

Inspection of Blue Skies School

126 Maidstone Road, Chatham, Kent ME4 6DQ

Inspection dates: 26 to 28 September 2023

Overall effectiveness **Good**

The quality of education **Good**

Behaviour and attitudes **Good**

Personal development **Good**

Leadership and management **Good**

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection Inadequate

Does the school meet the independent school standards? **Yes**

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils and their families are deeply appreciative of the education and care they experience at Blue Skies School. Almost all pupils have experienced disruption to their education and many have missed essential learning. Once attending Blue Skies, pupils make up for lost time. Almost all pupils settle quickly and attend, behave and learn very well.

Each morning, pupils are greeted by name as they arrive at school. In a supportive and gentle manner, staff check that pupils are ready for the day ahead. Pupils may be offered breakfast or the opportunity to speak with the school's well-being lead before heading to class.

Once in lessons, pupils are expected to work hard. With excellent support and adaptations where required, pupils rise to this expectation. The school's strong focus on preparing pupils for their next steps in life resonates well with pupils and contributes strongly to their sense of ambition.

A culture of respect and understanding pervades the school. Transgressions of behaviour are managed skilfully when they occur. Pupils agree that they are happy and enjoy school 'more than ever before' and that there is no bullying. Pupils have confidence in the staff to resolve any such concerns should they occur.

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

The curriculum is carefully designed, planned and adapted to meet pupils' needs. It is sufficiently broad and balanced and offers English, mathematics, science, cookery and life skills as core subjects. Older pupils continue to study a broad range of subjects. Curriculum planning, sequencing and implementation are strengths in established subjects. This is demonstrated in pupils' high levels of engagement and acquisition of knowledge. In newer subjects, such as history and learning outside the classroom, planning and resourcing are in development.

Teachers assess pupils' learning routinely, including through questioning and completion of tasks. More formally, pupils' progress is assessed and evaluated via tests and pupil review meetings. These methods work well to identify gaps in learning and inform teachers' planning. Pupils are familiar with self-assessment and recap their knowledge at the start and end of a unit of work or individual lesson. All pupils have education, health and care plans (EHC plan) which are reviewed and updated annually. Reviews keep pupils' needs and aspirations at the heart of discussion and planning. However, the daily checks of progress towards EHC plan targets lack precision.

Pupils particularly enjoy the cooking and life skills curriculums. All pupils achieve accreditations, such as a BTEC National Diploma, in these subjects. Inspectors observed pupils researching recipes and writing shopping lists, ahead of going to the supermarket to buy the ingredients required to cook their recipe.

Pupils, including those in the sixth form, understand the importance of literacy and numeracy skills in the world of work. Such understanding helps pupils to develop their stamina for learning. For example, in one ambitious English lesson, key stage 3 pupils identified features of a short story in a selection of gothic texts. Typically, pupils read fluently. Where this is not the case, additional support ensures that pupils catch up swiftly. Similarly, mathematics is structured to ensure that pupils catch up and fill gaps in knowledge. Pupils then proceed towards a GCSE or entry-level qualifications.

Adults act as role models, demonstrating respectful, joyful relationships. Classrooms are happy, industrious environments and positive attitudes pervade. A behaviour review in February 2023 introduced significant change. New systems include a focus on praise, rewards and correcting behaviours, for example through mediation. There have been no exclusions or suspensions since the updated policy was implemented. Staff, parents and pupils believe that behaviour at Blue Skies is good and managed well. Inspectors agree. Wherever needed, help to secure strong attendance is provided. Examples include additional counselling for pupils and home visits.

Personal development opportunities are planned with pupils' successful futures in mind. Pupils explore personal strengths and qualities and gain insights into different faiths, cultures, relationships and values. Classes learn about teamwork through working towards reward trips. Pupils take part in fundraising and experience responsibility through participation in the school council. In addition to lunchtime clubs, such as crochet and model-making, social events, such as a disco, are currently being introduced.

Careers education prepares pupils well for their next steps. A different career is identified and discussed weekly by all pupils. Pupils access individual guidance and visit careers fairs, and older pupils undertake work experience. Learning outside the classroom is developing to include interests that may lead to a career, for example horticulture and mechanics.

