

Acorn Park School

Andrews Furlong, Mill Road, Banham, Norwich, Norfolk, NR16 2HU

Inspection dates	26–28 April 2016
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Requires improvement
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Requires improvement
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Requires improvement
Sixth form provision	Requires improvement

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement

- Staff turnover has been high since the 2012 inspection. This has created instability and much concern among staff.
- The quality of teaching, assessment and learning is not consistently good because staff's expertise varies. As a result, pupils make only expected progress from their individual starting points.
- There is a limited range of nationally recognised qualifications and work-related courses for older pupils.
- The provision for post-16 learners does not yet provide them with a high-quality curriculum or learning environment.
- Subject leadership is at an early stage of development.
- The proprietors have not ensured that all the independent school standards are met.

The school has the following strengths

- This is a rapidly improving school and the right things are in place to make the required improvements.
- Many pupils say this is the best school that they have been to because the staff understand about autism and what to do to help them.
- Pupils are proud of their school, and their behaviour is often good.
- Pupils know a lot about how to stay safe, and staff at all levels of responsibility are extremely vigilant about pupils' well-being.
- Over the past 12 months, appointments for teaching, senior leadership and administrative positions have improved the quality of the provision.
- The strategic direction of the school is set out clearly by senior leaders. The permanent staff team is committed to the school's vision and leaders are keen to play their part.
- The governing body plays a significantly positive part in school improvement.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school must take action to meet the requirements of the schedule to The Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 and associated requirements. The details are listed in the full report.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by making sure that:
 - teachers have high-quality qualifications, expertise and experience to meet pupils' special educational needs and disabilities
 - teaching plans and assessments are suitably detailed to focus on pupils' learning as well as their social behaviour
 - staff teams have a shared understanding of how best to support pupils to show what they know and can do
 - pupils study for a suitably broad range of academic and work-related qualifications.
- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by making sure that subject leaders play a significant role in improving the quality of teaching and pupils' outcomes.
- Improve the sixth form provision, by:
 - establishing a clear rationale and identity for post-16 provision that supports learners' personal development in preparation for the next stage in their education
 - providing a suitable range of academic and vocational courses that meet learners' needs, aspirations and interests.
- The school must meet the following independent school standards:
 - The proprietor must enable pupils to acquire new knowledge and make good progress according to their ability so that they increase their understanding and develop their skills in the subjects taught (paragraph 3, 3(a)).
 - The proprietor must provide suitable accommodation for the short-term care of sick and injured pupils, which includes a washing facility and is near to a toilet facility (paragraph 24(1), 24(1)(b)).

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management requires improvement

- All but two of the independent school standards are met:
 - the standard about enabling pupils to make good progress is not met because pupils only make expected progress
 - there is no washing facility in the medical room.
- The recruitment of sufficient and suitably qualified staff has been a problem. Too few staff have been responsible for too much of the work for too long. Nevertheless, the acting headteacher and the chair of the governing body are committed to increasing the number of suitably qualified teachers. They support staff with the relevant courses, experience and time to complete the training. New staff have been appointed with the relevant qualifications and experience to move the school forward.
- Concerns over high staff turnover and complaints about excessive workload are well founded. Staff say that the situation has improved but they have mixed views about the availability of training, communication among staff and how well the school is led and managed. The acting headteacher and the governing body are aware of the concerns and some actions have taken place, particularly over the past year. For example, by:
 - listening more carefully to staff's concerns and taking action
 - negotiating non-teaching time so that staff can prepare teaching and assess pupils' work
 - appointing permanent staff with suitable expertise and qualifications.
- The curriculum gives pupils a range of opportunities to develop their skills in contexts that are meaningful and memorable. These include, for example, the care of the resident chickens, rabbits and guinea pigs, the meals in local restaurants or paying for goods in local shops.
- Pupils' personal development is a high priority throughout the curriculum, particularly speaking, listening and social skills. They learn how to work and play successfully with others, to stand up for themselves and to respect those who have different ideas or cultural traditions.
- Careers education, work-related learning and opportunities to gain a range of suitable nationally recognised qualifications are at an early stage of development.
- Subject leaders for English and mathematics were appointed recently. This is the first time that teachers have taken additional leadership responsibilities for subjects. There is a new leader of the sixth form. These leaders are ambitious and well experienced but do not yet play a full part in school improvement.
- Although most areas of the school's work require improvement, there are many strengths in leadership and management that mean that the school is well placed to move forward confidently:
 - the acting headteacher is well respected, knows what needs to be done and gives staff a clear steer about the priority for pupils to achieve well academically and socially
 - the principal makes sure that pupils' work is assessed accurately and tracked thoroughly, which gives staff what they need to plan effective lessons that meet pupils' needs
 - the operational manager tracks incidents of inappropriate behaviour thoroughly so that staff can evaluate the effectiveness of their management of pupils' behaviour
 - the family support worker makes sure that the revised admissions arrangements are strictly applied, which means that staff are now better prepared for new pupils.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - is strong
 - sets high demands on senior staff to provide a range of information about pupils' performance
 - regularly holds senior leaders to account for the quality of education and pupils' outcomes
 - provides significant funding to bring the premises and accommodation up to a high standard
 - funds frequent and relevant training for staff
 - provides good support through the human resources team.
- The arrangements for safeguarding pupils are effective.
 - Policies and systems for managing pupils' behaviour, assessing risks, appointing staff, referring concerns to the relevant authorities and restraining pupils are implemented effectively. Relevant training supports staff to fulfil their duties proficiently.
 - Staff work closely with parents, carers and other professionals to share information about pupils' well-being.

