

My Choice School – Oak House

Unit 3a, Mill Green Business Estate, Mill Green Road, Haywards Heath, East Sussex RH16 1XQ

Inspection dates

16–18 May 2017

Overall effectiveness	Good
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- Pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare have improved markedly since the previous inspection. These aspects of the school's work are now a significant strength.
- Academic and welfare staff work constructively together to promote pupils' well-being and keep them safe.
- The head of education and headteacher work well together to ensure a good and improving quality of education for pupils.
- The new headteacher's overhaul of the curriculum means that pupils are now starting to gain recognised qualifications and accreditations. However, leaders do not place enough emphasis on checking how well pupils do once they leave the school to be sure how well prepared they were.
- Effective teaching means that pupils want to come to school. They work hard and achieve well. Relationships between staff and pupils are strong. However, additional adults in the classroom are not used well enough to enhance pupils' learning.
- Teachers have high expectations. Their effective questioning, clear explanations and helpful demonstrations all help pupils to learn well.
- Pupils are confident to ask for help in lessons, and teachers check their understanding carefully. Generally, teachers use these checks well to adapt their teaching. However, these adjustments are not always precise enough to maximise the progress of particular pupils, such as the most able.
- Pupils benefit from broad and varied learning opportunities. Promotion of their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is strong. However, the depth of teachers' subject knowledge across subjects is varied. The potential for sharing expertise across the linked schools has not been fully exploited.
- There are no formal governance arrangements. The proprietor and leaders have ensured that all the independent school standards are met. However, the strategic leadership of the school is focused too much towards responding to issues, rather than being more proactive in securing the very best quality of education.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school meets the requirements of the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 ('the independent school standards') and associated requirements.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Refocus leadership in order to secure the best possible quality of education for pupils by:
 - strengthening governance arrangements, making sure that strategic leadership places sufficient emphasis on being proactive, as opposed to reactive, in making improvements
 - checking more rigorously on the progress of pupils once they leave the school as a way of evaluating how effective the school has been in preparing pupils for their next steps.
- Secure the highest possible quality of teaching and outcomes for pupils by:
 - maximising subject expertise available across the schools to ensure that all teaching is accurate
 - making better use of additional adults
 - refining the use of assessments to provide precisely the right level of challenge, including for the most able pupils.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- Leaders have steered the school through some challenging and turbulent times since the previous inspection. With determination, perseverance and self-belief in the ethos and strategies of the school, leaders and staff have ensured that current pupils achieve a good standard of education.
- Staff understand and promote the ethos of the school well. The school has a purposeful but relaxed and supportive atmosphere. There are strong links and effective communication between academic and welfare staff. New staff feel well inducted and supported, and staff morale is high.
- Leaders have secured significant improvements in pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare since the previous inspection. Leaders are now building on these vital and firm foundations to gradually raise academic standards too. Ambitious for pupils, the head of education spoke of 'always moving the finishing line' to build continuously on pupils' achievements.
- The headteacher, appointed since the previous inspection, has been instrumental in reviewing the curriculum. This work has lifted academic expectations through the provision of more accredited courses and qualifications. Additional funding has been used to enrich the curriculum for pupils, for example providing horse-riding or musical instrumental lessons. This is aimed at increasing engagement and promoting well-being. Pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare have improved markedly since the previous inspection, but the evaluation of the impact of particular spends is undeveloped.
- Promotion of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is effective. Pupils appreciate the opportunity to explore their own creativity. The strong emphasis rightfully placed on personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education supports their improving progress well. Citizenship sessions help prepare pupils better for life in modern Britain. Learning to respect and tolerate other's differences is a strong thread running across the curriculum.
- The headteacher and head of education work in close partnership. Lines of accountability at school level are simple, clear and well understood. Leaders' regular quality assurance checks ensure that operational procedures, such as the monthly checks on students' files, are carried out properly.
- Leaders have ensured that all of the independent school standards are met. However, the school is registered for three pupils and currently has four on roll. Leaders have risk assessed this increase to ensure that the needs of all pupils and the independent school standards continue to be met, but the school is currently operating beyond the terms of its registration.

