

Inspection of Blue Skies School

126 Maidstone Road, Chatham, Kent ME4 6DQ

Inspection dates: 29–31 October 2019

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

The quality of education

Requires improvement

Behaviour and attitudes

Good

Personal development

Requires improvement

Leadership and management

Requires improvement

Sixth-form provision

Requires improvement

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Good

Does the school meet the independent school standards?

Yes

What is it like to attend this school?

The school's calm, friendly atmosphere helps pupils settle successfully into school life. Pupils enjoy school and want to do well. They told inspectors how much they like subjects such as art, physical education (PE) and cookery. Pupils regularly prepare and cook recipes in the school's bright, well-equipped cookery room. For instance, during the inspection pupils enjoyed making and sharing Halloween biscuits.

Expectations of pupils' learning are not high enough in all subject areas. Too often, pupils are given work which is repetitive, undemanding and unstimulating. This means that pupils do not learn well enough and sometimes lose interest. Despite this, most pupils listen carefully to their teachers and complete the tasks set for them. Pupils usually behave well in lessons.

Pupils act sensibly when moving around the school. They chat happily with friends during breaktimes while enjoying a snack and a drink. Pupils use the school's attractive outdoor decked area responsibly and safely. Adults build strong relationships with pupils and take good care of them. This means that pupils feel safe and comfortable. One pupil said, 'This is a happy school – there's usually a smile on everybody's face.' Leaders take appropriate measures if there are any concerns about bullying.

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

The quality of education requires improvement. Senior leaders make sure that the school complies with the independent school standards. However, there are signs that the quality of education has begun to decline in recent months. This is because leaders have not kept a sufficiently close eye on the school's work and have been too slow to tackle weaknesses.

Leaders have not used training well enough to support staff development. This means that staff do not always have the skills and subject knowledge needed to teach the full range of subjects. Pupils learn less well in some subjects than in others and they are beginning to fall behind in their learning. For instance, weaknesses in the science programme mean that pupils do not develop scientific knowledge and skills securely enough. Science teaching pays too little attention to what pupils already know and can do. Instead, many pupils are given very similar tasks, regardless of ability or of previous learning. For instance, in the past few weeks most pupils in the school have labelled diagrams of a microscope, an animal cell and a plant cell, despite the fact that some already have a thorough knowledge of these topics.

Pupils have too few opportunities to complete practical science work. This is hampering their scientific understanding. Pupils currently studying science GCSE qualifications have not completed as much of the syllabus as they should have because they have not completed the practical activities required.

Most pupils join the school with secure reading skills. The school provides a good range of books to appeal to all tastes and pupils like to read. They say that there are plenty of books to choose from on the bookshelves and told us that their teachers give them regular opportunities to read. However, the school's reading programme does not build as well as it could on pupils' starting points. Nor does it extend pupils' understanding of texts skills well enough, particularly for the most able pupils.

Some programmes of study are more effective than others. For instance, cookery is a well-established and very successful subject in the school. High expectations mean that pupils of all abilities produce good-quality work. Pupils learn how to select, measure and combine ingredients and so become more independent. Teaching includes careful checks on how well pupils are learning. Activities are skilfully adjusted to suit pupils' individual needs. Pupils of all ages told us how much they enjoy cooking.

Pupils told us that behaviour 'has its ups and downs' but is mostly good. Sometimes pupils' special educational needs mean that they find school hard. However, adults understand this and provide sensitive encouragement and support. Leaders take suitable action if any concerns about unpleasant or aggressive behaviour arise.

Pupils value their education. They know that working hard in school will help them in the future. The school's personal development programme successfully develops pupils' understanding of topics such as money management, British values, respect for different beliefs and how to stay fit and healthy. However, the programme is not as ambitious for the pupils as it should be. For instance, sometimes activities are not sufficiently demanding and so pupils do not think as deeply about topics as they could.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Staff know who to speak to if they have any concerns about a pupil's safety. The designated safeguarding leads are clearly identified in signs throughout the school. Adults act quickly if they have any concerns about pupils' well-being. Pupils feel valued, secure and well cared for in school.

