

Inspection of Layston Church of England First School

The Causeway, Buntingford, Hertfordshire SG9 9EU

Inspection dates: 31 October and 1 November 2023

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

The quality of education

Requires improvement

Behaviour and attitudes

Good

Personal development

Good

Leadership and management

Requires improvement

Early years provision

Inadequate

Previous inspection grade

Outstanding

This school was last inspected under section 5 of the Education Act 2005 14 years ago and judged 'Outstanding' under a previous inspection framework. This reflected the school's overall effectiveness under the inspection framework in use at the time.

From then until November 2020, the school was exempted by law from routine inspection, so there has been a longer gap than usual between graded inspections under section 5 of the Act. Judgements in this report are based on the current inspection framework and also reflect changes that may have happened at any point since the last graded inspection.

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils value and respond positively to the care and nurture they receive. Pupils have strong relationships with adults. These help them to feel settled and safe.

Children in the early years do not receive a good enough quality of education. Too many are not well prepared for Year 1. Consequently, too many pupils spend time trying to catch up when they move on to key stage 1. As pupils move through the school, the curriculum is planned but is not always implemented consistently well. The quality of pupils' learning varies across different curriculum subjects.

Pupils demonstrate an understanding of how to keep themselves safe. They know how to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Pupils show respect for one another. They treat their friends with kindness and care. Older pupils thrive on the opportunity to become 'buddies'. They enjoy looking after the younger children or helping others who need a friend at playtime.

An array of wider opportunities, including clubs and outdoor learning, are on offer. These activities expand pupils' horizons and nurture their interests. Pupils from different year groups enthuse about learning in the forest. In these sessions, they plant vegetables and enjoy 'singing to king tree'.

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

Recently, there have been leadership and staff changes. These have slowed down the process of successful curriculum implementation throughout the school.

The reception class is not fully integrated with the rest of the school. The early years curriculum does not ensure children receive the knowledge, vocabulary and skills they need to successfully access Year 1. The local authority has recently supported the school to design a new early years curriculum. However, this is not being taught as intended. As a result, children access disconnected activities and do not achieve well enough. Children leave the early years with significant gaps in knowledge. Furthermore, adults do not precisely check children's learning. Therefore, the progress children make in the early years is unclear.

In Years 1 to 4, the school has worked successfully with external support to develop a curriculum that focuses on the knowledge pupils need. However, the curriculum is at various stages of development. In subjects such as mathematics, the curriculum has been precisely planned and pupils learn the intended knowledge successfully. Where the curriculum is less well developed, activities do not always match the intended learning. This means pupils do not learn as well.

Checks on pupils' learning are not in place in some foundation subjects. The school does not have an accurate view of how well pupils learn in these subjects. This means the school is less certain of how well pupils remember detailed knowledge.

Leaders are aware of this. They are beginning to develop systems to check how well pupils are achieving.

The school understands the importance of pupils learning to read fluently. Pupils' reading books are matched to the sounds they are learning. Staff are trained well to teach reading. All pupils are checked regularly. However, some pupils who fall behind are not always supported to catch up quickly enough. This means these pupils do not learn to read fluently as quickly as they should. This is reflected in recent published outcomes.

Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are generally well supported. Teachers make adjustments so that pupils with SEND can access the full curriculum alongside their peers. For others, the curriculum is specifically tailored to their needs. A high number of adults make this possible. However, there is some variety in how well this approach supports different pupils.

Many pupils behave well. They display positive attitudes to learning. Most classrooms are calm and orderly. However, there are some staff and parental concerns about behaviour. This is because there is not a shared understanding of the chosen approach to managing those few pupils who exhibit more challenging behaviour.

A well-structured personal development programme is in place. This ensures that pupils understand how to stay safe and develop a good understanding of different cultures and beliefs. Pupils are being prepared well for life in modern Britain.

Individual governors visit the school regularly to support leaders and staff. However, the governing body is not robustly holding leaders to account for their actions. It does not always ask those challenging questions about, for example, the quality of education.

Staff value the support of school leaders. They speak positively about the 'open door' policy and the emotional support they receive around their well-being.

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 years curriculum is not being implemented successfully. It is disconnected and does not prepare children for their next stage of learning. Too many children leave the early years with significant gaps in what they know and can do. They spend too much time in Year 1 and Year 2 catching up. The school must ensure that the early years curriculum is reviewed, planned and

implemented effectively to ensure that the needs of all children are met to prepare them well for Year 1.

- There is a lack of understanding between school leaders and a significant group of staff and parents about the school's chosen therapeutic approach to managing some pupils' challenging behaviour. Consequently, there is some discontent regarding decisions school leaders take when managing high-level behaviour incidents. The school should work closely with the school community to ensure there is a shared vision and understanding around the school's chosen approach to managing pupils' challenging behaviour.
- In some foundation subjects, the school's curriculum is not precisely planned to ensure pupils successfully learn the intended knowledge over time. There are inconsistencies in how the curriculum is taught and assessed. The school should ensure that it sets out the precise knowledge pupils need to learn and ensure assessment is used carefully to check pupils are learning and remembering the content.
- The school does not have an accurate view of its strengths and development areas. The governing body has not held school leaders to account with enough rigour. This means it has not recognised, or set about improving, the important areas of the school that need improvement. Leaders should ensure that they establish accurate evaluation systems and act to improve weak aspects of the school. The governing body must hold leaders to account with greater rigour to ensure that all pupils learn more and achieve well.

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

Unique reference number	117390
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	10255044
Type of school	First
School category	Voluntary controlled
Age range of pupils	5 to 9
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	148
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governing body	Colin Wilson
Headteacher	Adele McMurrough
Website	www.layston.herts.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	4 June 2009, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- There have been several recent changes to staffing. This includes the appointment of a new early years' leader, who has been in post since April 2023.
- The school does not use any alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors carried out this graded inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

- 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.
- The school's deputy head, who is also the leader responsible for pupils with SEND, mental health and well-being, subject leader for religious education, art

and design, personal, social, health and relationship education and teaches one day a week in early years, was absent from school at the time of inspection.

- Inspectors held meetings with the headteacher, subject leaders, groups of staff, governors, representatives from the local authority and pupils.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: early reading, mathematics, history and computing. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with subject leaders, visited a sample of lessons, spoke with teachers, spoke with pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work. The lead inspector also listened to pupils read with a familiar member of staff.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, 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.
- Inspectors reviewed a range of documents, including behaviour logs, attendance records, pupil records, minutes of governing body meetings, governor monitoring reports, school development plans, school self-evaluation documents, records of visits from the local authority and school policies.
- Inspectors considered 50 responses to the Ofsted online questionnaire, Ofsted Parent View. Inspectors also spoke with parents as they arrived at school.
- Inspectors spoke with pupils throughout the inspection to gather their views.
- Inspectors considered the 21 responses to the Ofsted's questionnaire for staff. Inspectors also met with staff throughout the inspection to gather their views.

Inspection team

Jonny Wallace, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Craige Brown

Ofsted Inspector

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