Previously unmet independent school standards (the standards) were judged to have been met at a monitoring inspection in March 2023. Documentary evidence, as well as meetings with proprietors and school staff, indicate increased rigour of self-evaluation and oversight. Proprietors understand their accountabilities. Strategies, such as linking the development plan to the standards, are helping leaders to ensure that standards are continuously met. Leaders have secured external advice to add rigour and assurance to their work and an advisory board is being established. Leaders are ambitious for the pupils and their school. Improvements secured demonstrate capacity for continued improvement. The school complies with schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010.

Almost all staff feel well informed about priorities and plans. All are proud to work at the school. Staff say they are treated fairly and that leaders support them well, including taking their workload into account.

Families are known well to the school. Communication is regular and helpful. There is good attendance at parents' evenings, annual review meetings and charity events. Parents appreciate how the school supports pupils both academically and socially and how it prepares pupils well for independence. One parent commented, 'Teachers have been amazing, supportive and encouraging.'

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and proprietor)

- The newly introduced curriculum subjects are not fully planned or resourced. In these subjects, leaders have not identified the precise knowledge that pupils should learn and in what order. This means that pupils will not make the progress they could. Leaders should prioritise the planning and resourcing of new subjects so that pupils learn equally well in all subject areas.
- Systems and practices established to strengthen leadership and oversight of the school are still new. Some aspects, such as establishing an advisory board, are not actively implemented. Therefore, planned developments are not having the impact on school improvement as intended. Leaders should ensure that new systems and approaches to leadership and oversight are fully embedded so that the school continues to improve.
- Daily monitoring of progress towards EHC plan targets is not effective. Targets written for daily tracking are insufficiently precise. It is not always clear whether the monitoring refers to effort, attitude or learning. Leaders should review the systems for tracking progress towards EHC plan targets so that they have clear purpose and are used effectively.

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.

School details

Unique reference number	135576
DfE registration number	887/6130
Local authority	Medway
Inspection number	10286135
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	11 to 25
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	17
Number of part-time pupils	None
Proprietor	Jonathan and Lauren Higgins
Headteacher	Graham Richards
Annual fees (day pupils)	£31,764 to £33,036
Telephone number	01634 357770
Website	www.blueskiesschool.co.uk/
Email address	info@blueskiesschool.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	28 to 30 June 2022

Information about this school

- Blue Skies is an independent day special school. It caters 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 EHC plan. They have usually experienced a disrupted education prior to joining the school.
- The school is registered for 38 pupils. There are 17 pupils on roll, including a small number in the sixth form. Currently, there are no pupils over the age of 18 attending the school.
- The school does not currently use alternative provision.
- The previous standard inspection took place in June 2022. A progress monitoring inspection took place in March 2023 when all previously unmet standards were judged to be met.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors 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.

Inspections are a point-in-time judgement about the quality of a school's education provision.

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

Inspectors discussed any continued impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.

- Inspectors met with the headteacher, subject leaders, staff and pupils. The lead inspector met with the proprietors and spoke to the school's commissioned improvement partner.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: English, mathematics, cooking and life skills (including upskilling and Haven). For each deep dive, inspectors held discussions about the curriculum, looked at curriculum planning, carried out lesson visits, spoke to teachers, spoke to pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- Inspectors also looked at curriculum plans for other subjects as shared on the school's website and spoke to leaders about other subjects, including history and personal, social and health education.
- Inspectors met with the leaders responsible for behaviour, attendance, spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, personal development and careers

information, advice and guidance.

- Inspectors considered the range of information shared via the school website. They looked at a wide range of policies and documents, including school evaluation and improvement documentation.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, 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 lead inspector toured the school to check for compliance with matters relating to premises, health and safety. Documentary evidence, such as relating to fire safety, was also scrutinised.
- Inspectors considered the views of staff through meetings, as well as through responses to Ofsted's online staff survey.
- The views of pupils were captured through a meeting with the school council, as well as through informal conversations with pupils throughout the inspection. Inspectors also considered the responses to Ofsted's online survey for pupils.
- A number of parents completed Ofsted's survey, Ofsted Parent View. All those who completed the survey wrote additional comments to support their views.

Inspection team

Hilary Macdonald, lead inspector	Ofsted Inspector
Sue Bzikot	Ofsted Inspector

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