Inspection of a school judged good for overall effectiveness before September 2024: Oakley School

Pembury Road, Tunbridge Wells, Kent TN2 4NE

Inspection dates: 22 and 23 October 2024

Outcome

Evidence gathered during this ungraded (section 8) inspection suggests that the school's work may have improved significantly across all areas since the previous inspection. The school's next inspection will be a graded inspection.

What is it like to attend this school?

The school's motto, 'Work hard, be kind, have fun and stay safe', is embodied in pupils' experiences. The school has a profoundly happy and respectful atmosphere. Pupils and adults treat one another with dignity and kindness. Pupils appreciate and trust their teachers and adults who support them. This is demonstrated through frequent informal conversations and interactions, pupils' strong attendance, and their high engagement in learning.

This is a 'total communication' school. Pupils are helped to convey their thoughts, supported by a range of resources. These include communication boards and aids, signing and the spoken word. Pupils develop an understanding of themselves, identifying their emotions and their likes and dislikes. Knowing what motivates and supports each pupil to learn successfully is fundamental to the school's work. Learning activities are adapted for every pupil in light of this information. Consequently, pupils rise to the school's high expectations for their learning.

Opportunities for learning beyond the classroom, including in the school's forest area, are exceptional. Graduated opportunities exist for pupils to join clubs, participate in sports events, take part in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme and to experience numerous school trips. Residential trips take place at increasing distances from home, including France and skiing in Italy.

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

The school's curriculum is ambitious and exciting. The curriculum operates on a four-year cycle and is meticulously tailored to Oakley School's age-related phases. Three pathways, known as: 'Engage', 'Explore' and 'Discover' ensure that, within their phases, pupils are further grouped according to their learning needs. Key areas of learning have been forensically considered. This has resulted in the 'Oakley Learning Journey Document'. For each curriculum area, the document identifies sequences of learning. This supports teachers to plan learning that is adapted precisely to meet pupils' needs from the early years to the sixth form.

Many approaches and strategies to facilitate learning are deeply embedded, including those to support regulation and communication. The integrated use of therapies and expertise from the therapies team supports pupils to learn well.

Staff routinely access further training to ensure that they possess strong subject knowledge and wider expertise. For example, training in reading, autism, Makaton and positive behaviour is routine for all staff. Adults get to know each pupil very well. Information about pupils' interests, as well as individual targets, is considered when planning learning. Consequently, activities are motivational, purposeful and fun. Moreover, the curriculum is relevant to pupils' lives. Most important things to learn are identified and prioritised, for example developing life skills that will support pupils immediately and into their futures. For example, older pupils, at the Tonbridge site, are taught about paying for items using bank cards as well as cash. Throughout the school, pupils learn to tell the time using digital clocks, reflecting their real-life experiences using phones and timetables.

There is expertise and enthusiasm in the school's oversight of reading. Staff are well-trained in phonics and many pupils learn to read fluently. Staff are resourceful at engaging all pupils in literature. For example, including yoga poses to represent different parts of the story 'Guess How Much I Love You' and a pupil reading a text aloud alongside an animation of the book on screen. A love of books is evident. Regular visits to the local library take place. There are book corners in many classrooms and sensory stories are widely used. Pupils spoke to inspectors about their favourite books, which included fairy tales, fiction and non-fiction texts. Pupils commented on their enjoyment of reading and talked about wider benefits, such as reading being calming and therapeutic.

Pupils at Oakley School achieve well. This is demonstrated through pupils' portfolios, progress towards education, health and care plan targets and in sixth-form students' achievement in functional skills accreditations. Leaders and teachers know how well each pupil is progressing through the curriculum. There is a collaborative approach to identifying and removing barriers to learning. Opportunities for pupils' wider development, including work experience and being part of the recruitment process for new staff, are extensive. Pupils are prepared fully for transition to colleges and wider provisions. This reflects the school's vision to give pupils opportunities to 'engage, explore, discover and develop their independence - to become confident, resilient, happy and well prepared for a positive and meaningful future'.

The school's leaders at all levels are inspirational. There is an unwavering commitment and determination to provide the best possible education for pupils. This is reflected in the extensive staff development offer, their awareness and consideration of the latest research and in judicious decision-making about implementing new approaches. Leaders, including governors, remain mindful of staff workload and routinely take this into account. Pupils and their families are at the heart of the school's work.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Background

Until September 2024, on a graded (section 5) inspection we gave schools an overall effectiveness grade, in addition to the key and provision judgements. Overall effectiveness grades given before September 2024 will continue to be visible on school inspection reports and on Ofsted's website. From September 2024, graded inspections will not include an overall effectiveness grade. This school was, before September 2024, judged to be good for its overall effectiveness.

We have now inspected the school to determine whether it has taken effective action to maintain the standards identified at that previous inspection. 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's work has improved significantly or that it may not be as strong as it was at the last inspection, then the next inspection will be a graded inspection. A graded inspection 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 second ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be good for overall effectiveness in March 2015.

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	132148
Local authority	Kent
Inspection number	10341647
Type of school	All-through Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	3 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	222
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	41
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governing body	Lizzie Bentley Bowers
Headteacher	Sam Perryman
Website	www.oakleyschool.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	26 March 2019, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- Oakley School is the Tunbridge Wells District Special school for children and young people, aged 4 to 19 years, with profound, severe and/or complex needs. Oakley school has an observation and assessment nursery at the Tunbridge Wells site.
- The school is located on two different sites. The main site is in Tunbridge Wells. Older pupils, in phase 4 of the school (academic years 10 to 14), attend school on the Tonbridge site. This is located in Waveney Road, Tonbridge.
- Since the previous inspection, the headteacher retired. The former deputy headteacher was appointed to the role of headteacher.
- The school uses no alternative provision.
- 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.

Information about this inspection

- Inspections are a point-in-time evaluation 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 met with the headteacher, the deputy headteacher, the assistant headteachers and heads of phase. The lead inspector also met with a group of governors, including the chair and vice-chair. The lead inspector held a telephone conversation with a representative of the local authority.
- Inspectors focused inspection activity on the following groups of subjects: communication and interaction, reading and mathematics, and personal, social, emotional and physical development. For each group of subjects, inspectors visited a sample of lessons, spoke to pupils and staff about 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.

Inspection team

Hilary Macdonald, lead inspector	Ofsted Inspector
Anne Allen	Ofsted Inspector

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