

The Acorn School

Church Street, Nailsworth, Stroud, Gloucestershire GL6 0BP

Inspection dates

22–24 January 2019

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
Sixth form provision	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- Leaders, including the proprietors, have high expectations of pupils and staff. They have maintained the good quality of education since the previous standard inspection.
- The proprietors have ensured that unmet standards identified during the emergency inspection in February 2018 have been addressed. Consequently, arrangements for ensuring pupils' safeguarding and welfare are effective.
- Leaders' strong vision and moral purpose are clearly reflected through the curriculum. This ensures that pupils become responsible citizens, ready for a life in modern Britain.
- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good. Teachers know each pupil well, which enables them to meet pupils' academic, social and emotional needs.
- Pupils' behaviour and conduct are good. Pupils are proud of The Acorn School and enjoy making positive contributions to both the school and the community.
- Programmes of study in the sixth form are highly tailored to meet students' individual needs and aspirations. Consequently, students are very well prepared for the next stage in their education, employment or training.
- Leaders' support for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) lacks the precision required to enable pupils to make strong progress.
- Teachers in the lower school do not consistently challenge pupils to make the best progress possible, particularly in spelling, punctuation and grammar and in mathematics.
- Limitations in the teaching of practical and investigative science and mathematics restrict pupils' experiences in using and applying the full range of their knowledge.

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?

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by ensuring that:
 - pupils with SEND are consistently well supported through high-quality plans with precise targets to improve their progress
 - leaders' monitoring of teaching is more focused on holding teachers to account, particularly to improve the consistency of spelling, punctuation and grammar.
- Strengthen the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by ensuring that:
 - pupils use and apply the range of their mathematical and scientific knowledge
 - pupils in the lower school make more rapid progress, particularly in writing and mathematics.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- Leaders, including the proprietors, have high expectations of pupils and staff. This has maintained the good quality of education since the previous inspection. Leaders have an accurate view of the quality of education the school provides.
- Leaders have a well-established philosophy to guide the school's preferred approach in promoting effective teaching, learning and well-being. Leaders' values are effectively communicated so that pupils, staff, parents and carers share common aims and ambitions. As a result, pupils are well prepared for the next stage in their education, employment or training.
- Leaders' strong vision and moral purpose are clearly reflected through the school's curriculum and teaching. For example, pupils are working alongside the community and educating it about the dangers of plastic in the world's oceans. This has included input from a pre-eminent biochemist and wildlife biologist. This ensures that pupils become responsible, considerate and caring citizens.
- The two co-headteachers, recently appointed in September 2018, have quickly gained the respect of pupils, staff and parents. They have immediately started to introduce systems and measures to build on the pre-existing strengths of the school. In particular, their focus on safeguarding has resolved all previously unmet independent school standards and has established a strong culture of keeping pupils safe.
- The headteachers have a shared ambition to keep improving the school. Together, they have identified appropriate priorities, for example introducing systems to track pupils' progress and ensuring that all pupils with SEND have an individual education plan (IEP).
- However, some aspects of the strategic overview for pupils with SEND are still being developed. Pupils are identified and receive targeted support, including dedicated tutorials. Although these activities are useful, targets on IEPs lack the precision needed to enable pupils to make the most rapid and sustained progress.
- Leaders hold teachers to account through visits to lessons and analysing pupils' workbooks. However, monitoring is not scrupulous enough to identify areas of concern quickly, such as weaknesses in pupils' spelling, punctuation and grammar.
- Leaders ensure that staff's professional development needs are met. There are strong systems to share knowledge and expertise, for example through staff meetings and continual dialogue about pedagogy. The headteachers are also introducing activities that link teachers' development to school priorities, to further improve the consistency of teaching, learning and assessment.
- The school's curriculum is effective in delivering its aims and intentions. For example, pupils learning about North America sing songs and tell tales of Native American culture. This promotes high-quality reflection about diversity, rights and tolerance, as well as key historical and geographical content with comparisons to modern living. As a result, pupils are gaining a broad range of knowledge and skills to apply in different contexts.
- Leaders promote British values and equality effectively through the school's programme of spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. For example, pupils learn about the

plight of the Jews in World War II through reading 'The Silver Sword', and debate the potentially damaging effects of the media's portrayal of body image.

