as part of the inspection.
- The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 7 to 13 with information and engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.

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.
- The inspection team held meetings with the headteacher, senior leaders, teachers and pupils. The lead inspector met with the members of the local governing body, including the chair of governors, as well as representatives from the trust board.
- The inspection team carried out deep dives in these subjects: English, mathematics, science, history, physical education and art. 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 samples of pupils' work.
- To inspect safeguarding, inspectors held meetings with safeguarding leads, governors, teachers and pupils. They scrutinised the single central record and sampled safeguarding records.
- Inspectors spoke to the alternative providers used by the school and with school leaders about their use. This included a visit to 'RADAR', where inspectors spoke to leaders, visited lessons and spoke to pupils.
- The inspection team also met with leaders in the sixth form, visited sixth-form lessons and spoke with groups of sixth-form students. This included a visit to the Skills Centre, which hosts a variety of vocational courses. Here, inspectors spoke to leaders, met with pupils and visited lessons.
- The inspection team also took account of a range of other information, including the school's development plans, school policies and governing body minutes.
- The inspection team spoke with pupils about their experience of the school. Inspectors took account of pupils', parents' and staff's views through conversations and responses to Ofsted's surveys.

Inspection team

Marian Feeley, lead inspector	His Majesty's Inspector
Anne Cullum	Ofsted Inspector
Phillip Blagg	His Majesty's Inspector
Cathy Reid	Ofsted Inspector
Daniel Botting	His Majesty's Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
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