- Pupils have good opportunities to learn how to be safe and healthy, including off-site.
- Pupils of all ages and abilities make choices and express their likes and dislikes, some using symbols, gestures or pictures, others through well-reasoned discussions.
- The facilities manager has earned a well-deserved reputation for responding to health and safety matters quickly, and for being highly organised and methodical in identifying risks.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment requires improvement

- The quality of teaching and assessment varies between classes, and is not of a sufficiently high standard for pupils to make consistently good progress.
- Qualified or well-experienced teachers plan learning effectively and teach pupils well. These teachers plan the learning carried out by teams of higher level teaching assistants (HLTAs) and teaching assistants (TAs). Although well trained to support pupils' care, highly committed and competent to make sure that pupils achieve expected levels, HLTAs and TAs lack the necessary skills to maximise learning. In addition, the effectiveness of the teams is sometimes diminished by the frequent and considerable use of agency staff, which adds additional burden for existing staff and creates uncertainty for pupils.
- Pupils' behaviour is often managed very well. During off-site activities and around the school site, staff skilfully and confidently manage pupils' behaviour so that they respond to high expectations and confront situations that they find really difficult, such as going to unfamiliar places or playing cooperatively with others. Their independence and autonomy is not as well developed in classrooms because pupils are not always encouraged to do enough by themselves, to take initiative or to learn from their mistakes.
- Opportunities to work as part of a group are well developed in some classrooms. This successfully promotes team work and produces a lively learning environment, particularly for the most-able pupils, who enjoy the debate and challenge.
- The therapy team makes a good contribution to pupils' learning, particularly their personal well-being, so that barriers to their confidence, language or physical skills do not get in the way of their learning. For example, as a result of the therapists' work with staff and pupils, the use of symbols to support communication and learning has become a strong feature of teaching.
- The quality of assessment varies because feedback to pupils, and teachers' notes about pupils' achievements, often focus on effort rather than on what pupils can do or how to extend the learning.

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 have positive attitudes to work and play, and are confident to try new things, to make choices and to express how they feel.
- Pupils are actively encouraged to express their views and to make choices. For example, they are involved in democratic decisions such as agreeing acceptable behaviour in class and the rewards that follow.
- Pupils of all abilities understand that bullying is wrong and have the vocabulary, oral or through symbols and gestures, to verbalise what is right and what is wrong.
- Older students know the effect that their unpredictable or unusual behaviours might have on other people, particularly within the wider community.
- The most-able pupils articulate the complexity, as well as the pleasure, of maintaining friendships. They understand how to deal with peer pressure or pressure from others who may lead them into danger, such as on the internet.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- Learning takes place in a supportive, yet challenging environment. Learning is not often interrupted by inappropriate behaviour. If it is, it is not for long and pupils know not to join in with those who are finding it hard to manage. This is because:
 - permanent staff form a very strong and united team, who know how to reduce pupils' anxieties very successfully and frequently reinforce appropriate behaviour so that pupils learn how to regulate their own behaviour

- staff sensitively challenge pupils’ inappropriate behaviour, including unacceptable language, and pupils respond quickly because they know what is expected and what is fair
- pupils trust the adults to guide and advise them for what is best.
- Staff have a good understanding of pupils’ vulnerabilities. A comprehensive range of risk assessments means that staff are vigilant and take swift action to address concerns.
- Most pupils’ attendance is in line with the national average.

