

Blue Skies School

126 Maidstone Road, Chatham, Kent ME4 6DQ

Inspection date

21 March 2023

Overall outcome

The school meets all of the independent school standards that were checked during this inspection

Main inspection findings

Part 1. Quality of education provided

Paragraph 2A(1), 2A(1)(b), 2A(1)(e)–2A(1)(f), 2A(2)

- At the time of the previous inspection in June 2022, the proprietors had not consulted with parents and carers about the relationships and sex education policy. The action plan submitted to the Department for Education (DfE) following the inspection committed to this consultation. There were also plans for accredited staff training in this curriculum area.
- Leaders have now consulted on the school's relationships and sex education policy and published it on the website. There has been notable investment in training for the responsible teacher. The curriculum continues to be taught, as it was before, in line with the school's timetable.
- The relevant requirements that were checked in this part are met.

Part 3. Welfare, health and safety of pupils

Paragraphs 7–7(b), 32(1), 32(1)(c)

- The previous inspection found that the independent school standards (the standards) relating to safeguarding and the implementation of the school's behaviour policy were unmet. The proprietors did not have robust oversight to ensure that policies linked to excluding pupils were appropriate. Leaders did not follow these policies consistently, causing a potential risk to pupils' safety and welfare. The proprietor's action plan indicated there would be a full consultation and that the behaviour policy and associated procedures would be revised.
- The school's behaviour and exclusions policies have been fully reviewed. Leaders have tightened processes around exclusions. They have revised the school's tracker, which details what steps should be taken and records when each action is complete. This includes ensuring that the right people have been notified in the event of any suspension or exclusion. Since the June 2022 inspection, although there have been a very small number of short 'withdrawal' or 'reflection' periods internally, there have been no suspensions or exclusions.

- The behaviour policy provides a useful guide to both the school’s culture regarding behaviour and how the policy’s approaches should be applied. The policy explicitly acknowledges that pupils’ anxieties and social challenges may impact their ability to follow the school’s expectations at all times. Examples of how to use the policy in practice cover a wide range of situations and contexts. In this way, it is helpfully detailed and clear.
- Inspectors also identified notable strengths in safeguarding at the previous inspection. These included the safeguarding curriculum and leaders’ actions to identify and respond to concerns. Safeguarding records are fit for purpose. Adults are alert to potential indicators of concern, working in partnership with parents and other professionals to respond.
- A suitable safeguarding policy, updated to reflect recent guidance, is published on the school’s website. Much of the policy shows how the statutory guidance applies or is relevant in this particular school. However, in the absence of a governing body, there are a few places where further clarity about the proprietors’ arrangements for oversight would be helpful.
- There have been no staff appointments since the previous inspection. The school’s experienced staff continue to receive regular training and updates in safeguarding. They recognise the significance and importance of this work and their place within it.
- The relevant requirements that were checked in this part are met.

Part 7. Manner in which complaints are handled

Paragraph 33, 33(c), 33(h)

- When the school was previously inspected, the complaints policy did not include timescales for managing complaints. The policy did not make clear that a complainant may be accompanied when attending a complaints panel. The proprietor’s action plan stated that these issues had been rectified and an updated complaints policy published.
- The complaints policy has been updated and now shows clearly the timescales for the management of complaints. It also stipulates that a parent can attend and be accompanied at a panel hearing. There have been no formal complaints since the previous inspection.
- The relevant requirements that were checked in this part are met.

Part 8. Quality of leadership in and management of schools

Paragraph 34(1)–34(1)(c)

- The June 2022 inspection found that the proprietors had not ensured that leaders knew the standards well enough. A number of policies had fallen short of the standards and the proprietors had not checked the impact of leaders’ actions sufficiently well. Leaders did not call staff to account fully for their work, and staff morale was low. The action plan outlined a range of training for leaders and staff. It also detailed a range of steps to strengthen quality assurance, self-evaluation and action planning. The proprietors also indicated the intention to appoint an experienced, external school improvement partner.
- Leaders have acted promptly to implement the action plan that was accepted by the DfE. There is now a much sharper focus on these and, importantly, all other regulatory matters. Leaders are taking a much more systematic approach to ensure that all of the

standards and associated requirements are continually met. The headteacher has received training and external support to expand his own knowledge and understanding. An ongoing audit schedule of how the proprietors check that standards continue to be met is in place.

- The school's development plan identifies pertinent areas for ongoing improvements. It draws explicit links with the standards where relevant. The plan, which is regularly reviewed, includes specific actions and clear timeframes and identifies lead responsibilities at different levels in the school.
- Following a challenging COVID-19 pandemic period, the proprietors are regularly visible and accessible in the school once again. This presence is widely welcomed by leaders and staff. Leaders have refreshed the approach to appraisal for all staff and leaders. A promising team of middle leaders have an important role in particular aspects of the school's work and leading specific parts of the school improvement plan.
- The proprietors are clear-sighted about the school's recent history and areas that still need to improve. They know that building leadership capacity is still a work in progress despite the school's evidently strong features. Once again, the proprietors are keeping a much closer oversight and scrutiny of the school's operation and effectiveness. They have commissioned an experienced and suitably qualified school improvement partner to provide independent scrutiny in support of their work. The school is also brokering wider professional networks and partnerships with other local schools. Following advice, the proprietors are taking the first steps towards forming an advisory board. These are all well-conceived steps towards sustaining and building on improvements.
- Despite the lapses, and consequently the inadequate judgement overall, the June 2022 inspection found this to be a school which also had significant strengths. This included a good quality education which had markedly improved since the previous inspection.
- Leaders know that there is still more to do to improve morale. The proprietors recognise that this should include a stronger focus on support staff to ensure that all leaders and staff feel valued for the important contribution that they make. Leaders and staff are proud of the school's strengths and committed to the work they do with pupils.
- The standard in this part is now met.