- Furthermore, leaders' attention to healthy lifestyles, sport and outdoor pursuits, as well as residential visits, ensures that pupils enjoy the benefits of a well-rounded education. This includes extra-curricular clubs and lessons, such as music and choir, which provide additional opportunities for pupils.
- Leaders ensure that pupils, staff and parents feel valued. Staff morale is high, and parents are effusive in their praise of the school. Inspectors were commonly told that the school has 'inspired' their children, focusing on them as an individual.

Governance

- The proprietors play an active role in the school. This enables them to have a strong first-hand knowledge of the school's effectiveness and an accurate self-evaluation. They have ensured that all the independent school standards are met.
- The proprietors fully understand their legal responsibilities and duties. They have effectively delegated the day-to-day running of the school to the new headteachers through clearly defined responsibilities. The operational and strategic roles of leaders, including the proprietors, are understood well.
- The proprietors effectively communicate their aims, ethos and vision to school leaders and staff. Current leaders feel empowered to make changes or amendments where they feel these are needed, such as in monitoring arrangements and tracking pupils' achievement.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Leaders have taken effective action to address the unmet standards identified during the emergency inspection in February 2018. In particular, the school now has a complete and robust single central register in place, recording efficiently the pre-employment checks on staff that work with pupils in line with current government requirements.
- Leaders have also ensured that staff are trained and have a strong knowledge of safeguarding procedures and arrangements to keep pupils safe, including how to refer to the local authority. As a result, staff take timely and appropriate action to pass on relevant information and work effectively with external agencies to protect pupils.
- Leaders have introduced an online system to gather and maintain information for safeguarding pupils. This has overhauled previous ways of working and fits with the renewed culture of safeguarding now prevalent in the school.
- The premises are well maintained to meet the pupils' physical and learning needs. Risk assessments are fully in place to evaluate and mitigate against potential harm in a range of situations, including fire safety and evacuation.
- Pupils say that they feel safe and that their emotional and mental health needs are met. Pupils trust staff and have confidence in them to help in a variety of situations.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Teaching is individualised so that pupils' needs are fully met, including those of the most able. The small cohorts help teachers to know pupils well and establish positive relationships.
- Teachers are enthusiastic. They have good subject knowledge, particularly in the upper school, which inspires and motivates pupils. Pupils enjoy opportunities to follow their own lines of enquiry and to be imaginative. As a result, pupils produce some high-quality work, including making detailed and exquisite jewellery and impressive art work. Teachers are skilful at helping pupils to improve their work.
- Teachers share a common understanding of the school's methodology, which ensures that the school's aims and ethos are reflected consistently throughout the curriculum. Consequently, teachers build on pupils' prior skills and knowledge incrementally, so that pupils make good progress by the time they leave the school.
- Teaching in the upper school promotes high standards and rapid progress, for example in pupils' and students' knowledge of complex biological science. This ensures that pupils are well prepared for the next stage in their education.
- Teachers share a love and enjoyment of learning. Lessons often include art, songs, literature and reading as various ways to engage pupils and develop a broad range of knowledge, as well as to spark interest. Pupils respond accordingly and delight in the different activities.
- Teachers use effective methods to consolidate pupils' learning. They support pupils well to deepen and secure their knowledge. This successfully promotes progress over time.
- Teachers use homework effectively to contribute to positive and enjoyable learning experiences. Pupils and parents report the value of home learning and how this adds value to daily lessons.
- Teachers and leaders instil a love of reading across the school day, for example activities including shared reading, telling stories, exploring mythical books and literature from other cultures, as well as time given for pupils to critique and evaluate what they read. As a result, pupils read widely and often for pleasure and to learn about the world around them.
- However, limitations in the teaching of practical and investigative science and mathematics restrict pupils' experiences in using and applying the full range of their knowledge. At times, this prevents pupils from asking enough of their own questions and being able to conduct tests to explore their own reasoning, predictions or hypotheses.
- Occasionally, teachers are not successful in promoting correct spelling, punctuation and grammar. For some pupils, this leads to persistent weaknesses, which are taking too long to remedy. This includes lower-achieving pupils or those with SEND whose IEPs are not precise enough to consistently meet their needs.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.

