

Inspection of an outstanding school: The Avenue Special School

Conwy Close, Tilehurst, Reading, Berkshire RG30 4BZ

Inspection dates:

24–25 September 2019

Outcome

The Avenue Special School continues to be an outstanding school.

However, inspectors have some concerns that standards may be declining, as set out below.

What is it like to attend this school?

This is an exceptionally friendly school. Pupils told us that the school is 'calm and happy'. Pupils feel safe. They move sensibly around the building and cheerily greet each other on their way. Teachers make sure that all the classrooms are peaceful environments where pupils can concentrate. Adults want the very best for every pupil.

Pupils go out and about every week on interesting visits into the local community and further afield. One group of pupils are excitedly looking forward to a residential visit later this term. All the pupils get a chance to join in with these meaningful experiences.

Leaders want pupils to have successful adult lives. They have worked hard to reorganise pupils' learning so that they can achieve well. New schemes of work in phonics (letters and the sounds they represent) and mathematics are ambitious for pupils to achieve well. However, pupils' learning is not yet planned precisely enough in these areas. All pupils leave the school and continue their education. Leaders are rightly ambitious for more pupils to leave for employment, wherever possible.

Governors know the school inside out but are not using all the information available to them to support leaders and hold them to account.

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

Leaders have worked hard over the last two years to organise pupils' learning so that teachers know exactly what they need to teach in the right order. In the school's core subjects of physical development, social and emotional development and communication, the plans are very clear. Teachers know exactly what pupils need to be able to do before they move on to the next thing. Pupils achieve well in these areas because the learning is really well organised. However, in phonics and mathematics, for example, learning is not as well designed. These subject plans are less detailed and are not adapted precisely

enough for the very specific needs of the pupils in the school.

Leaders ensure that communication is at the heart of the school's work. Skilled staff fully understand pupils' individual needs and use exactly the same communication approaches throughout the school. As a result, pupils achieve success using signs, pictures, technology or words to communicate their thoughts and views.

Pupils develop a love of reading by listening to stories every day. Pupils eagerly told us about their favourite books. Pupils are introduced to rhymes, letters and sounds as soon as they join the school. The phonics programme is relatively new to the school and is not yet being used fully. More staff training is due to take place this term and leaders have firm plans in place to extend the programme this year.

Pupils behave extremely well at The Avenue. High-quality training and guidance ensure that staff know exactly how to support pupils' behaviour successfully. Impressively, even though the number of pupils attending the school has increased significantly in recent years, the rate of behaviour incidents has reduced. Pupils enjoy relaxed and sociable breaktimes with plenty of things to do. Pupils told us that they trust the adults at school. They said that if they were worried about something they would tell an adult.

Staff plan many activities to help pupils develop personally and socially. For example, pupils recently joined in with other local schools to take part in a poetry competition. Some pupils proudly told me about their visit to the Royal Albert Hall and showed me their photographs of the visit. These, and many other experiences, help to extend pupils' learning beyond just academic subjects.

Leaders are highly ambitious for pupils to get a job when they leave education. Older pupils' annual review meetings include discussion about preparing for leaving the school. Some pupils are learning to travel independently so that they can get to work or college by themselves. However, planning, particularly that linked to pupils' annual reviews, is not focused sharply enough on the skills and experiences that pupils will need to successfully find a job.

Governors are extremely proud of the school. They know the school well and visit regularly. However, when evaluating how effective the school is, they rely too heavily on what school leaders tell them. Governors do not make enough use of all the information available to them, including external reviews of the school, to continue to improve the school.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Staff know pupils well. They take time to get to know pupils and their families personally. Staff take pupils' welfare very seriously. They understand the signs that might mean a pupil is at risk. Staff report any concerns promptly following the school's clear procedures closely.

Leaders work with other agencies and professionals effectively to help keep pupils safe.

Leaders are tenacious. They are not afraid to challenge other professionals to make sure that pupils get the help they need to stay safe.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- While leaders have made sure that the school's core curriculum pathways are strong, Pupils' learning is not so well planned in phonics and mathematics, for example. Leaders need to continue to improve the planning in these areas so that learning is organised in a logical sequence, in small enough units, to meet pupils' very specific special educational needs and/or disabilities.
- Leaders have high aspirations for pupils to enjoy happy and successful adult lives. Most pupils go to college when they leave the school. Leaders need to sharpen their work with older pupils so that transition planning is more precisely focused on the skills and experiences pupils need to make a successful transition to adulthood, including into employment when possible.
- Governors are ambitious for pupils to achieve well. Governors need to make more effective use of all the information available to them to support and challenge leaders.

Background

When we have judged a special school to be outstanding, we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains outstanding. This is called a section 8 inspection of a good school or non-exempt outstanding school. We do not give graded judgements on a section 8 inspection. However, if we find some evidence that the school could now be better than good or that standards may be declining, then the next inspection will be a section 5 inspection. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the section 8 inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour or the quality of education, we will convert the section 8 inspection to a section 5 inspection immediately.

This is the second section 8 inspection since we judged the predecessor school, The Avenue School, to be outstanding on 11 March 2011.

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 Ofsted Parent View information 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.

If you are not happy with the inspection or the report, you can [complain to Ofsted](#).

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, '[disadvantaged pupils](#)' refers to those pupils who attract government pupil premium funding: pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years and pupils in care or who left care through adoption or another formal route.

School details

Unique reference number	137435
Local authority	Reading
Inspection number	10111397
Type of school	Special
School category	Academy special converter
Age range of pupils	2 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	173
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	16
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Isobel Ballsdon
Headteacher	Symon Cooke
Website	www.avenue.reading.sch.uk/
Date of previous inspection	23 February 2016

Information about this school

- The Avenue Special School became an academy on 1 September 2011. It is the only school in The Avenue School Special Needs Academy Trust.
- The Avenue is a special school which caters for pupils from the ages of 2 to 19 years. There was only one pupil on roll in the early years foundation stage at the time of this inspection. There were 16 pupils aged between 16 and 19 years on roll, although these pupils are integrated in the school. The school does not have separate sixth form provision.
- The Avenue provides for pupils who have moderate or severe learning difficulties. Some pupils have profound and multiple learning difficulties. Many pupils have a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. All pupils have an education, health and care plan.
- The headteacher was appointed in September 2017 and was not in post at the time of the previous inspection.

- The school has seen an increase in pupil numbers in recent years.

Information about this inspection

- We held meetings with senior leaders, middle leaders, teachers and a group of support staff.
- We evaluated the quality of education by looking in detail at the teaching of early reading and communication, mathematics, and physical education.
- We discussed the curriculum design with leaders, carried out lesson visits, scrutinised pupils' work and spoke to pupils and teachers, about the curriculum.
- We evaluated the effectiveness of safeguarding. The school's single central record was reviewed. We met with the designated safeguarding lead, scrutinised documentation, including a sample of case files, and spoke to pupils and staff.
- The lead inspector met with three governors, who are also trustees of the school, including the chair of the governing body.
- We met with pupils to discuss their views about the school and talked to pupils informally about the school. Sixteen pupils responded to Ofsted's online pupil survey.
- We took account of the 10 responses to the Ofsted Parent View survey, and seven additional free-text responses. An inspector met with a few parents at the beginning of the first day of the inspection.
- We considered the views of 110 members of staff who responded to Ofsted's staff survey.

Inspection team

Claire Prince, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Simon Yates

Ofsted Inspector

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