

Inspection of St Helens Montessori School

Lower Road, East Farleigh, Maidstone, Kent ME15 0JT

Inspection dates: 23 to 25 April 2024

Overall effectiveness

Outstanding

The quality of education

Outstanding

Behaviour and attitudes

Outstanding

Personal development

Outstanding

Leadership and management

Outstanding

Early years provision

Outstanding

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Good

Does the school meet the independent school standards?

Yes

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils at St Helens Montessori School are exceptionally happy. The small size of the school ensures that every pupil is known as an individual. Pupils take a full and active role in the life of the school. They take pride in the meaningful role they play in school life. This begins right from the start of Nursery, where children learn to feed and care for the chickens and collect their eggs. The youngest children delight in bathing and brushing 'Bob', the school's bearded dragon.

Pupils are extremely thoughtful in the way that they conduct themselves. Older pupils care for younger children. Alongside staff, they model the polite and respectful attitudes that permeate the school. Each morning, the school comes together for assembly, which is led by pupils. Within assemblies, all pupils develop the confidence to share their own thoughts, ideas and prayers. Pupils know that what matters to them, matters to school staff.

From the moment children join Nursery, they become fully immersed in their own learning. As they progress through the school, pupils demonstrate highly positive attitudes to their learning. They are excited to learn and do not waste a minute of their school day. Pupils attend well, as their experience of school is highly positive. As a result, all pupils meet the high academic expectations that the school has of them.

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

The school has a highly ambitious, very well-established and carefully constructed curriculum. Pupils study an extremely broad range of subjects, including, for example, botany and astronomy. In each subject, including in the early years, the school has set out precisely what children need to learn at each stage. Consequently, pupils reach very high academic standards.

The school's approach is inspired by Maria Montessori and emphasises fostering independence and self-directed learning. Therefore, children have a high level of autonomy in selecting what they will focus on in the classroom within each session to progress through the school's curriculum. The school has very carefully developed the learning environment and learning activities to ensure that they align exactly with the curriculum in every subject.

Teachers have very strong subject knowledge and are experts in the school's curriculum. They fully understand the way the curriculum has been organised from early years through to the upper key stage 2. This enables them to provide personalised and highly effective support to each pupil. Teachers ensure that pupils have ample opportunity to practise and revisit important learning, and work with pupils to identify when a pupil has fully mastered key content and is ready to move on. Right from the start of Nursery, children are carefully shown how to be independent learners. They quickly come to understand their own vital role in their education. Children in Nursery and older pupils demonstrate exceptionally high

levels of commitment to their learning. The high levels of sustained concentration that children are supported to develop in Nursery ensure that every child is exceptionally well prepared for their transition to key stage 1.

The school's reading programme has a highly positive and long-term impact on pupils. Staff oversee a systemic and highly effective approach to the teaching of early reading and writing. Children in early years are carefully supported to develop their awareness of the sounds that letters make as soon as they are ready. In tandem, staff carefully help pupils to develop the physical coordination and strength they will need to begin writing letters. Each aspect of the programme has been thought through extremely carefully. As a result, all children successfully learn to read and form letters very quickly. Children who transition from the Nursery into the key stage 1 class at age five are already able to read and write three- and four-letter words.

As a result of the sensitive way that children are supported to develop as readers, they develop a keen love of reading right from the start. This is sustained as pupils move through the school. By the end of key stage 1, pupils are reading challenging texts, which have been carefully selected to prepare them for key aspects of the key stage 2 curriculum. For example, pupils read a series of books set in the past to prepare them for the key stage 2 history curriculum. The oldest pupils read widely and often, for pleasure and to conduct research to support their learning across the curriculum.

Pupils' knowledge and understanding of the school's curriculum is consistently enriched and extended through a wide, rich set of experiences. For example, pupils have worked with a local apple grower to develop a new species of apple. Working with an engineer, pupils have built a zip wire in their forest school. The school's ethos forms a key part of pupils' spiritual development. These values underpin the school's approach to character development. Daily, pupils lead the school in collective worship and prayers. Pupils have regular opportunities to engage in debate and discussion. Every pupil benefits from the school's drama programme and regular opportunities to perform to an audience.

Throughout the school, a strong emphasis is placed on learning about the natural world. This forms a key part of the school's personal development programme. Right from the start of early years, children learn how to grow and care for plants in the classroom and in the school grounds. As they progress through the school, they are supported to develop a strong understanding of how to look after the wider natural environment.

The headteacher is also the proprietor of the school. She has a very clear vision for the school, which is shared by all staff. Together, the headteacher and the wider team have fully realised their ambition for an exceptional education for every pupil. The headteacher ensures that the independent school standards are consistently met. The school complies with schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

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.

School details

Unique reference number	131567
DfE registration number	886/6113
Local authority	Kent
Inspection number	10322066
Type of school	Other independent school
School category	Independent day school
Age range of pupils	2 to 12
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	45
Proprietor	Jeannelle Dening Smitherman
Headteacher	Jeannelle Dening Smitherman
Annual fees (day pupils)	£7,500
Telephone number	01622 721 731
Website	www.sthelensmontessori.co.uk
Email address	office@sthelensmontessori.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	6 to 8 July 2021

Information about this school

- St Helens Montessori School is a co-educational independent school offering education for pupils aged two to 12 years old. The Nursery school opened in 1989 and the primary school opened in April 2006.
- The school follows the Montessori curriculum, enhanced with pupil workbooks and teacher presentations.
- The school is a Christian school but welcomes pupils of all faiths.
- The school currently uses no alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors carried out this inspection under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008. The purpose of the inspection is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

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

The school meets the independent school standards. These are the requirements set out in the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

- Inspectors discussed any continued impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors met with the headteacher, who is the sole proprietor, and with teachers, including the school's special educational needs and disabilities coordinator. The lead inspector spoke with a member of the school advisory board.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: early reading, mathematics and history. For each deep dive, inspectors met with leaders, looked at curriculum plans, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work. Inspectors listened to pupils reading. Inspectors also spoke to leaders about the quality of education provided in other subjects.
- Inspectors carried out other activities to check that the school meets the independent school standards. These included a check of the school premises and wider work to comply with health and safety laws (including fire safety). Inspectors considered the school's approach to risk management. Inspectors also checked the relevant policies and the school's website.
- 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.

Inspection team

Alice Roberts, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

Liz McIntosh

Ofsted Inspector

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