

# Blue Skies School

126 Maidstone Road, Chatham, Kent ME4 6DQ

**Inspection dates** 7–9 June 2016

**Overall effectiveness** **Good**

Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Good
Sixth form provision	Good

## Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

### This is a good school

- The head of school and his deputy provide a clear vision for the school and are an effective team. They are not afraid to question what is best for the pupils in their care.
- School leaders have high expectations of staff and pupils. Because of this, outcomes for pupils are good and improving.
- Staff are dedicated and committed to providing the high-quality care and guidance, both inside and outside the classroom, that pupils require.
- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good. Staff know the pupils well and provide appropriate levels of challenge and support throughout the school.
- Despite the complex needs of pupils, behaviour in classrooms and around the school is good.
- Senior leaders and proprietors have ensured that all the independent school standards are met.
- Safeguarding is given the highest priority. Staff are vigilant and aware of their statutory duties. They work hard at ensuring that pupils are safe both in and out of school.
- The personal development and welfare of pupils are catered for very well. Their social and emotional development is rightly seen as equally important as their academic achievements.
- The sixth form provides an effective curriculum and prepares students well for their future beyond school. Because of this, most move on to further education when they leave the school.
- Most pupils make good progress from their different starting points, including those who join the school after being out of education for long periods of time.
- Because of the good quality of teaching, pupils' attitudes to learning are good.

### It is not yet an outstanding school because

- The quality of teaching is good, but sometimes lacks the focus to ensure that pupils make the accelerated progress required to make their outcomes outstanding.
- The new system for tracking pupil progress is not yet fully embedded or as developed as it might be.
- The impact middle leaders have on improving the quality of teaching is not as effective as it could be.

### Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school meets the requirements of the schedule to the Education (Independent Schools Standards) Regulations 2014 ('the independent school standards') and associated requirements.

## Full report

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

- Further develop and refine the school's pupil tracking system so that teachers and support staff have a more fully accurate understanding of the needs and progress of each individual pupil.
- Develop the current leadership model so that middle leaders have more impact on improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, leading to outstanding outcomes for pupils.

## Inspection judgements

### Effectiveness of leadership and management is good

- The head of school and his deputy, who are also the proprietors, have a clear vision for the school. They lead with a quiet and calm confidence. They have instilled a culture which places the needs of the pupils, all of whom have complex needs, above all else. As a consequence, pupils experience success in a learning environment that is sympathetic to their individual requirements.
- Senior leaders have high expectations of staff and pupils. Because of this, pupils, many of whom have been unsuccessful in their previous schools, are constantly challenged to believe they can do better in all they do. The impact of this plays a major part in ensuring that the vast majority of pupils make the progress required for them to realise their full potential.
- Because of the small size of the school, all staff play a role in its leadership and management. While the leadership structure is well defined, all staff are expected to share the responsibility for ensuring that the pupils receive consistently high-quality learning experiences.
- Performance targets and the professional development of staff at all levels are closely linked to the school's priorities for improvement. Successful partnerships with other local schools and agencies have ensured that staff are equipped with the skills and expertise required to work in such a specialist environment.
- The school provides pupils with an appropriate curriculum, which covers all the required areas of learning. There is a strong focus on communication and language skills, and the deputy head of school, who is also responsible for the pastoral care of pupils, ensures that staff constantly focus on this aspect in order for pupils to make sense of their learning.
- The curriculum is kept under constant review to ensure that all pupils have an individual programme suited to their needs. This is especially the case for the small number of post-16 students who experience a range of practical and vocational experiences, as well as more formal academic study. Leaders ensure a clear focus on the personal interests and requirements of post-16 students, rather than just what might easily be provided for them.
- The spiritual, moral, social and cultural education of pupils is a strength of the school. Pupils have a strong sense of right and wrong. Activities such as communal lunches, where staff and pupils meet as a 'family' to socialise and experience food from different traditions and cultures, are popular.
- Leaders know the importance of teaching pupils the skills they need to play a successful part in modern British society. This goes well beyond ensuring that pupils are taught about democracy and the rule of law. Tolerance and respect for the views of others and the dangers of stereotyping, discriminating or treating people unfairly are intricately woven into the school day.
- Communication between staff, parents and pupils is excellent, ensuring that the needs of each individual pupil are met very well. Parents told the inspector that they appreciate the very open and honest approach of leaders when they raise concerns. They have confidence in the school and said that problems are tackled quickly and fairly when they arise.
- The position of senior teacher is key in ensuring that the quality of teaching continues to improve in order to become outstanding. The proprietors recognise that this role is underdeveloped and have plans to formalise the position and review the responsibilities it carries in order to strengthen the impact leaders have on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment.
- School leaders and managers work effectively to ensure that the independent school standards are met.
- **The governance of the school:**
  - The school's proprietors have a clear understanding of the strengths and areas that need to be further developed in the school. They have ensured that the good standards reported during the last inspection have been maintained, despite changes in the leadership structure of the school.
  - Proprietors understand the needs of the school's pupils well. They are not afraid to question how well the school provides for their academic and social and emotional needs. Because of this, pupils benefit from a well-balanced education that focuses on what is right for each individual.
  - The proprietors have ensured that the performance of staff is monitored closely and pay awards are closely linked to successful outcomes for pupils.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Procedures and day-to-day routines are sound and staff are very clear about their individual responsibilities where the safety of the pupils is concerned. The school provides a safe environment for learning and is maintained well. All appropriate checks, including fire safety, risk assessments and the suitability of staff or visitors, are in place. Parents told the inspector

they feel the school cares for their children well. Pupils told the inspector they feel that the school is a safe place for them to be.

## Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good

- The quality of teaching is consistently good. Because of this, most pupils make good progress from their different starting points. This is impressive when consideration is given to the fact that many pupils join the school with large gaps in their knowledge and understanding due to the inconsistent and dysfunctional nature of their prior educational experiences.
- Practical activities punctuate most lessons. Small breaks in learning ensure that pupils remain focused, although there were a number of occasions during the inspection where pupils were so engrossed in their learning, they continued with the tasks they had been set. This was the case in a mathematics lesson where pupils continued working to solve algebraic problems, despite being offered a 10-minute break.
- Small class sizes help teachers and support staff to provide pupils with the right level of challenge required to ensure success. Because staff know pupils very well, they recognise when individuals need more support and are not afraid of reshaping tasks or whole lessons in order to maximise learning.
- Relationships between adults and pupils are positive and classrooms are productive places. Teaching support staff play a crucial role in enabling pupils to remain focused and work to the best of their capabilities. This is especially the case with pupils who are new to the school or those who doubt their own ability.
- Because teachers recognise the importance of ensuring that pupils understand what is expected of them, there is a strong focus on the use of language in classrooms. Throughout the inspection staff used questioning skills very effectively in order to determine the progress pupils were making, thus detecting misconceptions, or identifying opportunities to deepen learning and add further challenge.
- Where teaching is strongest, pupils understand very clearly what is expected and respond well to tasks set for them. However, sometimes pupils are not given the time required to understand fully what is expected, or to respond to the questions adults ask. This means that pupil progress isn't always as strong as it might be.

## Personal development, behaviour and welfare are good

### Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good. Pupils benefit from a caring, nurturing environment and every effort is made to encourage each individual to aspire to achieve their best.
- Because of the culture of inspiring success, pupils gain in confidence as they move through the school. Most pupils display very good attitudes to learning and are curious to understand and make the links between new knowledge and what they have learnt before.
- Despite their complex needs, the majority of pupils display mature attitudes and are keen to be successful learners. Staff are skilled at breaking down the social and emotional barriers to learning that most pupils have, laying the foundations for the positive learning experiences needed for pupils to thrive.
- Staff attach great importance to preparing pupils for life in the 'real world' outside the school's nurturing environment. Parents are particularly impressed with this aspect of their children's education. One expressed delight that her son had been taught how to load and use a washing machine. Another expressed the opinion that his son would now manage well when he eventually left the school.
- The school works hard at ensuring physical and social and emotional well-being. The curriculum is enriched by activities such as Christmas shopping at a local mall and adventurous physical activities including kayaking, where all students were able to gain a nationally recognised certificate of competency.
- Pupils are taught to stay safe both in and outside school. Road and fire safety were the focus of a recent visit to the local fire station. Staying safe when using social media or the internet is a constant part of the school's efforts to prepare pupils for the potential dangers of modern communication technology.
- When the inspector spoke to a group of pupils about their prior experiences and opinions about the school, they were very forthright in praising the efforts of staff to provide for their needs. They offered

the opinion that staff understand them and treat them with respect. They are proud of their school and proud they belong to the Blue Skies 'family'.

### **Behaviour**

- The behaviour of pupils is good. Despite their complex needs, pupils' behaviour in classrooms or in communal areas of the school is commendable. They understand that poor behaviour is unacceptable and try hard to manage their emotions when they feel confused or angry.
- The school's behaviour policy is used consistently by all staff. Expectations are high. Rewards are used effectively to focus pupils' attention on 'doing the right thing'. Appropriate sanctions for poor conduct are used when required.
- Parents told the inspector that the school deals with behaviour well and that staff don't over-react when things go wrong. This was certainly the case during the inspection. Serious disruption within classrooms is rare and staff are skilled at ensuring that pupils stay focused so that conditions for learning are optimised.
- The attendance of pupils is very good, especially when the severe and complex needs of most pupils are considered. Absence is monitored closely and has fallen steadily over the last three years. Most pupils come to school most of the time.

