Inspection of Thistle Hill Academy

Aspen Drive, Minster-on-Sea, Sheerness, Kent ME12 3UD

Inspection dates:	5 and 6 November 2024
The quality of education	**Good**
Behaviour and attitudes	**Good**
Personal development	**Outstanding**
Leadership and management	**Outstanding**
Early years provision	**Good**
Previous inspection grade	Requires improvement

The headteacher of this school is Rebecca Handebeaux. This school is part of The Stour Academy Trust, which means other people in the trust also have responsibility for running the school. The trust is run by the chief executive officer (CEO), Rachael Howell, and overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by Fiona Trigwell.

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils are happy and feel safe at this inclusive school, where everyone is welcome. The school has high expectations of pupils' behaviour, and pupils rise to meet these well. Pupils treat one another with care. They know that their school values of showing support, togetherness, ambition, respect and success (STARS) allow them to shine. Pupils strive to live out these values daily and are keen to earn recognition for demonstrating these, such as earning certificates, points and the chance to attend the weekly 'golden lunch'.

Staff know pupils well and are ambitious for what all can achieve, especially those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The school has made significant improvements to its provision over the last few years. Pupils achieve well. Parents also recognise these improvements, noting the 'warm and stable environment' with staff, who go 'above and beyond' for their children whose 'achievements are celebrated'.

Pupils increasingly contribute to the life of their school. They are proud to hold leadership responsibilities such as being members of the school council, 'well-being warriors', 'Makaton ambassadors' and 'digital leaders'.

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

The school has designed a curriculum that carefully identifies the essential knowledge and skills that pupils need to know. This builds effectively from the early years upwards, meaning that children in Reception are given firm foundations from which their next stages of learning are developed.

Staff subject knowledge is strong and clear explanations support pupils in understanding their learning. In most lessons, careful checks are made to ensure that pupils have understood their learning. In most subjects, but especially in English and mathematics, tasks in lessons are well designed to support the intended learning. However, in some wider subjects, these links are not always as consistently strong.

Reading is taught well in the school. A well-executed phonics programme is delivered expertly by staff. They pick up quickly when pupils might struggle and encourage them to try again. This helps to support pupils to become fluent and confident readers.

The early years setting is a welcoming and positive space. Children are clear about the routines and habits that make for successful school life, thanks to the expectations and modelling that staff have put in place from the start. Staff model vocabulary consistently well. This supports children in developing their own spoken language. Children are confident to speak with visitors and keen to explain what they are learning.

Pupils conduct themselves well. They are motivated and keen to engage in their learning. Commonly understood rules are followed consistently well by pupils. For those who need extra support to meet the school's high expectations for conduct, staff are effective in helping pupils to reflect on their actions and do better next time.

The school works tirelessly to support pupils to attend well and this work is effective. For some pupils, there are greater barriers to their high attendance. Staff take considered steps to ensure those pupils and their families are supported to attend school more frequently.

The support for pupils with SEND is adept and precise. In classrooms, pupils' needs are well known. Appropriate adaptations are made to support pupils in engaging successfully with the same curriculum as their peers. A range of additional resources are seamlessly woven into lessons to support pupils' needs. The school also has a specialist resourced provision, known as 'Bears'. Here, pupils with more significant needs have expertly matched provision to their stage of learning.

The wider development of pupils is exceptionally strong. The school carefully tailors its offer to the needs of the pupils especially well. A well-considered personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) programme builds appropriately, ensuring that pupils know, for example, how to form healthy relationships, as well as how to keep themselves safe. This is complemented superbly by the school's 'life skills' programme, preparing pupils for a variety of key skills they need to become increasingly independent. These include elements such as preparing a meal, planning a journey, and first aid. As well as through their leadership opportunities, pupils contribute substantially to their school community. For example, pupils are currently raising money to be able to build a sensory garden in the school.

Determined and highly effective leadership has led to significant improvements since the last inspection. Trust and school leaders identify specific actions and implement them carefully, consistently evaluating if they have the impact they intend. Nothing in this school happens by accident. All interventions in the school are introduced with care and checked with precision. Staff feel valued in this school, and well supported by those who lead them. They have a real voice, especially about their workload, which leaders respond to readily to make substantive changes that impact on staff, and the pupils in their care, positively.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- In some foundation subjects, there is not a consistently sharp link between the activities planned in lessons and the intended learning. This means that, at times, pupils may not understand or recall their learning as effectively as they could. The school needs to ensure that, as its revised foundation curriculum is embedded across the school, staff have the knowledge and support they need to make more considered links between activities and intended learning, to support pupils in achieving well.

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' is used to mean pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND); pupils who meet the definition of children in need of help and protection; pupils receiving statutory local authority support from a social worker; and pupils who otherwise meet the criteria used for deciding the school's pupil premium funding (this includes pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years, looked after children (children in local authority care) and/or children who left care through adoption or another formal route).

School details

Unique reference number	140393
Local authority	Kent
Inspection number	10341765
Type of school	Primary
School category	Academy sponsor-led
Age range of pupils	4 to 11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	333
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Fiona Trigwell
CEO of the trust	Rachael Howell
Headteacher	Rebecca Handebeaux
Website	www.thistlehill.kent.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	20 June 2024, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The school has been part of The Stour Academy Trust since January 2017.
- The school has a specialist resourced provision (SRP) for 14 pupils, all of whom have education, health and care plans, whose primary need is autism. This provision is known in the school as the 'Bears' class.
- The school currently uses no alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

The inspectors carried out this graded inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. During a graded inspection, we grade the school for each of our key judgements (quality of education; behaviour and attitudes; personal development; and leadership and management) and for any relevant provision judgement (early years and/or sixth form provision). Schools receiving a graded inspection from September 2024 will not be given an overall effectiveness grade.

- Inspections are a point-in-time evaluation about the quality of a school's education provision.
- Inspectors discussed any continued impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- The inspection team held meetings with the headteacher, senior leaders, teachers and pupils. The lead inspector met with the members of the trust board, including the chair of the trust board. The lead inspector also held a meeting with the chief executive officer (CEO).
- The inspection team carried out deep dives in these subjects: reading, mathematics, history, science and art. For each deep dive, inspectors held discussions about the curriculum, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, the inspectors: reviewed the single central record; took account of the views of leaders, staff and pupils; and considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils' interests first.
- The inspection team took account of a range of other information, including the school's development plans, school policies and trust board minutes.
- The team spoke with pupils about their experience of the school. They took account of parent and carer and staff views through conversations and responses to Ofsted's surveys.

Inspection team

Marian Feeley, lead inspector	His Majesty's Inspector
Claire Martin-O'Donoghue	Ofsted Inspector
Michael Green	Ofsted Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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Textphone: 0161 618 8524
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