- Pupils are proud of The Acorn School and enjoy making positive contributions to both the school and community.
- Pupils enjoy having a voice in the school and are keen to get involved in different aspects of the school's work. Consequently, pupils enjoy whole-school events that unite them, such as the forthcoming Easter event where they will all be singing 'Bohemian Rhapsody'.
- Staff's high expectations of pupils ensure that from the moment they join the school, pupils are well prepared, engaged and willing to contribute in lessons.
- However, there are occasions when teachers' inconsistent expectations lead to pupils producing sub-standard work, characterised by recurring errors in writing or poor handwriting. Sometimes, teachers do not address this quickly enough, so pupils sometimes continue to produce work in this vein for lengthy periods of time.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- Pupils are polite and respectful towards one another. Their strong sense of morality contributes towards a happy and orderly environment at school.
- Pupils enjoy additional responsibilities. Staff encourage this and provide opportunities for pupils to carry their ideas further. For example, the evolution of the plastics committee into the climate/environment committee provides pupils with meaningful opportunities to be conscientious and responsible citizens.
- Pupils say that bullying is extremely rare. However, if it does happen, they have confidence that staff will deal with this promptly and sensitively. Bullying and other forms of anti-social behaviour are not typical at The Acorn School.
- Pupils enjoy their lessons and attending school. Parents confirm this. One parent was typical of many when they stated that their child's 'enthusiasm for learning has rocketed' while at the school.
- Leaders' approach to working with pupils and students results in pupils being articulate, resourceful and respectfully opinionated. Pupils become free-thinking individuals with a balanced and considered view of the world around them.

Outcomes for pupils

Good

- Students' outcomes by the time they leave school at 18 are strong. Students are well prepared for the next stage in their learning, academically, socially and emotionally.
- Attainment rises progressively as the pupils move from the younger to older year groups. At stages when pupils are not meeting similar milestones or age-appropriate expectations, they swiftly 'catch up' as they work towards and in the upper school, including in English, mathematics and science. This is in line with the increasing demands of the school's preferred curriculum and programmes of study.
- Pupils read widely and often. They develop strong communication and language skills, which enables them to be effective learners in a broad range of subjects.
- The standards of pupils' art and design are exemplary. This is instilled in pupils from the youngest ages and developed consistently through the school.

- Pupils' skills, knowledge and understanding are strong across the curriculum. Knowledge is woven through subjects and across the curriculum. As a result, pupils draw on useful information to apply it in different contexts and situations. For example, they write their own informative accounts based on their own research of historical events.
- The most able pupils are successful in a range of subjects, particularly in the upper school, where they bring together their accumulated skills, knowledge and understanding to become effective learners. Many of the most able pupils go on to highly respected universities and employment.
- Pupils with SEND make some progress in lessons. However, this is limited because planned strategies or actions are not precise enough to consistently meet their needs.
- The school does not enter pupils into national examinations or tests. Therefore, there are no statistical comparisons with other schools, settings or national averages.
- There are no pupils eligible for free school meals (the pupil premium, including children looked after) or with education, health and care (EHC) plans currently in the school.