Leaders make sure that the school is tidy and well maintained. They complete regular risk assessments and make good use of these to keep pupils safe, both on and off the school site. The business manager makes sure that all recruitment checks are completed promptly.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and proprietor)

- Leaders know that weaknesses in the quality of education are hampering pupils' learning. They know that expectations of pupils' learning are not high enough in

some subjects, particularly for the most able. Recently, leaders have begun to make improvements. For instance, they have made arrangements for the older pupils to complete more practical science work. Leaders should continue with existing plans to review, develop and update the curriculum so that pupils of all abilities learn well, particularly in reading and science.

- The proprietors have an overgenerous view of the school's work. They have not held leaders to account sufficiently for the school's performance in recent times. The proprietors are committed to the school and want to provide pupils with the best possible education. They know that procedures for checking the school's work need to be improved. The proprietors should strengthen procedures for reviewing the school's work and act with greater urgency to address weaknesses in the quality of education.
- Leaders do not use staff training well enough to support teachers' professional development needs. This means that staff do not always have the skills or subject knowledge needed to teach the school's curriculum effectively. High staff turnover has made it difficult for leaders to provide pupils with an education of sufficiently good quality. Staff have willingly taken on additional workload and are pulling together during this unsettled time for the school. However, some members of staff feel ill-prepared to deliver the curriculum as well as they would like. Leaders should review and improve the use of staff training so that teachers are well supported and confident about what to teach, when and why.
- The school's work to support pupils' personal development is underdeveloped. Leaders have recently introduced a programme to teach life and living skills and pupils are enjoying the course. However, it is still early days and pupils are not learning as well as they could. Leaders should continue with work to develop the use of the programme to support the development of pupils' personal skills.

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The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

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

School details

Unique reference number	135576
DfE registration number	887/6130
Local authority	Medway
Inspection number	10076614
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	11 to 25
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	21
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	7
Number of part-time pupils	None
Proprietor	Blue Skies Limited (Jonathan and Lauren Higgins)
Chair	N/A
Headteacher	Nicole Bradley
Annual fees (day pupils)	£30,840 to £21,764
Telephone number	01634 357770
Website	www.blueskiesschool.co.uk
Email address	info@blueskiesschool.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	7–9 June 2016

Information about this school

- Blue Skies School is an independent day special school. It caters for pupils for pupils aged 11 to 25 who have autism or social and communication difficulties.
- Pupils are placed in the school by Medway and Kent local authorities. All pupils have an education, health and care plan. They have often experienced a disrupted education prior to joining the school.
- The school is registered for 38 pupils. There are 21 pupils on roll, including seven in the sixth form. There are currently no pupils in the 19 to 25 age group.
- The previous standard inspection took place in June 2016.
- Four out of five teachers joined the school at the start of the current academic year.

Information about this inspection

We carried out this inspection under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008. The purpose of the inspection is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

The school meets the independent school standards. These are the requirements set out in the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

- We met with the headteacher, the proprietors, the business manager and other school leaders. We also held discussions with staff and pupils.
- We did deep dives in these subjects: reading and phonics, science, cookery and life and living skills. We spoke with the leaders for these subjects, looked at curriculum documents, visited lessons, looked at pupils' work and talked with pupils and teachers.
- We checked the school's safeguarding arrangements. We held discussions with leaders and explored staff knowledge and understanding of safeguarding matters. We reviewed a range of safeguarding records. We also scrutinised the single central register of staff suitability to work with children and looked at school records.
- We considered the views expressed by parents, staff and pupils in our inspection surveys. We met with a group of pupils to talk about their work, their experiences of school life, and their opinions of the school.

Inspection team

Julie Sackett, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

Hilary Goddard

Ofsted Inspector

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