

Astra SCITT

Dr Challoner's Grammar School, Chesham Road, Amersham, Buckinghamshire HP6 5HA

Inspection dates

19 to 22 June 2023

Inspection judgements

Primary and secondary age-phase combined

Overall effectiveness

Good

The quality of education and training	Good
Leadership and management	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Outstanding

What is it like to be a trainee at this ITE provider?

Trainees get an admirable grounding in how pupils learn best and the implications for their own subjects and classroom practice. They grasp key concepts such as working memory and learn important strategies to help pupils access and embed learning. Trainees are familiar with the distinction between the aspirations of adaptive teaching and the limits of differentiation. There is an unapologetic focus on upskilling all trainees, whether primary or secondary, with the essentials of how pupils learn to read.

Leaders take great care to make sure that trainees 'do not just survive but thrive' during their training and on into their teaching career. Communication between different partners is strong. Acutely aware of their selective context, leaders deliberately plan trainees' first-hand experience of contrasting schools and the different challenges they present so that they are well prepared to teach anywhere. Leaders take trainees beyond being unquestioning recipients of research findings, teaching them to read widely with a critical eye. They encourage trainees to 'think forward' about their career.

For many schools, Astra is their training provider of choice, putting pupils at the heart and doing everything with passion and integrity. Trainees commend the 'phenomenal' support they get. Leaders employ creativity and flexibility to ensure that trainees succeed. They have responded proportionately to trainees' concerns about workload, while never being prepared to risk quality. Headteachers praise Astra for producing high-quality teachers with longevity for the profession and ready for early promoted posts.

Information about this ITE provider

- This school-centred initial teacher training (SCITT) provider offers a postgraduate route to qualified teacher status (QTS) in both the primary and secondary age-phases. Trainees follow either the core, School Direct, School Direct (salaried) or Future Scholars initial teacher training (ITT) route. They train to teach five to 11 years or 11 to 16 years, except for business studies trainees who cover 14 to 19 years.
- Most trainees study full time over one year, with a part-time option to train over two years. Trainees can also take the opportunity to study for a Postgraduate Certificate in Education with Goldsmiths, University of London as well.
- There were 41 trainees at the time of the inspection. Fifteen following the primary and 26 the secondary route. There is also a handful of assessment-only trainees each term.
- The SCITT works with almost 100 maintained and independent schools across Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire. The vast majority of the partner schools which are inspected by Ofsted were judged good or outstanding at their last inspection.
- Partner schools either offer school-based placements, host or deliver training or provide visiting tutors. Schools are not necessarily active partners every year.

Information about this inspection

- The inspection was carried out by one of His Majesty's Inspectors and three Ofsted Inspectors.
- Inspectors met with the SCITT principal, lead subject tutor (secondary), primary training manager, ITT development manager, SCITT officer and data analyst, recruitment and compliance manager and chief financial and strategy officer.
- The lead inspector also met with the headteacher of the lead school in their role as accounting officer, representatives of the governing board's Astra Committee that oversees the work of the SCITT and members of the steering group.
- The inspection team conducted focused reviews in early reading, languages and mathematics in the primary phase and, in secondary, drama, geography, mathematics and religious studies. As part of the reviews, they met with either primary subject facilitators or secondary subject tutors, visited nine schools and conducted one visit off site from the lead school. During these visits, inspectors met with 14 trainees either in person or online as well as mentors, initial teacher training coordinators (ITTCos) and headteachers.
- In addition, inspectors met in person or online with a further 12 trainees and 10 early career teachers, as well as groups of trainers, ITTCos, mentors, headteachers, visiting tutors and supervising tutors. A representative from Buckinghamshire New University joined a discussion about mentoring. Staff from the Aylesbury hub joined a discussion about recruitment and compliance.
- Over the course of the inspection, the team reviewed a wide range of the provider's documents and information on the website as well as trainee portfolios and

responses to the trainee and staff surveys. Two inspectors spent some time at the SCITT's annual conference for current and new trainees.

