

Inspection of an outstanding school: The Birches School

Newholme Road, West Didsbury, Manchester M20 2XZ

Inspection dates: 11 and 12 July 2023

Outcome

There has been no change to this school's overall judgement of outstanding 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 to be a graded inspection.

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils are happy. They relish being part of this vibrant school community. Staff take the time to get to know and understand pupils' additional learning needs. Pupils have extremely strong relationships with staff. Adults care for pupils exceptionally well. This caring approach helps pupils to feel safe in school. Pupils know who to turn to when they need support should they have any worries or concerns.

Leaders and staff have high expectations for pupils' achievement. Adults successfully work together to ensure that pupils grow in confidence during their time at the school. Furthermore, staff skilfully enable pupils to develop a wide range of communication techniques. From their individual starting points, many pupils achieve well across a range of subjects. However, some staff do not have the required subject knowledge to deliver aspects of the curriculum to a consistently high standard. This might hinder these pupils from achieving all that they could in these subjects.

Pupils, including the youngest children, learn in a calm, orderly environment. Everyone manages pupils' behaviour consistently well. Pupils enjoy their social times with each other. Pupils respect each other. On the rare occasion that bullying or unkind behaviour occurs, leaders deal with this straight away.

Pupils experience a wide range of high-quality enrichment opportunities. These include going swimming and participating in sporting activities. Pupils also visit the local shop to put their learning into action in a real-life context.

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

Leaders have recently revised the curriculum to meet the changing needs of the school's pupils. All pupils who attend The Birches School have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The curriculum is broad, balanced and ambitious for these pupils. A

golden thread, which successfully runs through the curriculum, is communication. Many pupils find communicating challenging. However, leaders and staff use a wide range of appropriate communication systems to support pupils' communication development. This includes the skilful use of sign language and picture-based communication systems.

Pupils follow one of three carefully designed pathways as they progress through the school. On each pathway, leaders ensure that the curriculum is suitably tailored to reflect pupils' additional learning and developmental needs and their starting points. For example, one pathway supports some pupils through a carefully crafted early years curriculum. Overall, the curriculum fully incorporates the priorities that are outlined in pupils' education, health and care plans.

In many subjects, leaders ensure that teachers benefit from subject-specific training. This enables them to implement the new curriculums well in these subjects. However, in some other subjects, leaders have not checked that teachers have the required expertise to deliver aspects of the curriculum content in the way that leaders intend. This hinders how deeply some pupils acquire new knowledge and skills.

In addition, leaders have introduced a different approach to assessment. On a day-to-day basis, these new assessment systems allow teachers to identify more closely what new knowledge pupils have retained. However, leaders have not ensured that all staff fully understand how to assess pupils' learning over time in some subjects. Sometimes staff are unsure as to what pupils should know and remember in some elements of the curriculum.

Leaders have made reading central to the curriculum. Pupils are exposed to a wide variety of literature. Leaders have thought carefully about how each individual pupil will learn to read. Where appropriate, pupils access a structured phonics programme. Leaders have ensured that staff have had appropriate training to deliver the phonics programme. In many cases, the phonics scheme is delivered well. However, a few staff do not have all the subject knowledge that they require to model the sounds accurately to pupils. This leads to some pupils developing misconceptions about how to pronounce some sounds.

Although all pupils have SEND, leaders are alert to identify any additional needs that pupils may have. They work effectively with external agencies to ensure that they meet pupils' learning needs.

Pupils work hard in lessons with staff who support them to access their learning. They continue to concentrate even when they find things tricky. Pupils' behaviour is managed consistently well by staff, with clear rules and routines in place. As a result, pupils learn without interruptions.

Pupils' wider personal development is a prominent part of school life. Leaders carefully design different enrichment experiences for pupils to ensure that they understand more about the community in which they live. For example, pupils visit the local church and mosque. This is so that they can learn about different religions and societies in modern Britain. Pupils make a valuable contribution to their local community through charity fundraising.

Governors, leaders and staff work together as a cohesive team. Governors and leaders understand what the school does well and what still needs to be improved to enhance the quality of education for pupils. Governors hold leaders to account for the performance of pupils. Overall, staff feel supported by leaders with their workload and well-being.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

There is a strong culture of safeguarding at The Birches. All who work at the school know pupils and their families well. This allows staff to recognise and understand pupils' vulnerabilities and their additional needs.

Staff are well trained to spot any signs that pupils may be experiencing harm. Staff understand what they need to do if they have a concern about a pupil. When required, leaders have a proactive approach towards working with different external agencies.

Staff know the risks that pupils may face in their lives. They help pupils to understand these dangers, including how they keep themselves safe when using the internet.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Some teachers do not have all the subject knowledge that they require to deliver aspects of the curriculum to a consistently high standard. This hinders how well some pupils learn elements of the curriculum in these subject areas. Leaders should ensure that they train staff to deliver all aspects of the curriculum so that pupils excel.
- In a minority of subjects, leaders have not ensured that staff fully understand how to implement their assessment systems. Consequently, some staff are not as confident as they should be that pupils are learning and remembering knowledge over time. Leaders should ensure that staff implement their new assessment systems consistently well.
- Some staff do not have the necessary subject knowledge to deliver the phonics programme to the highest standard. Occasionally, a few staff do not model sounds accurately to pupils. Consequently, some pupils develop misconceptions. Leaders should ensure that additional training is provided for staff. This is to ensure that these staff deliver the phonics programme accurately.

Background

When we have judged a school to be outstanding, we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains outstanding. 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 outstanding in July 2012.

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	105613
Local authority	Manchester
Inspection number	10210987
Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	5 to 11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	165
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governing body	Barbara Woolley
Headteacher	Rob O'Hara
Website	www.thebirchesschool.org
Date of previous inspection	14 November 2016, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Information about this school

- Leaders do not make use of any alternative provision.
- All pupils have an education, health and care plan. The school caters for pupils with severe learning difficulties and profound and multiple learning difficulties.

Information about this inspection

- 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 carried out deep dives in these subjects: early reading, mathematics and art and design. For each deep dive, inspectors met with subject leaders, visited lessons, talked with pupils and staff and looked at examples of pupils' work. Inspectors also met with other curriculum subject leaders.
- Inspectors met with the headteacher and other senior leaders to discuss the personal development programme, as well as pupils' rates of attendance and pupils' behaviour.
- The lead inspector met with a group of governors. He held a telephone conversation with the chair of governors. He also met with a representative of the local authority.

- The lead inspector observed some pupils in Year 1 and Year 3 reading to a familiar adult.
- Inspectors observed pupils' behaviour at lunchtimes and during their snack time. They scrutinised leaders' records of behaviour.
- Inspectors reviewed a wide range of documentation, including that relating to the school's safeguarding procedures. Inspectors also reviewed the school development plan and leaders' self-evaluation document.
- Inspectors spoke with groups of pupils about their experiences at the school. They spoke with staff about their workload and well-being.
- Inspectors took account of the responses to Ofsted's online surveys for staff and pupils.
- Inspectors observed pupils' arrival at the school in the morning.
- Inspectors took account of the responses to Ofsted Parent View, including the free-text responses.

Inspection team

Stuart Perkins, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Paul Edmondson

Ofsted Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
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