Governance

- There are no formal governance arrangements. By leaders' own admission, reporting to directors is 'informal' and focused on dealing with issues that arise rather than being proactive in seeking improvement. This relationship lacks the sort of rigorous challenge and support that could help the school towards becoming highly effective.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Academic and welfare staff work closely together to protect pupils and keep them safe.
- The school's comprehensive safeguarding policy, published on its website, takes good account of the most recent guidance. The emphasis placed on the view that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility is underpinned strongly by the school's own ethos. Everybody spoken to during the inspection was emphatic that pupils are safe in school.
- The duty to report concerns is clear. Detailed reporting procedures are helpfully summarised in flowcharts and checklists that can be followed systematically to ensure that the correct action is taken. Contacts outside the organisation and out of hours are readily accessible. Record keeping is detailed and of good quality.
- Thorough and systematic checks on the suitability of staff go way beyond statutory requirements. A rigorous recruitment procedure includes rigorous questions relating to safeguarding at interview. A comprehensive range of training is mapped out according to staff role and monitored to check that all is completed and kept up to date.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Highly positive relationships between teachers and pupils show strong mutual respect. Constructive interactions between pupils and teachers get the school day off to a good start.
- Teachers' expectations are high. Teaching is brisk and purposeful, making effective use of the available time. Pupils are expected to work hard, and their good levels of productivity reflect how well they respond. Teachers are rightly proud of their joint achievements with pupils.
- Through effective modelling and clear explanations, teachers make learning points explicit. They plan logical sequences of activities so that pupils' learning builds systematically. Teachers check pupils' understanding carefully, but do not always use this information skilfully enough to secure the best possible progress. For example, there are short periods where most-able pupils have to wait for those that are struggling to catch up.
- A wide range of information and assessments feeds into individualised plans to meet pupils' particular needs, both academically and holistically. Teachers employ a sensible balance between formal and informal methods of assessment. They use these checks well to identify gaps and knowledge in skills in particular subjects, such as mathematics.

- Teachers' questioning is effective. For example, they use their strong subject knowledge of English to deepen pupils' understanding of challenging texts such as 'Of Mice and Men'. Teachers employ varied and well-judged strategies to target questions to particular pupils or seek volunteers to answer. The most able pupils are effectively challenged to apply their learning to different contexts, although at times teachers could be more demanding of pupils' answers.
- Pupils feel confident to seek clarification during lessons if they are unsure. Teachers resist the temptation to do too much for them, guiding and demonstrating key learning points before drawing back to allow pupils to continue working independently. However, additional adults in the classroom are not used well enough and have a limited impact on pupils' learning.
- Termly written reports link closely with pupils' individual education plans and provide a detailed record of their achievements. As part of a cycle, next steps are also identified to feed into the next report. These reports not only provide a detailed account of pupils' academic progress, but also include warm, individualised comments about their personal development.
- Given the lack of subject specialists across all subjects, teachers' subject knowledge is not as strong as it could be in all areas. There are opportunities for sharing expertise across the linked schools, but these have not been maximised to ensure that all subject-specific teaching is precise and accurate.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- The strengths that now exist in this aspect of the school represent a significant improvement from the time of the previous inspection. Typically, pupils have either been permanently excluded from their previous schools or persistently refused to attend. Therefore, the school's success in this area is a considerable achievement.
- Pupils enjoy school, and have positive attitudes and engage well. They take genuine care with the quality and presentation of their work and show high levels of respect for their environment. For some pupils, these aspects show a marked improvement during their time at Oak House. The significant amount of work in pupils' books shows good levels of engagement over time.
- Some pupils demonstrate considerable resilience and tenacity when faced with challenging tasks. Others use the agreed strategies to manage the situation when they feel unable to cope with the demand. For teachers, weighing up the academic challenge against pupils' well-being, mental health and negative prior experiences is a careful balancing act, of which they are acutely mindful.

