

Inspection of a good school: The Valley School

Broadhall Way, Stevenage, Hertfordshire SG2 9BN

Inspection dates:

11 and 12 July 2023

Outcome

There has been no change to this school's overall judgement of good as a result of this ungraded (section 8) inspection. However, the evidence gathered suggests that the inspection grade might not be as high if a graded (section 5) inspection were carried out now. Inspectors are recommending the next inspection to be a graded inspection.

What is it like to attend this school?

This is a happy and welcoming school. Pupils are cheerful, polite and enthusiastic learners. They take part in a wide range of activities that help them to develop confidence, independence and social skills. Pupils enjoy the performing arts curriculum. They are proud to have been part of the whole-school show and to have performed at the Albert Hall.

Pupils' behaviour is exemplary. Pupils learn to understand and manage their emotions. During lessons, lunch breaks and around the school, pupils behave sensibly and are respectful towards adults and each other. Pupils accept and understand that people are different. They are safe and appreciate the way that adults understand their individual needs.

Pupils benefit from extremely positive relationships with staff. Staff have high expectations for pupils, and pupils work hard to reach these. Pupils know and understand what bullying is. They know that they can trust adults to deal with any bullying should it happen.

As pupils move through the school, they learn to become increasingly independent. They learn how to use local transport and how to manage their finances. The school offers a wide range of work experience opportunities and career advice. This helps pupils to make informed choices about their future education and careers. However, some areas of the curriculum are not as well developed as others. As a result, some pupils are not always supported as well as they might be to achieve as well as they can.

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

Leaders have created an environment where staff are motivated to provide the very best

for pupils. As a result, pupils are keen learners, attend regularly, and consistently engage well with their learning.

Leaders have developed a curriculum that ensures that all pupils have access to a range of learning experiences. This curriculum has been set into three different pathways. Staff identify which pathway is appropriate and, in most subjects, match learning well to the different needs of pupils across all year groups. This means pupils access the curriculum at a level appropriate to their needs. This supports pupils to make progress from their individual starting points.

Leaders and middle leaders are continuing to develop the English curriculum. In key stage 3, pupils study books that link to their topics. This helps to broaden pupils' reading experiences. However, for some pupils who struggle to read, the curriculum does not set out clearly the sounds that pupils will learn, or the order they will learn them in, to help them to learn to read fluently. Teachers do not identify, with precision, the gaps that pupils have in their phonic knowledge. As a result, pupils do not always receive the targeted support they need. This means that some pupils do not develop the knowledge or skills they need to read as well as they might.

In writing, pupils have some opportunities to build on what they already know and to make useful connections to other subjects they study in school. However, some teachers do not focus well enough on the gaps that pupils have in their basic writing knowledge, such as in their letter formation or writing simple sentences. As a result, some pupils do not make as much progress in their writing as they should.

The school's vocational curriculum helps pupils to develop practical skills in a purposeful way. Pupils carefully design and construct woodwork and are proud to share their work with the school and visitors. Pupils learn to grow and nurture plants. They put the vegetables they grow to good use. These skills prepare pupils for a range of appropriate further learning when they leave. Most pupils gain qualifications at various levels to continue successfully with their education at the end of Year 11.

Pupils' well-being is at the heart of leaders' work. Leaders do their utmost to ensure pupils come to school and enjoy the everyday experiences of learning in an inclusive environment. Pupils learn about different religions and to accept people for who they are. Leaders offer a wide range of trips and clubs in school. They provide transport so that all pupils have access to the many after-school clubs.

Pupils learn what bullying is. Leaders closely monitor different behaviour incidents and ensure that those pupils who need enhanced support received it. Pupils learn about keeping themselves healthy and how to maintain respectful relationships.

Governors know the school well. They support and challenge school leaders effectively. Staff welcome the most recent changes and are well supported by leaders. Leaders know where the school needs to improve. The actions they have taken are beginning to make a difference.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Through leaders' comprehensive personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education curriculum, pupils learn about potential dangers when using social media and mobile devices. Pupils learn how to keep themselves safe outside of school, including being vulnerable to the risks of child exploitation. For those pupils who are unable to attend, leaders provide support at home and work closely with families until pupils are able to attend.

Staff are well trained, understand the potential risks to pupils in the community and know what signs to look for that might indicate a pupil is worried or at risk of harm. Staff refer and record concerns appropriately. Leaders deal with concerns effectively to ensure that pupils get the precise support they need to stay safe. This includes seeking help from external agencies when needed.

Leaders complete all required pre-employment checks on staff.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Leaders have not identified the important phonic knowledge that some pupils need to learn to be able to read. This means pupils do not build on their phonic knowledge to help them to read as well as they might. Staff do not identify the targeted support that some pupils need. Leaders need to ensure that there is a curriculum in place to support the teaching of phonics. They then need to ensure that there is appropriate training for staff so they know how to help pupils learn the sounds they need to read as well as they can.
- The English curriculum does not set out in enough detail the important skills that pupils need to learn to become secure and confident writers. This means pupils do not get enough opportunities to embed the important foundations they need to become better writers. Leaders need to identify precisely the important skills and knowledge that pupils need to learn from Year 7 to Year 11 so that pupils have better opportunities to make progress with their writing.
- Teachers do not clearly identify the gaps that individual pupils have in their reading and writing. This means they do not then plan well enough to address these gaps. As a result, some pupils do not secure the knowledge and skills they need to access future learning. Leaders need to ensure that they train all staff in how to identify and address gaps in pupils' reading and writing knowledge so that all pupils have better opportunities to build on their learning.

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 second ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be good in October 2013.

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](#)' 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	117669
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	10268753
Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	11 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	173
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governing body	Elizabeth Ellis
Headteacher	David Pearce
Website	https://thevalley.herts.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	24 January 2018, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- This school specialises in providing education for pupils with learning needs.
- All pupils have an education, health and care plan.
- There has been new leadership since the previous inspection. The headteacher took up post in 2021.
- The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 7 to 11 with information and engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.
- The school is currently undergoing the construction of a completely new school. This has had an impact on outdoor facilities, such as pupils' play areas.
- The school currently uses two unregistered alternative provisions.

Information about this inspection

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.

- Inspectors met with the headteacher and other members of the leadership team. They met with members of staff, four members of the governing body, including the chair of governors, and a representative of the local authority.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: English, PSHE and science. For each subject, inspectors discussed the curriculum with subject leaders, visited a sample of lessons, reviewed pupils' work and spoke with teachers and pupils.
- To inspect safeguarding, inspectors scrutinised the single central record and a wide range of documents, including safeguarding files. Inspectors spoke to leaders, including the designated safeguarding leads, staff and pupils.
- Inspectors considered the 16 responses, including free-text responses, to Ofsted's online survey, Ofsted Parent View. Inspectors also took into consideration 36 responses to Ofsted's staff survey and 34 responses to Ofsted's pupil survey. The lead inspector also took into account an email from a parent.
- Inspectors spoke with staff and pupils throughout the inspection to gather their views.

Inspection team

Cindy Impey, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

Mary Abeyasekera

Ofsted Inspector

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at <http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/>.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

© Crown copyright 2023