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 that were checked during this inspection. This included the standards and requirements that the school was judged to not comply with at the previous inspection. Not all of the standards and associated requirements were checked during this inspection.

The school now meets the following independent school standards

Part 1. Quality of education provided

- 2A(1) The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor-
 - 2A(1)(b) ensures that every registered pupil who is provided with secondary education at the school is provided with relationships and sex education, except in so far as the pupil is excused as mentioned in sub-paragraph (2),
 - 2A(1)(d) in making arrangements for the purposes of paragraphs (a), (b) or (c), has regard to any guidance under section 80A of the Education Act 2002 that applies in relation to the provision of education by maintained schools,
 - 2A(1)(f) consults parents of registered pupils at the school before making or revising a statement under sub-paragraph (e), and
 - 2A(1)(g) publishes a copy of the statement on a website and provides a copy of the statement free of charge to anyone who asks for one.
- 2A(2) Arrangements made by the proprietor for the purposes of sub-paragraph (1)(b) must ensure that where a pupil's parent requests that the pupil is wholly or partly excused from sex education provided as part of relationships and sex education, the pupil is so excused until the request is withdrawn, unless or to the extent that the head teacher considers that the pupil should not be so excused.

Part 3. Welfare, health and safety of pupils

- 7 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that-
 - 7(a) arrangements are made to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils at the school; and
 - 7(b) such arrangements have regard to any guidance issued by the Secretary of State.

Part 6. Provision of information

- 32(1) The standard about the provision of information by the school is met if the proprietor ensures that-
 - 32(1)(c) particulars of the arrangements for meeting the standard contained in paragraph 7 are published on the school's internet website or, where no such website exists, are provided to parents on request.

Part 7. Manner in which complaints are handled

- 33 The standard about the manner in which complaints are handled is met if the proprietor ensures that a complaints procedure is drawn up and effectively implemented which deals with the handling of complaints from parents of pupils and which—
 - 33(c) sets out clear timescales for the management of a complaint
 - 33(h) allows for a parent to attend and be accompanied at a panel hearing if they wish.

Part 8. Quality of leadership in and management of schools

- 34(1) The standard about the quality of leadership and management is met if the proprietor ensures that persons with leadership and management responsibilities at the school—
 - 34(1)(a) demonstrate good skills and knowledge appropriate to their role so that the independent school standards are met consistently;
 - 34(1)(b) fulfil their responsibilities effectively so that the independent school standards are met consistently; and
 - 34(1)(c) actively promote the well-being of pupils.

School details

Unique reference number	135576
DfE registration number	887/6130
Inspection number	10278186

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 status	Independent special school
Age range of pupils	11 to 25
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	15
Number of part-time pupils	None
Proprietor	Jonathan Higgins
Headteacher	Graham Richards
Annual fees (day pupils)	£31,764 to £33,036
Telephone number	01634 357770
Website	www.blueskiesschool.co.uk/
Email address	jo@blueskiesschool.co.uk
Date of previous standard inspection	28 to 30 June 2022

Information about this school

- Blue Skies School is an independent day special school. It caters for pupils aged 11 to 25 who have autism spectrum disorder or social and communication difficulties. Currently, the oldest pupils on roll are aged 18.
- 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 DfE's Get Information about Schools website lists the proprietor as Jonathan Higgins. Mr Higgins understands that both he and his sister, Lauren Higgins, are joint proprietors. School policies and documentation, and previous inspection reports, reflect this joint position. The proprietors report that they will contact the DfE to clarify the discrepancy

with the public record.

- The previous standard inspection took place in June 2022.
- Some key stage 4 and 5 students study at Mid-Kent College once a week. The school does not use any other alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

- This inspection was carried out at the request of the registration authority for independent schools. The purpose of the inspection was to monitor the progress the school has made in meeting the independent school standards and other requirements that it was judged to not comply with at its previous inspection.
- This was the first progress monitoring inspection. It was conducted without notice.
- Following the previous inspection, the DfE required the school to prepare a statutory action plan. Ofsted evaluated the action plan on 21 December 2022. The DfE wrote to the school accepting the plan on 6 February 2023.
- The inspector held discussions with the proprietors, headteacher and staff. He spoke on the telephone with the school's external improvement partner. The inspector toured the school site with the headteacher, briefly visiting lessons. The inspector reviewed policies, records and other documents related to the standards that were previously unmet.

Inspection team

Clive Dunn, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

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