

Inspection of Ernest Cookson School

Bankfield Road, West Derby, Liverpool, Merseyside L13 0BQ

Inspection dates: 5 and 6 June 2024

Overall effectiveness

Inadequate

The quality of education

Inadequate

Behaviour and attitudes

Inadequate

Personal development

Inadequate

Leadership and management

Inadequate

Previous inspection grade

Outstanding

This school was last inspected under section 5 of the Education Act 2005 10 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. The school received an ungraded inspection under section 8 of the Act on 2 July 2019. 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 across the two sites have very different experiences at this school. The majority of pupils who attend the main school receive a poor standard of education. They have been let down by frequent changes in leadership and a curriculum which does not meet their special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) effectively.

The experience of a small group of pupils could not be more different. These pupils receive their education at the school's satellite site. They have been protected from the turmoil that the school has recently faced. These pupils are much more positive about school than the majority of their peers. They behave well and they learn and achieve more.

Pupils in the main school site are frequently exposed to aggressive and unruly behaviour. Many pupils told inspectors that this makes them feel unsafe. For them, school is often an unhappy place to be. Many staff do not believe that they have the support that they need to successfully address incidents of misbehaviour.

Over a period of time, the school's expectations of what most pupils can and should achieve have fallen sharply. As a result, most pupils do not achieve well. They make little or no progress towards the targets in their education, health and care (EHC) plans. Until very recently, the school has done little to halt this decline in its effectiveness.

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

This school has been devoid of effective leadership for a long time. A rapid succession of temporary leadership arrangements has created confusion for staff and inconsistency in their approaches to supporting pupils. Governors' actions to stem the decline in pupils' behaviour and achievement since the previous inspection have been unsuccessful.

Very recently, intensive support from the local authority has provided some glimmer of hope. This support is helping the school to begin to take positive steps towards improvement. However, the weaknesses in the school's provision are wide-ranging and entrenched. As a result, there is little evidence to indicate that the recent changes are making real or sustained differences to pupils' experiences at school. Many staff are new, others are temporary and some positions remain unfilled. Overall, there is very limited capacity to bring about much-needed improvements.

Some decisions taken in the interests of managing poor behaviour have curtailed the school's ambition for most pupils. For instance, the school day has been shortened in length. In addition, pupils who attend the main site experience fewer subject lessons than their peers at the satellite site. Furthermore, the curriculum in many subjects is newly established. These subjects have only just begun to be taught at all. The school is still identifying the knowledge that pupils should learn. Most staff are unclear about what they should be teaching. Many do not have the expertise

that they need to select effective ways to teach. Added to this, lessons are frequently interrupted or abandoned due to poor behaviour. This considerably limits how well pupils learn.

In sharp contrast, the efforts of staff at the satellite site have ensured that a minority of pupils experience a better quality of education. This aspect of the school is an oasis of calm. Pupils learn what they should and they achieve well. The school has not acted to address the gulf of inequality that exists between the two sites. Nor has it ensured that successful practices at the satellite site are replicated in the main school.

The deficiencies in the curriculum also extend to the school's provision for personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education. This is of poor quality. Added to this, pupils at the main site take part in enrichment activities which are unavailable to those on the satellite site. The school has not considered how these experiences will contribute to pupils' wider understanding of the world. Consequently, pupils are not developing into respectful, responsible citizens. They have not learned enough to prepare them adequately for life in modern Britain.

All pupils at the school have SEND. The school's systems for assessing and meeting their needs are poorly developed. Often, individual plans for pupils do not adequately break down their EHC plans into achievable targets. Staff do not know how best to help these pupils to succeed. In addition, the school has not successfully established strategies to check what pupils know and can do. As a result, staff are often unaware of, and fail to address, the deficits in pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding. Overall, neither the school's curriculum nor the way in which staff deliver it are helping pupils to develop their social and emotional skills appropriately.

Many pupils cannot read well enough for their age. The school has begun to prioritise reading. It has introduced a suitable phonics programme for pupils in key stage 1. This is starting to help the youngest pupils to learn sounds and the letters that they represent. Pupils in key stage 2 who struggle to read have not received any support to catch up. A considerable number have missing phonics knowledge. This places a further barrier in the way of their achievement.

In recent months, the school has renewed its expectations of pupils' conduct. There has been a reduction in the frequency of serious incidents. However, these still occur too often. Some pupils' lack of respect for each other undermines the positive environment that the school is striving to create. Staff described the daily disruption to learning, and the additional workload that it creates, as a major challenge to their well-being.