Sixth form provision

Good

- The quality of teaching in the sixth form is good. Teachers know the needs of students and set work to match them. Consequently, students make good progress to reach consistently high standards in a range of subjects, including English, mathematics, art and science.
- When they leave the school, students move on to a wide variety of university placements across a range of subjects and degree courses. Most students progress to higher education at a level appropriate to their abilities and career aspirations.
- Leaders are aspirational for students in the sixth form. Expectations of standards to be achieved are high. As a result, students achieve high levels of knowledge and understanding of their specialist subjects, demonstrated through portfolios of work.
- The composition and delivery of the curriculum are exemplary. Programmes of study are tailored to the individual needs of students. Students fulfil their academic needs and aspirations through bespoke activities, courses and support. For example, those with an interest in drama and comedy have devised courses to provide for their needs. This enables students to gain an important foothold in their particular areas of interest.
- The school's own examinations and tests are recognised by universities. As the school does not enter students into GCSE or A-level examinations, there is no comparison to be provided in this report.
- Careers advice is delivered in an impartial and appropriate manner. This is focused on the abilities and aspirations of the students. Different careers fairs, events, work placements and supporting interviews provide suitable advice and guidance in the upper school.
- Students are highly motivated and enthusiastic. They talk positively and passionately about their time in the school. Students attribute their success to the individualised teaching and curricular opportunities within a caring school community. They feel that they are well prepared for an assortment of careers and opportunities when they leave The Acorn School.

- Practical science and investigative work are less successful. Some inconsistencies in preceding years mean that the progress of some students is not as good as it could be by the time they leave the school.
- Safeguarding arrangements for the sixth form are effective and in line with protocols and procedures for the rest of the school.
- All the independent school standards are met in relation to the sixth form.

School details

Unique reference number	115808
DfE registration number	916/6068
Inspection number	10056306

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 school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	6 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	38
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	9
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietors	Graeme and Sarah Whiting
Chair	Not applicable
Co-headteachers	James Whiting/Barnaby Franklin
Annual fees (day pupils)	£6,675–£9,450
Telephone number	01453 836508
Website	www.theacornschool.com
Email address	info@theacornschool.com
Date of previous inspection	21–23 June 2016

Information about this school

- The Acorn School is a co-educational, non-selective independent day school.
- The Acorn School has been managed by the proprietors since it was established in 1991. The school does not have a governing body.

- The school is operated by The Acorn School Ltd. The proprietors run the school together. One of the proprietors continues to teach in the school; one has recently retired from the post of headteacher.
- The co-headteachers took over the day-to-day running of the school in September 2018.
- There are no disadvantaged pupils in the school currently.
- The school does not have approval for Section 41 and, therefore, does not have pupils with an education, health and care plan.
- The school has no pupils educated off-site or in alternative provision.
- The lower school operates for pupils broadly between the ages of six to twelve, whereupon pupils transfer to the upper school, which includes the sixth form.

Information about this inspection

- An unannounced emergency inspection in February 2018 identified some unmet standards, which related to pupils' welfare, health and safety and leadership and management (Part 3 paragraph 7, Part 5 paragraph 23, Part 8 paragraph 34).
- This inspection was commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) and undertaken in accordance with Section 109 of the Education and Skills Act (2018) and incorporated a progress monitoring inspection (PMI) to evaluate whether the previous unmet standards have been addressed.
- In addition, the inspection considered a request by the proprietors to the DfE for a material change (Part 1 paragraphs 2, 3 and 4, Part 2 paragraph 5 and Part 8 paragraph 34). This was to extend the age range to include three- and four-year-old children. At this time, consent is not given for this change.
- The inspectors observed pupils in a range of subjects in all classes. In addition, inspectors looked at a broad range of pupils' work across the school and in different subjects.
- The lead inspector also listened to some pupils read and evaluated the standard of reading at key points in the school.
- The inspectors held discussions with the proprietors, pupils, staff and leaders throughout the inspection, including the co-headteachers, outdoors and physical education teacher and specialist mathematics teacher.
- The inspectors scrutinised documentation relating to safeguarding, behaviour and attendance, which is now securely held on an online system. School policies and documentation, including risk assessments, the single central record and programmes of study, were evaluated. In addition, the inspector reviewed the site and premises to check regulations in line with the independent school standards.
- The inspectors took account of the views of parents through checking the 42 responses to the inspection survey (Parent View) and also by meeting face to face with parents at the start of the third day.

Inspection team

Stewart Gale, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

David New

Ofsted Inspector

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