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

Astra's core values of 'support, collaboration and innovation in teacher training' and the commitment to undertake 'everything with integrity' shine through. There is an unwavering focus on inclusive practice and professional behaviours. Leaders are restless for continuous improvement. Mechanisms for ensuring and assuring quality are well embedded. Strong feedback loops mean that senior leaders know the provision inside and out and where they need to finesse it.

Supervising and visiting tutors complement each other's work very well. They ensure that trainees have a high-quality lived experience in schools and that assessment of their learning of the curriculum is accurate and timely. The steering group is fundamental to the SCITT's ongoing cycle of scrupulous self-evaluation and ambitious improvement planning. It is the means by which all stakeholders' voices are heard, their views considered carefully and changes made as appropriate.

Leaders have, as they say, 'turned the tanker' in raising all partners' awareness of current thinking about how pupils learn. The six-point 'Astra Star Curriculum' is tightly aligned with the core content framework (CCF) and its evidence base. Trainees' learning is built and assessed systematically over three phases from 'understanding' and 'identifying', through 'demonstrating' and 'doing' in collaboration with expert colleagues, on to doing so independently.

School mentors are the crucial expert colleagues in schools. Leaders' work to raise the profile of mentoring has paid off. It is a role that is highly prized. Recruitment is carefully thought through and enhanced training ensures quality. Mentors work skilfully in tandem with ITTCos, to translate the taught ITE curriculum into a high-quality school experience.

Subject tutors and facilitators bring a wealth of experience and expertise. Often, they deliver the taught sessions in their own schools to expose trainees to contrasting contexts and afford them opportunities to observe and deconstruct excellent practice together. Subject-specific reading and research enhance the CCF evidence base. Leaders' work to reset thinking and expectations in secondary subjects means that there is unequivocal agreement about the essential components of central training and tracking of trainees' subject knowledge. That thinking is not, currently, quite as sophisticated across primary subjects.

Central training to teach early reading is well spaced and timed for primary trainees so they all get an incredibly good grounding. Trainees understand the importance of pupils learning to read to access the curriculum and the importance of storytelling. There is no doubt in their minds about the primacy of phonics, including for older pupils and those with additional needs. They understand the importance of precision in assessing pupils' learning and intervening swiftly where needed. Secondary trainees are inspired to follow

up on the introductory session they attend. They want to understand how pupils who struggle with reading are supported and the implications for their subject.

What does the ITE provider need to do to improve the primary and secondary combined phase?

(Information for the provider and appropriate authority)

- There is still some work to do to ensure that the subject-specific curriculum for primary trainees is consistently of a very high standard. The models for centre-based sessions and subject knowledge audits are not as precise as in secondary. Leaders should continue to further refine the primary curriculum, working with facilitators to ensure a shared understanding of essential subject content and the CCF evidence base.

Does the ITE provider's primary and secondary combined phase comply with the ITE compliance criteria?

- The provider meets the DfE statutory compliance criteria.

ITE provider details

Unique reference number	70355
Inspection number	10278313

This inspection was carried out in accordance with the 'Initial teacher education inspection framework and handbook'.

This framework and handbook sets out the statutory basis and framework for initial teacher education (ITE) inspections in England from September 2020.

Type of ITE provider	School-centred initial teacher training
Phases provided	Primary and secondary combined
Date of previous inspection	30 April and 24 September 2018

Inspection team

Alison Bradley, Lead inspector	His Majesty's Inspector
Andrew Porter	Ofsted Inspector
Matthew Newberry	Ofsted Inspector
Sarah Fitzjohn	Ofsted Inspector

Annex: Placement schools

Inspectors visited the following schools as part of this inspection:

Name	URN	ITE phases
Chesham Bois Church of England School	145033	Primary
Chiltern Hills Academy	137280	Secondary
Dr Challoner's Grammar School	136419	Secondary
Holmer Green Senior School	138058	Secondary
St Mary and All Saints CofE Primary School	110459	Primary
St Michael's Catholic School	149612	Secondary
The Highcrest Academy	136858	Secondary
Tylers Green Middle School	110303	Primary
Waterside Primary Academy	149097	Primary

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