- Pupils feel safe. The varied PSHE education curriculum is adapted carefully to address areas where pupils may be particularly vulnerable. Pupils are taught a breadth of vocabulary to express their emotions and feelings. They begin to use this language to communicate and manage their own behaviours. However, although pupils know the potential risks of certain activities, they do not use this knowledge consistently well enough to make the right choices.
- Pupils get on well together. Close supervision means that bullying in the school is rare. Pupils are taught effective strategies to help them to manage conflict appropriately. Detailed records of any type of incident involving pupils show that the school's policies are applied consistently.
- The school's tracking of pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare shows how their outcomes improve over time. Understandably, this is at varying rates linked to the often complex emotional and mental health needs of individual pupils.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- The school has a calm, orderly atmosphere. Pupils listen attentively to the teacher and follow instructions promptly. Over time, the number of behaviour-related incidents has reduced substantially. Pupils conduct themselves well during breaktimes and these are positive social occasions.
- Staff make detailed assessments of various aspects of pupils' behaviour and identify suitable control measures to minimise potential risks. The school's overarching behaviour policy is therefore personalised to each pupil, in line with its stated aim. However, the positive behaviour achieved throughout the day is reliant on close adult supervision.
- Pupils' regular school attendance is another success story. There are substantial improvements in attendance levels for individuals and the school overall. Leaders are now working hard to ensure that pupils arrive promptly at the start of the day. This situation is already improving, although leaders have identified that there is still more to do.

Outcomes for pupils

Good

- Pupils achieve well across a broad range of areas, personally and academically. Given the nature of pupils' potential barriers to engagement and previous experiences, both in and out of school, their progress is often uneven. However, over time, pupils make good progress.
- When they join the school, pupils are usually well behind in their learning. On-entry assessments show that typically, pupils are also performing at a lower level than reported by their previous schools. Often this is because they have experienced prolonged gaps in full-time education and/or emotional trauma.

- Pupils are set both long-term and short-term goals. These are monitored closely at varying levels by school staff and other professionals. Leaders and teachers check regularly to identify and address any slowdown in progress. Every pupil has an individual education plan that includes personal targets across a wide range of subjects. The promotion of aspects such as life skills and citizenship is also well covered. Pupils are given clear opportunities to feed their own wishes and views into their educational plans.
- Recently, the introduction of accredited awards in functional English and mathematics has begun a significant shift in academic expectation. This has boosted pupils' self-esteem, and they approach formal examinations seriously and with maturity. The qualifications they are gaining are a formal recognition of their re-engagement in education. However, taking account of some pupils' ambitions and prior academic attainment, the most able pupils in particular have a long way to go to fulfil their potential.
- Given pupils' starting points, the school makes good progress in preparing pupils for the next stage of their education or training. The careers programme equips pupils well with helpful skills towards getting a job. Where appropriate, provision is made for pupils to do work experience in carefully risk-assessed placements. However, closer pursuit of pupils' destinations when they leave to see whether placements have been sustained and to check their subsequent outcomes would give a clearer picture of the school's success.

School details

Unique reference number	135766
DfE registration number	845/6057
Inspection number	10020899

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	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	11 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	4
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	My Choice Schools
Headteacher	Susan Evans
Annual fees (day pupils)	£23,000 to £38,000
Telephone number	01444 446920
Website	www.my-choice-homes.com/my-choice-school
Email address	a.murphy@my-choice-homes.com
Date of previous inspection	23–24 October 2013

Information about this school

- Oak House is a very small independent special school with a fluctuating roll.
- The school admits pupils who typically have severe social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. All pupils are children looked after and they usually join the school mid-year with a history of disrupted education.
- Over time, some pupils may have a statement of special educational needs, or an education, health and care plan.
- The headteacher, appointed since the previous inspection, oversees a number of other similar schools, line managed by the proprietor's head of education.

- The school's previous inspection was a full inspection that took place on 23 and 24 October 2013.
- The school does not use any alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

- Her Majesty's Inspector made three visits to the classroom to observe the teaching and learning that was taking place. He also looked carefully at pupils' work over time and the school's own assessments and records of pupils' progress. In addition, he considered leaders' own monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning.
- During the inspection, Her Majesty's Inspector had a wide range of discussions, both formally and informally. He spoke with pupils, staff, leaders and a director. No social workers or parents were available to speak with. There were no responses available to the point-in-time survey.
- One response to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, was considered, as well as four confidential questionnaires returned by staff.
- Her Majesty's Inspector observed the work of the school throughout the day and scrutinised a wide range of documentation relating to the independent school standards, including a review of the school's website.

Inspection team

Clive Dunn, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

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