### **Outcomes for pupils**

**are good**

- Because of the disruption pupils have experienced in their previous educational life, most enter the school with starting points that are typically below or well below those that might be expected for their age.
- Many pupils have been out of formal education for long periods of time before entry. Very few join at the start of the school year. There are no pupils in Year 7 at the moment. All pupils joining the school have previously suffered serious disruptions to their learning in the past.
- Once pupils settle into the school and start to benefit from the consistent approach and high expectations of staff, they begin to make good progress from their different starting points, especially in English and mathematics.
- In the past, outcomes in mathematics by the end of key stage 4 have been better than those in English. Typically, most pupils are successful in obtaining GCSE awards for mathematics, many at higher levels. This year, the school predicts that all of its Year 12 pupils will achieve at grade C or above in English language and English literature.
- Disadvantaged pupils do equally as well as other pupils in the school because of the focused support they receive. Due to the very small numbers of disadvantaged pupils attending the school, it is not helpful to make comparisons with other pupils nationally.
- Because of the bespoke nature of each pupil's support the most able pupils do very well. This is especially the case in key stage 4 and the sixth form, where the school has seen some very impressive individual successes in recent years.
- Outcomes in the sixth form are improving, although very small numbers in some cohorts make year-on-year comparisons meaningless. Last year, all students leaving the sixth form went on to further education. The school expects this to be the case this year.
- The school is using a new system to track the progress of pupils in light of the move away from assessment using national curriculum levels. School leaders are keen to further develop and refine this system to enable staff to have a more consistent approach to assessing pupil progress.

### **Sixth form provision**

**is good**

- The school's post-16 provision is good. School leaders have ensured that the high expectations seen in the rest of the school are continued into the sixth form. This means that students are supported well in their transition to further education, training including apprenticeships, or employment.
- Because of the very small numbers in the sixth form, the school offers bespoke programmes of studies for its students, ensuring that the interests of individuals, not what the school might be able to offer, dictates the pathway they follow.
- Pastoral support is strong. Students in the sixth form are expected to set an example to the pupils in the rest of the school. Expectations of behaviour and academic progress continue to be high.
- Due to the school not using alternative placements or providers in the sixth form, students benefit from a stable environment and continue to receive support and guidance from staff they know well. In some

cases, specialist tutors or teachers are employed so that students can make the choices that interest them most. This arrangement also provides the safe and nurturing environment that individual students require.

- Last year, all of the school's sixth-form students progressed to further education, with most moving to mainstream colleges. The school expects this to be the case again this year and transition arrangements are under way to ensure that students are well prepared for the potentially destabilising changes that this move might bring.
- Careers advice is delivered both in-house, including visits to careers fairs, and through a partnership with the Medway Youth Trust, which provides impartial advice and guidance.
- The school also uses the services offered by a local university of 'accessibility ambassadors', who visit weekly with a programme which encourages pupils across the whole school to look 'outward' and 'forward' when considering what comes after their time at Blues Skies School.
- Those students who need to improve their English and mathematics skills during the sixth form do so during functional English and mathematics sessions, or by studying to improve their GCSE grades.
- The school has worked hard in recent years to increase the breadth of work experience placements available to students in the sixth form. Recent placements include those with a national power company, an 'arts' café, stables and a local school for a pupil who wants to follow a career in teaching.

## School details

<b>Unique reference number</b>	135576
<b>Inspection number</b>	10008610
<b>DfE registration number</b>	887/6130

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

<b>Type of school</b>	Day special school
<b>School status</b>	Independent school
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	11–25
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Gender of pupils in the sixth form</b>	Mixed
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	20
<b>Of which, number on roll in sixth form</b>	7
<b>Number of part time pupils</b>	None
<b>Proprietor</b>	Blue Skies Limited (Jonathan and Lauren Higgins)
<b>Chair</b>	Jonathan Higgins
<b>Headteacher</b>	Jonathan Higgins
<b>Annual fees (day pupils)</b>	£30,840
<b>Telephone number</b>	01634 357770
<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.blueskiesschool.co.uk">www.blueskiesschool.co.uk</a>
<b>Email address</b>	<a href="mailto:info@blueskiesschool.co.uk">info@blueskiesschool.co.uk</a>
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	4–5 July 2012

## Information about this school

- Blue Skies School is an independent day special school for pupils aged from 11 to 25 who have autism or social and communication difficulties. The school is currently registered for 38 pupils.
- Pupils are placed by Medway and Kent local authorities and have often had a disrupted education before joining the school.
- There are currently 20 pupils on roll, including seven in the sixth form. All pupils attending the school have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan.
- Most pupils are of White British heritage.
- The school does not use any alternative or off-site provision.
- The school has no particular religious affiliation.
- The current head of school took up his position after the last standard inspection, which took place in July 2012.

## Information about this inspection

- The inspector observed teaching and learning across the school and looked at samples of pupils' work across a number of subjects and year groups.
- The behaviour of pupils was observed at the start of the school day, during break and lunchtimes, and as pupils moved around the school at different stages of the day.
- Meetings were held with the head and deputy head of school, who are also the proprietors. Additional meetings were held with members of staff with various leadership and management responsibilities. A meeting was also held with a group of pupils.
- The inspector considered the views of parents by analysing Ofsted's online parent questionnaire, Parent View. He also held telephone conversations with parents. Seven responses to the staff questionnaire were also considered.
- The inspector scrutinised policies, procedures and records in order to check the school's compliance with the independent school standards.
- The inspector considered a number of documents provided by the school, including the school's self-evaluation document, school improvement plan, and the school's own pupil progress information.

## Inspection team

Clive Close, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

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