

# Inspection of Cumbria Academy for Autism

Branthwaite Road, Workington, Cumbria CA14 4SS

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| Inspection dates:         | 15 and 16 October 2024   |
| The quality of education  | <b>Requires improvement</b>  |
| Behaviour and attitudes   | <b>Good</b>  |
| Personal development      | <b>Good</b>  |
| Leadership and management | <b>Requires improvement</b>  |
| Sixth-form provision      | <b>Requires improvement</b>  |
| Previous inspection grade | Not previously inspected under section 5 of the Education Act 2005 |

The head of this school is Kara Smallman. This school is part of The Eden Academy Trust, which means other people in the trust also have responsibility for running the school. The trust is run by the chief executive officer (CEO), Susan Douglas, and overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by Barry Nolan. There is also an executive headteacher, who is responsible for this school and one other.

## **What is it like to attend this school?**

Pupils are welcomed to this school with a warm smile and a friendly greeting. They know that staff care for them deeply and that there is always an adult there for them when needed. Consequently, pupils feel happy and know that they are in safe hands here.

The school expects all pupils, all of whom have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), to achieve well. However, there are weaknesses in how well the curriculum for pupils across school, including students in the sixth form, is designed, and delivered, in several subjects. This means that some pupils do not achieve as well as they should.

Pupils are respectful of others. They conduct themselves well around school. Older students are positive role models for their peers. Pupils are clear about the behaviours expected of them. Staff respond swiftly and sensitively to their emotional needs.

Pupils talk enthusiastically about the interesting and varied 'enterprise' activities that they are involved in. There is a broad range of opportunities to develop their confidence and independence through creating companies and designing and making products. Older pupils act as a board of trustees, overseeing all aspects of these activities. Pupils gain a wealth of skills and understanding about the world of work through activities that include research, finance, and marketing.

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

This school has been through a period of turmoil. This had affected how safe pupils felt in school, as well as their behaviour. The new leadership team, including the trust, have acted rapidly to make improvements. The school is again a stable and caring place to be. However, this recent instability has meant that the school has not been able to develop the curriculum as much as it would have liked.

In the subjects that are designed well, the school has given careful thought to the important knowledge that pupils should learn. However, curriculum thinking in other subjects, including in the sixth form, is less well developed. In these subjects, the school has not set out the order of knowledge that it wants pupils to learn as clearly as it should. This means that teachers are not always clear about what to teach and when. As a result, in these subjects, some pupils do not learn as well as they could. Nevertheless, by the time that pupils leave school at the end of the sixth form, many are well prepared for their next steps in education, with some achieving qualifications, including GCSEs.

Teachers are knowledgeable about their subjects. They explain things clearly to pupils and design activities that capture their interests. Teachers provide pupils with many opportunities to revisit and recap important learning. In the main, this helps pupils to remember their learning well.

In subjects where the school is clear about what pupils should learn, staff routinely check that pupils have understood their learning. However, in other subjects, staff do not make checks carefully enough on what pupils have learned. This means that staff do not consistently identify gaps in pupils' knowledge or what pupils need to learn next.

Reading is a priority for the school. Pupils who struggle to read benefit from revisiting early reading strategies, including phonics. Reading books are well matched to pupils' abilities. Staff seek to foster a love of reading among pupils at every opportunity. They provide them with a wide range of books and reading materials, such as magazines, to complement their interests.

All pupils have education, health, and care (EHC) plans. Staff offer a range of support to help pupils achieve academically and to build their social, communication and independence skills. However, the information gathered about pupils' individual needs is not precise enough. For these pupils, their next steps are not as accurate as they should be. At times, this affects teachers' ability to meet pupils' needs as well as they could.

Pupils behave well in lessons. They listen carefully and are motivated to learn. As pupils get older, they are increasingly able to self-regulate and enjoy friendships, socialising and participating in all that the school has to offer. The school prioritises pupils' attendance. The school's analysis of absence is frequent and thorough. Sensitive support is put in place to re-engage pupils who struggle to attend school. Staff do all that they can to ensure pupils attend regularly.

Pupils' wider development is at the forefront of the school's work. Pupils have a strong voice in school. For example, they develop their own class rules and charters. Additionally, pupils were central to the decision to change the school's name and school uniform.

The school makes sure that pupils, including those in the sixth form, benefit from comprehensive careers advice and guidance. Older pupils are offered work experience and other practical experiences. These experiences develop pupils' confidence, resilience, and independence.

