Inspection of an outstanding school: The Castle School

Love Lane, Donnington, Newbury, Berkshire RG14 2JG

Inspection dates: 24 and 25 April 2024

Outcome

The Castle School continues to be an outstanding school.

What is it like to attend this school?

The Castle School is a very special place. It is a vibrant and exciting place to learn. Parents and carers are delighted with how their children thrive and flourish. Pupils, who all have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), are exceptionally well prepared for their futures. For example, pupils develop their communication, social and entrepreneurial talents when selling items they have made at Newbury Market.

Pupils are happy and feel safe. At all three school sites, pupils feel a strong sense of belonging to a caring school community. Pupils have an exceptional understanding and appreciation of their peers. They form strong and trusting friendships. Pupils behave very well. They are kind to each other. Staff are quick to resolve any worries that pupils report.

The school has high ambitions for pupils. It enables pupils to achieve strongly from their starting points. Pupils access a broad curriculum. This results in them gaining the relevant qualifications to pursue their aspirations. The curriculum is enriched through a myriad of well-chosen activities. The choir often performs to groups. Some pupils visit local care homes. Pupils enjoy taking part in visits to activity centres. These experiences develop both their social and academic skills.

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

The school's curriculum is highly effective. It provides every pupil with an ambitious, broad and enriching provision. Different learning pathways enable pupils to learn in a way that best meets their needs. Staff pay meticulous attention to the targets in pupils' education, health and care plans (EHC plan). These are then broken down into small steps, and staff plan learning to achieve these. As a result, pupils achieve strongly as learning is highly personalised.

Skilled staff know their pupils exceptionally well. They deliver important content in an accessible way for the sensory, emotional and physical needs of each pupil. This individualised approach ensures that pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, are able to learn as well as they possibly can. Staff collaborate effectively with a range of therapists. They ensure that specialist support is carefully blended into the curriculum. Pupils benefit from occupational, speech and language, hydro and physiotherapies. Staff use a rigorous approach that checks what pupils know now and what they need to learn next to achieve their targets.

The school has a comprehensive communication programme. Pupils learn to use a range of appropriate technology and/or visual symbols which enable them to communicate with increasing accuracy. The school strongly promotes a love of reading. Those who are developing pre-reading skills or using phonics to learn to read are very well supported. They gain the skills to read with increasing fluency. All pupils enjoy stories and visits by theatre companies. The impressive library contains a wide range of fiction and non-fiction books to promote reading.

Pupils behave exceptionally well. There is a harmonious atmosphere throughout the school. Those with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs are very well supported. Staff know pupils very well and understand pupils' possible triggers that may cause them to be upset. They skilfully help pupils to self-regulate their emotions. As a result, learning is rarely disrupted. Leaders analyse attendance information carefully. They follow up on any unexplained absences quickly to promote good attendance. The proportion of pupils who are routinely absent has substantially reduced over recent years.

The curriculum promotes excellent personal development. There is a clear focus on making sure that all pupils learn to be as independent as possible so that they can become active citizens. For example, some students help to manage the end-of-day bus collections. The detailed personal, health, relationships and sex education programme provides pupils with a growing understanding of equality and difference.

Students in the sixth form achieve exceptionally well. They develop strong skills across a range of subjects. There are many opportunities that develop students' confidence and economic understanding. For example, pupils take part in a furniture recycling project. The school's 'World of Work Programme' is superb. Visitors from Australia and Denmark have come to see this excellent provision. There are a huge range of opportunities provided, each tailored to students' needs. Some experiences lead to full-time employment. Students are very successful in obtaining placements on courses that lead to further qualifications, and transition is carefully planned. Additionally, the school aims to ensure that students who are leaving this school have developed a strong social network so they know where to access support.

Parents and carers are effusive in their praise for the school. They appreciate how their children are thriving. Leaders are not complacent. They continually drive further improvements to ensure that pupils get the best possible provision. Staff training provides valuable opportunities to share expertise. Governors are highly ambitious. They robustly hold leaders to account and check the positive impact of the school's work.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

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

This is the second ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be outstanding in October 2014.

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	110182
Local authority	West Berkshire
Inspection number	10321772
Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	4 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	175
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	34
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governing body	Helen Cabell
Headteacher	Jon Hewitt
Website	www.thecastleschoolnewbury.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	15 January 2019, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- All pupils who attend the school have an EHC plan. The school caters for pupils with a broad range of SEND, including autism, SEMH, moderate learning difficulty, severe learning difficulty and profound and multiple learning difficulty.
- The school is situated across three sites, the main site at Love Lane, a sixth-form provision at Monks Lane in Newbury and The Castle@Theale near Reading for pupils with SEMH needs.
- The school uses one unregistered alternative provision.
- The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 8 to 13 with information and engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.

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, the deputy headteachers, the assistant headteachers, the designated safeguarding lead, some curriculum leaders, the leaders with responsibility for The Castle@Theale and the sixth-form provision. They met with some members of staff and some pupils. The lead inspector had a telephone conversation with the local authority adviser. She also met with governors, including the chair of governors.
- The inspectors carried out deep dives in early reading and communication, mathematics and personal, social and health education. For each deep dive, inspectors held discussions about the curriculum, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teaching staff and spoke to some pupils about their learning. Inspectors also looked at samples of pupils' work. An inspector listened to pupils read to a familiar adult.
- 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 met with members of staff and spoke to pupils throughout the inspection to gather their views about the school. Inspectors considered the responses to Ofsted's surveys for parents, pupils and staff.

Inspection team

Liz Bowes, lead inspector	Ofsted Inspector
Alan Johnson	Ofsted Inspector

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