

# Inspection of a good school: St Mary's School

Horam, Heathfield, East Sussex TN21 0BT

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Inspection dates:

27 and 28 September 2023

## Outcome

St Mary's School continues to be a good school.

The headteacher of this school is Paul Murphy. This school is part of The Sabden Multi-Academy Trust, which means other people in the trust also have responsibility for running the school. The trust is run by the chief executive officer, Joanne Foulkes, and overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by Gillian Sole.

## What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils at St Mary's School have highly complex social, emotional and behavioural needs. Most arrive without the personal skills they need to make a positive contribution to their school and wider community. Leaders and staff are very aware of this and plan the school's curriculum to help pupils develop these skills over time. The rural setting of the school enables it to provide an enriching outdoor curriculum. Pupils particularly enjoy forest school and caring for the school's chickens, goats and horses.

Older pupils, who have been at the school the longest, have been supported to develop their empathy and understanding of others and to re-engage with learning. Most feel well prepared for their next steps in life.

Pupils throughout the school sometimes struggle to regulate their emotions. Occasionally, pupils use aggressive language when they are upset or frustrated. Staff are well trained and quick to respond. They know how to keep others safe and get pupils back to learning as quickly as possible. However, for some pupils, it is unsettling to see and hear the behaviour of others. Leaders are aware of this. They have taken steps to reassure younger pupils, for example by staggering breaktimes. They have also created a separate provision for older pupils with autism, who need a smaller and quieter learning space.

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

When pupils first join the school, they have often been out of school, or attending only for very limited amounts of time. There is an initial focus on building pupils' resilience for the school day, integrating them into school life and building trusting, positive relationships with staff. Pupils respond to this well. Staff then focus on developing pupils' learning

behaviours, for example by establishing clear expectations that pupils will complete their work in lessons. The school day has been carefully designed with pupils' special educational needs and/or disabilities in mind. For example, pupils have a short break between every lesson to enable them to 'reset' and get ready for learning again.

Leaders at all levels recognise that pupils will often have limited opportunities outside of school to develop their hobbies and interests. The school provides extensive opportunities for enrichment within the planned curriculum. Staff are quick to identify and tap into pupils' interests. Pupils are supported to learn how their talents and interests might be developed through further learning into a possible career. Pupils learn about animal husbandry and motor mechanics, for example, alongside the school's academic curriculum.

The school has identified that, since the pandemic, more pupils are at an early stage of learning to read. Those in the primary phase follow a phonics curriculum, and there is catch-up in place for older struggling readers. Throughout the school, teachers give careful consideration to the books and texts that engage pupils in reading. However, leaders recognise that their early reading curriculum needs further strengthening. This is because not all staff are trained to support pupils who struggle to read as they do not know the sounds that letters, and groups of letters, make.

The school has devised a suitably broad curriculum for pupils. In the strongest subjects, for example physical education (PE), leaders have carefully sequenced the curriculum through the primary phase up to secondary. In a small number of subjects, including English, leaders have considered the primary and secondary curriculums separately. This means that the primary curriculum is not consistently preparing pupils as well as it might for the demands of the secondary curriculum. The multi-academy trust has recently appointed a primary education lead, who is currently supporting the school to further develop its primary curriculum and ensure that it is fully preparing pupils for the next stage of their education.

The school ensures that pupils receive the provision set out in their education, health and care (EHC) plans. This includes a broad range of interventions and therapies that support pupils with their mental and physical health and enable them to better access the academic curriculum. The school is developing how it continuously monitors the impact of the interventions it provides.

The school is acutely aware of the qualifications that pupils will need to progress to their next steps. Leaders ensure that pupils are also aware of why qualifications matter, and how they will improve their life chances. Leaders aim for every pupil to have an 'onwards pathway' when they leave the school. They provide appropriate careers advice and ensure that pupils are aware of the college courses available to them.

School and trust executive leaders know the school and its pupils extremely well. They are committed to ensuring that pupils who join the school get a high-quality education that enables them to transition on to the next phase of their education with greater confidence, and a greater chance of future success. Those responsible for governance

fully understand their roles. Executive leaders provide confident, strategic leadership, and there are robust systems in place to ensure accountability and oversight.

## **Safeguarding**

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

## **What does the school need to do to improve?**

### **(Information for the school and appropriate authority)**

- The early reading and reading catch-up programmes are not as effective as they could be. Not all staff are trained to teach early reading effectively. While some pupils progress well with their reading, others do not. Leaders need to ensure that all staff are trained in the teaching of early reading, and that the early reading curriculum is revised to ensure a clear sequence of learning from the moment pupils join the school.
- In some subjects, the curriculum lacks cohesion between the primary and secondary phases of the school. As a result, pupils are not as well prepared for the secondary phase as they might be. Leaders need to review their curriculum plans to ensure that they plan a continuous and well-sequenced curriculum in all subjects that starts when pupils first join the school.

## **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 predecessor school, St Mary's School, to be good in January 2015.

## **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' is used to mean pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND); pupils who meet the [definition of children in need of help and protection](#); pupils receiving statutory local authority support from a social worker; and pupils who otherwise meet the criteria used for deciding the school's [pupil premium funding](#) (this includes pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years, looked after children (children in local authority care) and/or children who left care through adoption or another formal route).

## School details

<b>Unique reference number</b>	142163
<b>Local authority</b>	East Sussex
<b>Inspection number</b>	10288058
<b>Type of school</b>	Special
<b>School category</b>	Academy special converter
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	9 to 16
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Boys
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	82
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	Board of trustees
<b>Chair of trust</b>	Gillian Sole
<b>CEO of the trust</b>	Joanne Foulkes
<b>Headteacher</b>	Paul Murphy
<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.sabden.org.uk">www.sabden.org.uk</a>
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	23 May 2018, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

## Information about this school

- The school is part of The Sabden Multi-Academy Trust.
- All pupils on roll have an EHC plan. The school caters for pupils whose predominant area of need is social, emotional and mental health. Many pupils have multiple and complex diagnoses. Pupils generally exhibit challenging behaviour, and many have been permanently excluded or out of school before joining St Mary's School. The school has identified that an increasing number of pupils joining their roll have a diagnosis of autism.
- At the time of the school's last graded inspection, the school was a residential school. The school no longer has residential provision.
- The school is not using any alternative provision.

## Information about this inspection

- Inspections are a point-in-time judgement about the quality of a school's education provision.

- This was the first routine inspection the school 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 of the school.
- Inspectors met with the headteacher and the deputy headteacher. The lead inspector met with the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust and spoke with the chair of the board of trustees.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: early reading, English, mathematics and PE. For each deep dive, inspectors held discussions about the curriculum, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, the inspectors: reviewed the single central record; took account of the views of leaders, staff and pupils; and considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils' interests first.

### **Inspection team**

Alice Roberts, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

Tom Neave

Ofsted Inspector

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