

Inspection of a good school: Sycamore Short Stay School

Old Farm Estate, Dudley, West Midlands DY1 3QE

Inspection dates: 4 and 5 June 2024

Outcome

Sycamore Short Stay School continues to be a good school.

What is it like to attend this school?

There is a calm, welcoming and purposeful atmosphere present throughout this inclusive school. Almost all pupils arrive having had significant disruption to their education. Leaders ensure that pupils' needs are carefully assessed on arrival, and this includes listening to the voices of pupils and parents. The school works hard to minimise or remove the barriers that pupils face to attending school.

Over time, pupils are supported to re-engage positively with education. Pupils learn to reflect on their feelings and actions. This helps them to build their resilience and character. Pupils grow in their understanding of what it means to work well in lessons. This is built on the strong relationships quickly develop between pupils and staff. Pupils of all ages are helped to read and they enjoy this. They value the rewards they receive for positive engagement in learning and school life. Older pupils particularly enjoy saving and spending through the 'Sycamore Bank'.

Pupils' personal development is well catered for. Pupils know that staff are there to help them. Staff provide timely support and are responsive as particular issues arise. This covers a whole range of additional needs that the pupils often arrive with. The school supports pupils towards a return to a mainstream school or another appropriate setting very well.

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

The school has clear transition processes to effectively support pupils to both enter and leave this short stay setting. Leaders ensure that they understand as much as possible about the pupils before they start. A detailed profile is built up so that pupils' needs and starting points can be used to provide bespoke support to meet their needs. This includes important background information around attendance and safeguarding. Older pupils and parents spoke positively of the support they received on arriving at the school.

Pupils can arrive with unrecognised or unmet special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). A wide range of possible barriers to learning are considered, including reading ability and any possible SEND needs. The school is working well to support all pupils effectively to make progress in life and learning.

Pupils at the earliest stages of reading are helped to improve quickly. They are provided with appropriate support to learn the phonic knowledge they need to read. Teachers deliver this bespoke support with clarity to help pupils secure their new knowledge well. More widely, reading is a central part of school life. Leaders have rightly prioritised this and it forms a crucial part of daily lessons for pupils of all ages. This helps pupils to engage with a range of literature and develop their love of reading.

Teachers know the pupils well. They have immensely positive relationships with pupils and praise them regularly for their efforts and achievements. The school has put in place an ambitious curriculum for all. The purpose and drive for every pupil to succeed is shared by all staff. Pupils are supported well to engage with their learning on an appropriate level. However, teachers do not always select activities that match the ambitious nature of the planned curriculum. This means that pupils are not always engaged in tasks that help them to build towards what the school intends.

The school has very high expectations of pupils' conduct. Pupils live up to this well. When they are struggling, they are given space to reflect and self-regulate. The school uses rewards to help pupils understand the value of small positive actions, as well as learning about the outside world. While there are significant challenges with attendance due to pupils' previous experiences, this is improving. The school is doing the best they can to secure improvements in attendance from what are very low starting points with a dynamic group of pupils.

The school has carefully structured its approach to personal development. Leaders work effectively to ensure they gather all relevant safeguarding information about their pupils. This informs lessons and a range of other support. For example, pupils have access to bespoke mental health support within school. This provides pupils with a safe space to discuss their feelings, helping them to express themselves and build positive relationships with others. A range of external support is also used to help pupils. The school has strong connections with wider agencies such as the NSPCC, police, and youth justice. Pupils are encouraged to think about their future in very positive terms. Pupils in key stage three have opportunities to consider a full range of possible post-16 options and broaden their horizons through a range of experiences and visits. Younger pupils enjoy the after-school book club, regular swimming lessons and other trips and visits, including residential visits.

Governors are clear about the strengths of the school and are ambitious for its future. They hold pupils at the heart of their decision making. Leaders at all levels recognise the challenges of working in this complex environment. Staff speak highly of working in the school. They know leaders will listen and support them actively with their workload and to promote their wellbeing. There is a strong sense of being a team and a shared drive to give pupils the very best.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Some areas of the curriculum are not clear enough on what needs to be learnt. Therefore, teachers do not always select the most appropriate tasks for pupils to do. As a result, pupils do not maximise their learning time in lessons. The school should ensure that the purpose of each activity is clearly related to a specific part of the curriculum being delivered.

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 first ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be good in January 2019.

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	134768
Local authority	Dudley
Inspection number	10322811
Type of school	Pupil referral unit
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	5 to 15
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	24
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Headteacher	Steve Markham
Website	www.sycamore.dudley.sch.uk
Date(s) of previous inspection	15-16 January 2019, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The school is a pupil referral unit and works with those pupils who have been, or at risk of being, permanently excluded from key stages one to three.
- The school uses no alternative provision at present.
- During the previous and current academic year, the school has worked with many pupils and not all of these have entered the school.
- The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 7 to 9 with information and engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.

Information about this inspection

- The inspectors carried out this ungraded inspection under section 8 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. The inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school and has taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.

- The inspectors held meetings with the headteacher, the chair of governors, the local authority representative, other senior leaders, subject leaders and teachers. They also talked informally to pupils and staff to gather general information about school life.
- The inspectors carried out deep dives in early reading, mathematics and PSHE. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with subject leaders, 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.
- The inspectors looked at records and spoke to staff in relation to attendance, behaviour and bullying.
- A range of documentation was scrutinised, including leaders' plans to improve the school and their self-evaluation of the school's work.
- The inspectors took account of responses to the pupil and staff survey and also spoke to parents at the start of the school day.

Inspection team

Richard Wakefield, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Pete Hines OBE

Ofsted Inspector

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