

Inspection of a good school: The Link School

Swindon Road, Sunderland, Tyne and Wear SR3 4EE

Inspection dates:

15 and 16 November 2023

Outcome

The Link School continues to be a good school.

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils like the calm, peaceful atmosphere and small class sizes. They feel valued and notice how much staff care for them. Pupils are included in many decisions about their education. They grow in confidence and recognise the positive impact the school has on their lives.

Staff make clear what they expect of pupils' behaviour. Most pupils know and respond well to these expectations and boundaries. Skilled adults support pupils to manage their emotions and conduct. Pupils, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), learn to make positive behaviour choices.

Pupils develop trusting relationships with adults and know who to turn to if they have a concern. One pupil echoed the views of many in saying, 'If I have a problem, staff help me sort it out.' Pupils are safe, including from bullying. They are taught how to behave responsibly, including when online.

Pupils like what they study. They gain important knowledge of English, mathematics and science. This helps them make up lost ground from their previously disrupted schooling. Pupils develop the resilience to complete more challenging work. They get along well in lessons and respond positively to adults' encouragement. Pupils are well prepared to rejoin mainstream education.

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

Strong leadership and governance is bringing about many improvements to this inclusive school. Leaders have overhauled much of the curriculum. It is increasingly broad and ambitious and equips pupils with a secure grasp of English and mathematics. Support for pupils' social, behavioural and emotional development features in many aspects of the curriculum. This provides pupils with a strong foundation to achieve well in their time at the school and many do.

Most pupils have significant gaps from their previous learning. Many need plenty of skilled support to re-engage with school. Leaders establish a precise knowledge of each pupil's academic, behavioural and emotional needs. Leaders also identify accurately the needs of pupils with SEND. Staff use their training and subject knowledge to mould the curriculum to each pupil's needs.

Many pupils join the school as reluctant or struggling readers. The school has transformed its reading curriculum. Pupils in the early stages of reading receive precise phonics teaching each day. They read books that help them to practise the sounds they know. Skilled staff provide weaker readers with well-judged support. Pupils become more confident, fluent readers. Many enjoy listening to a wide range of stories. Older pupils confidently discuss the texts they are studying. The school's work to ensure that more pupils read widely and for pleasure is having more impact in the primary phase than in the secondary phase.

In the wider curriculum, leaders have set out what pupils should learn in each subject. Teachers are careful not to overload pupils with too much new information. Teachers design learning that matches the interests of pupils, including those with SEND, and builds on what they have studied before. Teachers spot and are quick to support pupils who struggle in their learning. Attendance at 'gap busting sessions' helps pupils to develop a more secure grasp of important information. Pupils remember plenty of what they study.

Pupils receive the support that they need to manage their behaviour. Staff model the positive attitudes they expect of pupils. Therefore, the longer pupils are at the school, the better they behave. Lessons are typically positive and productive with plenty of good-humoured discussions.

The school provides impressive provision for pupils' personal development. A well-thought-out mindfulness programme supports pupils to reflect on and manage their emotions and actions. As part of the curriculum offer, pupils gain valuable experience of life in the local community through, for example, visits to local landmarks. Older pupils receive well-judged careers guidance and experience of the world of work. They learn relevant vocational subjects. This supports many to continue with their education when they leave the school.

Many pupils have a history of low attendance. Leaders understand the causes of this and use a wide range of strategies to support pupils to attend well. Many pupils' attendance improves. However, the attendance of some pupils in key stage four remains lower than it should be.

Staff share leaders' passion to enable pupils to achieve the best possible outcomes. Staff enjoy and are proud to work at the school. They feel listened to and say leaders are considerate of their workload and well-being. Parents, pupils and commissioning schools are fulsome in their praise of the work of 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)

- The school's work to instil a love of reading is ongoing. It is having less of an impact in the secondary phase than in the primary phase. Some older pupils do not enjoy reading and do not read widely. Leaders should accelerate their work to ensure that secondary-age pupils read more widely and become more confident and fluent readers.
- The attendance of some pupils in key stage four is lower than it should be. Leaders should review and finetune the strategies that they have in place to improve pupils' attendance so all older pupils attend regularly and often.

Background

When we have judged a school to be good, we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains good. 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 would now receive a higher or lower grade, then the next inspection will be a graded inspection, which 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 first ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be good in June 2018.

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

Unique reference number	135640
Local authority	Sunderland
Inspection number	10290155
Type of school	Pupil referral unit
School category	Pupil referral unit
Age range of pupils	5 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	147
Appropriate authority	Local authority
Headteacher	Donna Walker
Website	www.linkschool.org.uk
Dates of previous inspection	12 and 13 June 2018, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The Link School is a pupil referral unit providing education for up to 196 pupils aged between 5 and 16. Some pupils are dual registered. This means that they are on the roll of two schools: the commissioning school and The Link School.
- Since the last inspection, the age range of the school has been expanded to 5 to 16. The school operates across two main sites in Sunderland and one assessment hub in another school.
- Pupils join the school throughout the academic year.
- A high proportion of pupils have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Many have social, emotional and mental health needs.
- 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.
- The school makes use of three registered alternative providers and four unregistered alternative providers.

Information about this inspection

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 visited both school sites and the assessment hub, located at a local school.
- Inspectors visited two alternative providers and had discussions, by telephone, with two others.
- Inspectors held several meetings with the headteacher and other senior staff during the course of this inspection.
- Inspectors also met with several groups of teaching and support staff.
- The lead inspector met with six members of the management committee (the body responsible for governance of the school).
- Inspectors met with a representative of Sunderland local authority and also spoke with representatives from two commissioning schools.
- Deep dives were carried out in these subjects: reading, mathematics and science. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with subject leaders, visited a sample of lessons alongside school leaders, spoke with teachers, spoke with some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work. Inspectors also spoke with leaders and looked at samples of pupils' work in a small number of other subjects.
- Inspectors spoke with pupils about their learning and about their views on behaviour and the wider experiences they receive at school.
- Inspectors observed pupils' behaviour across the duration of the inspection.
- To check the effectiveness of safeguarding, inspectors checked the single central record of pre-appointment checks, looked at safeguarding documentation, spoke with staff, pupils, governors and trustees, and spoke with representatives from Sunderland local authority, commissioning schools and alternative providers.
- Inspectors reviewed parents' responses received through the Ofsted online questionnaire for parents, Ofsted Parent View, including free-text responses. Inspectors also considered the responses received through Ofsted's pupil and staff questionnaires. Inspectors took account of the school's analysis of its own surveys of the opinions of parents and pupils.

Inspection team

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His Majesty's Inspector

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