

Inspection of a good school: Castle School, Cambridge

Courtney Way, Cambridge, Cambridgeshire CB4 2EE

Inspection dates:

16 and 17 May 2023

Outcome

There has been no change to this school's overall judgement of good as a result of this ungraded (section 8) inspection. However, the evidence gathered suggests that the inspection grade might not be as high if a graded (section 5) inspection were carried out now. Inspectors are recommending the next inspection be a graded inspection.

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils at Castle School are happy and enjoy attending. Their individual special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are clearly understood by the staff, who make sure that they are well cared for. Pupils are safe, and parents and carers are very positive about the provision. The arts are prioritised, and pupils' artwork is proudly displayed. Pupils take part in activities such as singing and dancing with joy and enthusiasm.

Pupils enjoy learning, which is often based on a story told through role play and props. However, the way in which learning builds, day on day and year on year, is not organised well enough, and pupils end up repeating activities when this is not beneficial.

From the very start, children in early years are supported to develop the confidence to be themselves. As pupils get older, building up their independence is well planned and includes taking trips locally, then further afield over time. Students in the sixth form take part in college and work placements. As pupils move through the school, they become more able to look after themselves.

Virtually all pupils learn to ride a bicycle or tricycle or to ride together with an adult. The older pupils use this as transport rather than taking the minibuses to different activities across the city.

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

Staff know the pupils very well. They prioritise developing pupils' communication skills and physical development. Children learn to communicate their likes and dislikes from the start of early years. 'Gym/swim' and cycling are core parts of the school curriculum. For children in early years and pupils in key stage 1, outdoor learning forms most of the

curriculum. These activities mean that pupils become confident either playing with the wide range of outside play equipment or travelling around by bicycle.

There are plans in place for pupils' social and emotional development and their learning in English and mathematics that use small steps over time. However, over time, these plans have become over-complicated. It is not always clear enough what the appropriate pathway for an individual pupil is.

Conversely, some curriculum content (for example, 'animals and habitats') is not specific enough about what leaders want the pupils to learn. As a result, some pupils are repeating activities rather than building new learning on what has come before.

There are a few subjects, for example mathematics, where the order of learning and what should be taught are much clearer. Pupils said that they enjoy mathematics. They make good progress through the mathematics curriculum. Some pupils achieve GCSEs in subjects such as art and design, providing a strong base for their next steps in education.

Some teachers are highly skilled in choosing appropriate learning activities for pupils. For example, they make sure that pupils with the most complex needs have physical, sound and smell cues to help them understand. For pupils who can learn to write, some staff make sure that each day builds on what came before, leading to good-quality pieces of writing. However, this is not the case in all classes, and sometimes the curriculums planned by teachers are not challenging enough.

The early teaching of rhyme and rhythm through song and using instruments helps pupils understand sound and to recognise their names. As they move to learning the sounds that printed letters represent, the sequence of teaching phonics is not always well matched to what pupils need to learn next.

The school is a calm and happy place. Staff are well trained to spot when pupils are at risk of becoming upset. As a result, pupils become good at calming themselves down. Pupils are taught to cooperate and collaborate with others. The students in the sixth form work well as a team, for example by running a weekly café, including preparing all the food and maintaining the finances.

The school uses a wide range of therapeutic services. Pupils enjoy using the specialist rooms, such as the 'light room' and 'explore' (sensory play) space.

Leaders make sure that pupils learn about different cultures and ways of life through weekly themes, such as learning about Eid. Leaders prioritise getting pupils out into the local area. Pupils regularly take part in local community and arts projects.

The school has been through a period of turbulence in leadership, but there is now a permanent headteacher in place. Staff feel that they are part of a close team, and those teachers who are at an early stage in their career feel well supported. Governors are aware that during the pandemic restrictions, their skills fell behind. They are now accessing more training to increase further their challenge to school leaders.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Staff are trained in how to keep children safe. They notice the small changes that indicate that a pupil is feeling upset or worried.

Leaders are swift to deal with any concerns about pupils. They discuss these with parents appropriately or make referrals to children's services.

Until recently, the detail in the safeguarding records did not reflect the level of care and the response provided. Training has clarified what needs to be recorded and why. Records are now more comprehensive and help staff work together to safeguard pupils. Leaders' systems to check that all actions have been completed have been improved.

All appropriate checks are made to ensure that adults are suitable to work in the school.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Leaders' assessment framework, which identifies the next developmental steps for each child, is over-complicated. There are too many different systems that do not all match up with each other. This means that it is not always clear what appropriate steps individual pupils should be working on over time. Leaders should ensure that their assessment systems support clearly sequenced learning over time.
- Leaders have not made sure that the curriculum is clear enough about what subject knowledge teachers are expected to teach. As a result, pupils repeat learning activities without building on what has come before. Parts of the curriculums planned for individual classes are not challenging enough for some pupils. Leaders need to ensure that the curriculum makes it clear to teachers what they should teach and when, and that this is implemented effectively.
- The phonics programme has recently changed. The order in which pupils are taught sounds is not always sequenced correctly, and so progress is mixed. Leaders need to ensure that the teaching of phonics and writing of the letters that sounds represent builds sequentially over time.
- Until recently, the detail of what leaders record in safeguarding records has not been enough. This meant that if another member of staff was following up an incident, they would not have known precisely enough what actions had been taken or what discussions had been held with parents or children's services. This is now improved but needs embedding into the long-term practice of the school. Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that all safeguarding records contain sufficient detail of the concern, how it was followed up and resolved, the actions taken, the decisions reached, and the outcome.

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 second ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be good in December 2013.

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	134972
Local authority	Cambridgeshire
Inspection number	10255254
Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	3 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	221
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	35
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Nick Brenton
Headteacher	Charlotte Whysall
Website	www.castleschool.info
Date of previous inspection	27 June 2017, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The school provides education for pupils with a wide range of complex SEND. All pupils have an education, health and care plan.
- There are 20 children in early years and key stage 1 who are based at a satellite base a few miles away. This is at The Fields Centre, Galfrid Road, Cambridge CB5 8ND.
- The school is creating a partnership with a local sixth-form centre, and some pupils spend two days a week based there.
- The school does not use any alternative provision.
- The headteacher had been in post for three weeks at the time of the inspection.

Information about this inspection

- This was the first routine inspection the school had 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 other members of the leadership team. They met with members of staff. They also spoke with members of the governing body and school improvement partners.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in communication and language/early reading, mathematics, and creativity/art and design. For each subject, inspectors discussed the curriculum with subject leaders, visited a sample of lessons, examined pupils' work, and spoke with teachers and pupils.
- Inspectors also reviewed pupils' work and leaders' planning in other subject areas.
- To inspect safeguarding, inspectors scrutinised the single central record and a wide range of documentation, including safeguarding files. Inspectors spoke to leaders, including the designated safeguarding leads, and staff and pupils.
- Inspectors considered the 38 responses, including free-text comments, to Ofsted's online survey, Ofsted Parent View. They considered the 48 responses to the Ofsted staff survey.

Inspection team

Tessa Holledge, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Lynda Walker

Ofsted Inspector

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