

Inspection of a good school: Hill Top School

Wealcroft, Felling, Gateshead, Tyne and Wear NE10 8LT

Inspection dates:

13 and 14 February 2024

Outcome

Hill Top School continues to be a good school.

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils and students love coming to this caring and inclusive school. Each morning, pupils receive a warm welcome from staff as they arrive. This provides a positive start to the school day and helps pupils feel safe. Strong, trusting relationships between staff and pupils are the reason that Hill Top is such a happy place to be. Pupils have a strong sense of belonging here. Well-established daily routines create a safe and harmonious environment for pupils to thrive. As a result, pupils try their best and they behave very well.

All pupils have an education, health and care (EHC) plan. The school does much to extend pupils' learning beyond the classroom. Pupils appreciate the extra opportunities, trips and visits they experience. They take part eagerly in events such as sports tournaments and outings to the local area. The 'Independent Living Skills' curriculum helps pupils to be ready for adulthood. Pupils value how visits to the local shops help them to learn about finance and develop their independence.

Parents and carers are overwhelmingly positive about the school. One parent echoed the sentiments of many, 'My child has flourished throughout his time here, staff always have his best interests at heart.'

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

Since the last inspection, there have been several changes to the leadership team. The current leadership team has driven improvements, particularly in the quality of education that pupils receive. The school has developed an ambitious curriculum. Pupils study the same breadth of academic subjects as they would in a mainstream school. The curriculum is designed around pupils' individual needs and the information on their EHC plan. Each curriculum pathway promotes the pupils' independence, with a focus on careers and employment in adulthood.

Rightly, developing pupils' communication, language and reading is a high priority. Staff know the importance of reading and how it strengthens pupils' communication skills. Pupils who struggle with their reading, where appropriate, benefit from daily phonics sessions. Staff bring stories alive using a range of sensory techniques to engage and stimulate pupils' imaginations. Staff read to pupils regularly, and many pupils enjoy reading.

Staff gain a detailed knowledge of pupils' needs through regular high-quality training. Typically, teaching support is carefully adapted to help all pupils participate in learning. In English, for example, pupils often read aloud in front of their peers. This helps them to feel confident to speak in front of an audience. Those who need additional help to read receive appropriate, targeted support.

Staff work together to develop sequences of lessons and provide subject training for colleagues. Most subject leaders are highly skilled and experienced in monitoring the curriculum and making changes when needed. However, some subject leaders have not yet had the chance to review how well their curriculum is implemented. This means they do not always know what needs to change or which staff need further training. Also, the school has not established effective systems to check how well pupils are remembering their learning. This means that, at times, leaders do not know if teaching is helping to close gaps in pupils' knowledge. The school recognises this. It is providing training to ensure that the impact of the curriculum is more effectively checked and considered to help pupils retain the knowledge they need for the next stages of learning. However, there is still more to do.

Pupils behave very well. Staff are skilful in their approach if pupils find it hard to manage their emotions. Because of this, learning is rarely disrupted, and pupils engage well in lessons.

The school has taken decisive action to improve pupils' rates of attendance. This has led to an increase in attendance rates for many pupils. The school is in the process of establishing the best approach to tackling persistent absence. Still, there are a small number of pupils who are absent from school too often. Consequently, these pupils miss essential learning.

The school's approach to developing pupils' personal development is impressive. The pupil-led enrichment programme encourages pupils to take part in activities they would otherwise not usually do, such as dance and cooking. Pupils appreciate these opportunities to develop their interests and talents.

The curriculum for personal, social, health and economic education is carefully designed. Pupils are well supported to understand important ideas, including the importance of healthy and safe relationships. An extensive careers programme and work experience offer raises pupils' aspirations and widens their ambitions for the future. Pupils, and students in the sixth form, have access to a wide range of careers information and work-

related learning. Because of this, they are well prepared for their next steps beyond school.

Governors know the school well. They support and challenge school leaders effectively. Staff feel well supported by leaders. They are proud to work at this school.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- In a few subjects, checks are not made to consider how well the academic curriculum is being implemented. This means that, at times, leaders are unable to assure themselves that pupils are securing the knowledge that they need. The school should ensure that there are effective systems to fully evaluate the impact of the curriculum.
- In some subjects, curriculum leaders have not had sufficient opportunities to monitor the impact of their new curriculums. This means they are not able to know what changes might need to be made to the curriculum, or what additional training might be needed for some staff. The school needs to ensure that all subject leaders have the opportunity to review the curriculum's implementation in their subjects so they can evaluate what changes might need to take place.
- A small proportion of pupils do not attend school as often as they should. This means that they miss valuable learning, which has a negative impact on how well they achieve. The school should ensure that they take appropriate and effective action to support pupils to secure high attendance for all pupils.

Background

When we have judged a school to be good, we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains good. This is called an ungraded inspection, and it is carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. We do not give graded judgements on an ungraded inspection. However, if we find evidence that a school would now receive a higher or lower grade, then the next inspection will be a graded inspection, which is carried out under section 5 of the Act. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the ungraded inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour or the quality of education, we will deem the ungraded inspection a graded inspection immediately.

This is the second ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be good in June 2018.

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	130942
Local authority	Gateshead
Inspection number	10290118
Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	11 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	130
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	20
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governing body	Sharon Redhead
Headteacher	Anita Bell
Website	www.hilltopschool.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	5 June 2018, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- There have been several changes to staffing since the previous inspection. This includes the appointment of a new headteacher, deputy headteacher and assistant headteacher.
- The school is part of a hard federation with Dryden School.
- All pupils have an EHC plan. The school caters for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties, severe learning difficulties and autism spectrum disorders.
- The school does not make use of any alternative provision.
- The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Year 8 to 13 with information and engagement about approve technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.

Information about this inspection

- Inspections are a point-in-time judgement about the quality of a school's education provision.
- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. The inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors met with the headteacher, deputy headteacher, the special educational needs coordinator, curriculum leaders, a sample of teachers and support staff.
- Inspectors met with members of the local governing body including the chair of governors. The lead inspector spoke to a representative of the local authority.
- The quality of education was considered through deep dives in reading, language and communication, mathematics and independent living skills. For each deep dive, the inspectors discussed the curriculum with subject leaders, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and scrutinised samples of pupils' work. Inspectors also considered pupils' learning in other subjects, including personal, social, health and economic education.
- Inspectors examined a range of documentation, including leaders' self-evaluation, improvement plans, governors' minutes and documentation relating to pupils' attendance and behaviour.
- 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.
- Inspectors observed pupils and held formal and informal discussions with pupils about what it is like to be a pupil at the school.
- Inspectors spoke to a range of staff about the school's work, including about safeguarding and behaviour. Inspectors spoke to parents at the start of the school day. Inspectors also considered the responses to Ofsted's surveys for parents, pupils and staff.

Inspection team

Jean Watt, lead inspector	Ofsted Inspector
Angela Spencer-Brooke	Ofsted Inspector

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