The local advisory board, and board of trustees, share the school's ambition and commitment to provide a high-quality education for pupils. However, this is not fully realised. For example, the curriculum, in a number of subjects, including personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education, remains underdeveloped. Staff value the support that they receive for their well-being and workload. For example, they appreciate the time that the school gives them to focus on their subject leadership roles. Staff are proud to work at the school.

## **Safeguarding**

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

## What does the school need to do to improve?

### (Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- In several subjects, across all key stages and including the sixth form, the school has not considered exactly what pupils should learn and in what order. This hinders some pupils from achieving as highly as they could. The school should finalise the curriculum content in these subjects to ensure that teachers know exactly what knowledge pupils must learn and when they should learn it.
- In several subjects, assessment strategies are not used effectively. Where this happens, teachers are not clear about what pupils have learned and where there might be gaps in pupils' knowledge. The school should ensure that teachers have a clear understanding of exactly what pupils know and can remember and use this information to shape future learning.
- For some pupils, the information the school has about their SEND needs is not used effectively. Where this is the case, teachers are not setting targets that are precise enough. Consequently, pupils do not learn all that they could. The school should ensure that targets set from the SEND information available to the school are precise enough to accurately identify pupils' next steps in learning.

## 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 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

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|---|--|
| <b>Unique reference number</b>                    | 143723   |
| <b>Local authority</b>                            | Cumberland   |
| <b>Inspection number</b>                          | 10294399   |
| <b>Type of school</b>                             | Special  |
| <b>School category</b>                            | Academy special converter  |
| <b>Age range of pupils</b>                        | 4 to 19  |
| <b>Gender of pupils</b>                           | Mixed  |
| <b>Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision</b>   | Mixed  |
| <b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>        | 65   |
| <b>Of which, number on roll in the sixth form</b> | 7  |
| <b>Appropriate authority</b>                      | Board of trustees  |
| <b>Chair of trust</b>                             | Barry Nolan  |
| <b>CEO of the trust</b>                           | Susan Douglas  |
| <b>Headteacher</b>                                | Kris Williams (executive headteacher),<br>Kara Smallman (head of school)                   |
| <b>Website</b>                                    | <a href="http://www.cumbriaacademyforautism.org.uk">www.cumbriaacademyforautism.org.uk</a> |
| <b>Date of previous inspection</b>                | Not previously inspected   |

## Information about this school

- Cumbria Academy for Autism originally opened as a free school in September 2019. The school converted to become an academy in November 2023. For a period of three weeks between 19 October and 7 November 2022, the school was closed to pupils due to safeguarding and welfare, health, and safety concerns.
- The school is a special school for pupils and students with autism. All pupils have an EHC plan.
- At the time of this inspection, there were no pupils in the early year's foundation stage or key stage 1.
- At the time of this inspection, the head of school was absent from the school.
- As well as a board of trustees, there is a local advisory board. This is chaired by John Moffat.
- 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.
- Leaders use two alternative providers.

## Information about this inspection

The inspectors carried out this graded inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. During a graded inspection, we grade the school for each of our key judgements (quality of education; behaviour and attitudes; personal development; and leadership and management) and for any relevant provision judgement (early years and/or sixth-form provision). Schools receiving a graded inspection from September 2024 will not be given an overall effectiveness grade.

- 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 carried out deep dives in these subjects: early reading, including aspects of communication and language, mathematics and PSHE. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with curriculum leaders, visited a sample of lessons, spoke with teachers, and looked at samples of pupils' work. Inspectors spoke with some pupils about their learning. They also looked at the curriculum in some other subjects.
- 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 spoke with pupils about school life.
- Inspectors spoke with the executive headteacher, the deputy headteacher, who was also the designated safeguarding lead, and member of staff responsible for the single central record. They also spoke to the SEND coordinator and those responsible for careers advice and guidance.
- Inspectors held discussions with staff, which focused on the well-being and safeguarding of pupils.
- The lead inspector spoke with the chair of the local advisory board, and members of the board of trustees, including the chair of trustees. She also spoke to the CEO of the trust.
- Inspectors reviewed a range of documentation, including documents relating to school improvement.
- Inspectors considered the responses to Ofsted Parent View, including the free-text comments. They also considered the responses to Ofsted's staff survey. There were no responses to Ofsted's pupil survey.

## Inspection team

Sue Eastwood, lead inspector  
Sharon Common

His Majesty's Inspector  
Ofsted Inspector

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