Outcomes for pupils

require improvement

- Pupils of all ages and abilities, and including disadvantaged pupils, make expected progress from their different starting points, across a range of subjects. Progress in science is not as well developed as for literacy and numeracy.
- Pupils often make good progress in mathematics.
- Prior to September 2015, there were too few opportunities for pupils to gain nationally accredited courses, particularly for the most-able pupils:
 - GCSEs and functional qualifications for English and mathematics were introduced for a few pupils last year and they achieved the expected grades.
 - This academic year, the range is extended to include information technology (IT), and more pupils are entered for these examinations, and on track to achieve expected grades.
 - From September 2016, firm plans are in place to introduce a wider range of suitable courses and qualifications for pupils of all abilities from Year 9 through to the end of the post-16 provision.
- The quality of pupils’ work in books varies and is linked to the variation in the quality of teaching across the school.
 - Some pupils, particularly the most able, record mathematical work carefully so that it is an effective record of what was learned and what needs to improve.
 - Work is sometimes limited to minimal recording of single words or numbers, or sticking pictures that have been cut out by staff, particularly for the less-able pupils.

Sixth form provision

requires improvement

- Development of the sixth form provision is a work in progress and a clear priority within the school’s action plan.
- Post-16 learners are currently taught with pupils of other ages or individually in separate classrooms. Learners’ individual needs, particularly their social and emotional development, are planned appropriately but full consideration for their successful transition to the next stage in their education is not well planned.
- The new leader of the post-16 provision and the previous post-holder know what needs to be done and have the expertise to make the changes happen. In addition, new, well-experienced teachers have been appointed to support the curriculum and qualifications for older learners of all abilities, needs and interests.
- As for older pupils, the current vocational courses and qualifications for post-16 learners are for English, mathematics and IT, although the range will increase from September 2016.
- Sixth-form learners leaving the school last year went on to further education or were supported to live as independently as possible within their local community.

School details

Unique reference number	135066
Inspection number	10006086
DfE registration number	926/6152

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.

Type of school	Independent special school
School status	Independent school
Age range of pupils	6–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	66
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	17
Proprietor	Acorn Care and Education
Chair	Grahame McEwan
Headteacher	Arabella Hardey (acting headteacher)
Annual fees	£40,000 to £80,000
Telephone number	01953 886656
Website	www.acornschoools.co.uk
Email address	admin@acornparkschool.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	3–4 October 2012

Information about this school

- There have been two changes in headteacher since the previous standard inspection, in 2012. The school is currently led by the deputy headteacher (as acting headteacher) during the planned absence of the current substantive headteacher.
- The number of pupils on roll is over double that at the time of the previous standard inspection.
- Since the 2012 standard inspection, Ofsted has conducted two inspections and an evaluation of the action plan:
 - 24 June 2014; an unannounced emergency (following concerns about staff ratios, the high turnover of staff, staff contracts and the supervision of pupils), when six of the independent school standards were judged as not met
 - October 2014; an evaluation of the school's action plan for the six unmet independent school standards was judged as likely to lead to the standards being met
 - 5 February 2015; an unannounced progress monitoring inspection, when the independent school standards were judged as met.
- This is a special school for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities where almost all pupils have a diagnosis of autism and an education, health and care plan or a statement of special educational needs.
- Almost all pupils are boys.
- Just under one in four pupils are looked after by their local authority.

Information about this inspection

- The Department for Education commissioned Ofsted to carry out this standard inspection earlier in the inspection cycle than previously planned, following complaints about the effects of high staff turnover.
- The inspectors observed lessons, some jointly with the acting headteacher. Meetings were held with the acting headteacher, the principal, the chair of the governing body, and the leader of the post-16 provision. In addition, inspectors met with the family support worker, the facilities manager, the operations manager, the human resources manager from the trust, two therapists, classroom staff and pupils. Documents were scrutinised for pupils' progress, the quality of teaching and governance, and arrangements to safeguard pupils. An inspector toured the premises. The single central register of recruitment checks on staff's suitability to work with children was also scrutinised.
- Inspectors considered the views of pupils, parents, staff and local authority officers. Seven parents responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View and six gave written comments. Inspectors also received 54 responses to Ofsted's questionnaire for staff. Two telephone discussions were held with representatives from the local authority. The school's two most recent questionnaires for pupils were considered.

Inspection team

Heather Yaxley, lead Inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Jennifer Carpenter

Ofsted Inspector

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