A considerable proportion of pupils, including some of the most vulnerable pupils, are persistently absent from school. The school engages with appropriate external agencies to support these pupils to attend school. This has led to a reduction in absence levels for some pupils. However, there is a lack of systematic analysis to identify the reasons why some pupils do not attend. Consequently, the school's

actions to bring about improvement have not made enough difference to some pupils' rates of attendance.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

The governing body has not ensured that the school's safer recruitment policy is enacted effectively. They have failed to carry out all of the checks on new governors that are required by law. While this does not place pupils at risk of harm, it represents a clear breach in the duties that governors must uphold.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Leadership capacity at all levels is weak. The school does not have the ability to address the shortcomings in pupils' education without considerable support. As a result, pupils' achievement has declined sharply since the previous inspection. Governors must ensure that there is sufficient capacity, knowledge and expertise within the school to bring about successful and sustainable improvements.
- Over time, some pupils' behaviour has deteriorated to the point that it has prevented the majority of pupils from learning effectively in an orderly environment. It also makes some pupils feel unsafe and unhappy. In addition, many pupils are persistently absent from school. The school must take urgent steps to ensure that consistent strategies to improve pupils' behaviour and attendance are in place, and that staff are supported to use them effectively.
- In most subjects, the curriculum is ineffective. Pupils' experience of learning is often disjointed and lacking in structure. Added to this, the curriculum does not appropriately support pupils' social and emotional needs. As a result, pupils underachieve considerably. The school must design and implement a curriculum that is coherent, meets pupils' needs and allows them to securely develop their knowledge and skills over time.
- Some staff lack the expertise to teach effectively. The school has not supported them sufficiently well to design learning and select appropriate pedagogies that meet pupils' needs. This further hinders how well pupils learn. The school should ensure that staff receive appropriate guidance and support to deliver subject curriculums consistently well.
- The school's systems to assess pupils' learning, including their social and emotional learning and how well they can read, are embryonic. Consequently, staff do not know where pupils have developed gaps or misconceptions in their learning, nor how well they are progressing towards the objectives in their EHC plans. The school must ensure that there is a coherent approach to checking how well pupils are learning the curriculum and to addressing gaps in pupils' knowledge, including their reading knowledge.

- The majority of pupils do not receive a suitable quality PSHE education. Added to this, the opportunities that the school provides to support pupils' wider development are not made available to all pupils equitably. Pupils' preparation for later life is starkly uneven. The school must ensure that its provision for pupils' personal development is of a high quality, delivered consistently well and accessible by all.
- The governing body has failed to uphold some of its duties. It has not ensured that the safer recruitment checks carried out on governors are in line with those required by law. Furthermore, the governing body has not ensured that pupils at the school have an equal access to education. Governors must ensure that all of their responsibilities are met.

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	104744
Local authority	Liverpool
Inspection number	10337282
Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	5 to 11
Gender of pupils	Boys
Number of pupils on the school roll	67
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governing body	Mark Rea
Headteacher	Geraldine James (Acting Headteacher)
Website	www.ernestcookson.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	2 July 2019, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- All pupils have EHC plans. The school caters for pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs. Places at the school are commissioned by the local authority.
- The school does not currently have a permanent headteacher. At the time of the inspection, the school was led by an acting headteacher with support from the local authority school improvement service.
- A considerable number of staff and governors, including the chair of governors, have been appointed since the previous inspection.
- The school operates an additional site. This is located entirely within Lister Junior School, Green Lane, Tuebrook, Liverpool, L13 7DT. Ten pupils receive full-time education at this site. They are taught by staff from Ernest Cookson School.
- The school does not make use of any alternative provision for pupils.

Information about this inspection

The inspectors carried out this inspection under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. We deemed the inspection a graded (section 5) inspection under the same Act.

In accordance with section 44(1) of the Education Act 2005, His Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires special measures because it is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the school are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school.

- 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 spoke with the acting headteacher, other leaders and members of staff. The lead inspector also met with members of the governing body, including the chair of governors. He also spoke with a representative of the local authority and several other professionals currently providing support to the school.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in early reading, mathematics and history. For each deep dive, inspectors held discussions about the curriculum, visited a sample of lessons, spoke with teachers, spoke with some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work. Inspectors also discussed the curriculum in some other subjects.
- Inspectors spoke with groups of pupils about their experiences at school and their views of behaviour and bullying.
- Inspectors scrutinised a range of documentation, including leaders' improvement plans, minutes of governing body meetings and records of pupils' behaviour and attendance.
- 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.
- Inspectors considered the responses to Ofsted Parent View, including the free-text comments. They also considered the responses to Ofsted's online survey for staff. There were no responses to the pupil survey.
- Inspectors visited the school's additional site and considered the education that pupils receive there.

Inspection team

Ben Hill, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Ian Hardman

His Majesty's Inspector

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