

Inspection of a good school: Courtlands School

Widey Lane, Crownhill, Plymouth, Devon PL6 5JS

Inspection dates:

17–18 December 2019

Outcome

Courtlands School continues to be a good school.

What is it like to attend this school?

Courtlands is a school where positivity, acceptance and friendship shine through. Staff are united in ensuring that each pupil is at the heart of everything they do. Staff want pupils to be the best they can be and to achieve as well as they can. Many pupils have experienced trauma in their lives and have had long absences out of education. At Courtlands, pupils start to re-engage and discover the joy of learning.

During the inspection, we spoke with lots of pupils. They told us they enjoy school and about what they learn in their lessons. Pupils were excited to share their learning with us.

Pupils feel safe, well looked after and cared for. Staff know each pupil extremely well and relationships are powerful. Pupils trust staff and are able to talk to them and share their worries or anxieties.

The behaviour of pupils, many of whom have complex needs, is good. This view is also shared by parents and carers. 'Staff are superb; calming and supportive, able to deal with conflicts that do inevitably arise, in a wonderfully positive way,' and 'reassurance, praise and positivity, ideal for children with special educational needs' were typical of the comments received by inspectors.

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

The school continues to provide pupils with a good quality of education. The headteacher is relentless in his determination to provide pupils with the knowledge and social skills they need to lead purposeful and fulfilling lives. His resolve for pupils to be the best they can be is shared by senior leaders and staff.

Leaders work hard to ensure the curriculum is personalised to meet the needs of each pupil. Subjects are typically well planned and sequenced appropriately. The 'Courtlands well-being curriculum' is pivotal to pupils' development. There is no doubt that threaded throughout pupils' learning is the drive to develop a healthy mind and body, creativity,

exploration, play and an understanding of the wider world. However, an increase in pupil numbers, along with the increase in staff, have meant that some staff have not been able to complete training as swiftly and fully as required so that their skills match those of more established colleagues. As a result, at times, some staff do not ensure that planned activities meet pupils' needs precisely enough. At times, the emphasis is on completion of an activity rather than on ensuring that pupils know and remember more. This can hamper pupils' achievement.

The implementation of the well-being curriculum starts in the early years provision. Children learn the importance of forming positive relationships as staff embed the three core rules: how to be safe, kind and ready to learn. The environment in early years is safe and secure. Staff know the specific needs of each child. Staff make effective use of the sensory environment. This helps children develop accurate recognition of sounds and noises. For example, children were able to describe what objects were in their buckets. The use of photographs develops early communication. As a result, children, some of whom are non-verbal, quickly develop vocabulary. This helps them to move from single words to talking in sentences. This helps children gain the skills and confidence they need as they get older.

The headteacher demonstrates a determination that every pupil will gain a love of reading and become a fluent and confident reader. Children in early years enjoy storytime and learning rhymes. This enjoyment continues with older pupils. However, leaders recognise that the teaching of early reading for a few pupils is underdeveloped. While there is a phonics scheme in place, it is not taught systematically. Books are not consistently well matched to the sounds that pupils know. This has a detrimental effect on pupils' achievement in reading. This also means they struggle with their spelling. The school improvement plan shows the decisive action leaders are taking to tackle this area. They are aware that staff training is essential to ensure that all staff have the skills and expertise to develop reading. However, it is too early to see the impact of this work.

Therapy is a crucial element of the school's work. For example, play, music, speech and language therapy are used successfully to aid pupils' well-being and academic development.

Pupils experience a wide range of activities in school and beyond. Most notable are the opportunities they have access to through 'Great Escapes', which is a weekend and holiday club run by staff. These activities build pupils' confidence and self-esteem and help reduce their anxious behaviours. For example, trips to Paignton Zoo and the local farm enthuse pupils and provide them with experiences beyond the classroom. Clubs in school are also available, including visiting sports coaches from Plymouth Argyle and Plymouth Albion. These clubs develop pupils' skills in team sports and working together.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders ensure that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Systems for reporting and recording safeguarding concerns are rigorous.

Staff receive regular updates on safeguarding in line with current legislation. They know what to do if they have any anxieties or doubts to minimise risk to pupils and keep them safe. Leaders have a strong focus on ensuring that pupils' good emotional and mental health is a high priority in their work to safeguard pupils. Parents value the care and help their children receive: 'a truly amazing school,' and, 'her smile is all the confirmation we need' were typical of comments made.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Leaders acknowledge that there is more work to be done to ensure that staff who are new to the school, or returning after an extended absence, have had the training that other staff have received previously. Leaders need to check the implementation of the curriculum, along with how teachers use their assessments, to inform teaching more precisely across the school.
- Leaders actively promote the joy of reading with pupils. This encourages pupils and is helping them to develop a love of reading. Increasingly, pupils are reading with greater accuracy and understanding. However, there is an inconsistency in pupils' ability to use and apply their phonic knowledge accurately. There is not a sharp enough focus, or an effective system in place, to ensure that those pupils who struggle to read catch up quickly and spell correctly.

Background

When we have judged a special school, we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains good. This is called a section 8 inspection of a good school or non-exempt outstanding school. We do not give graded judgements on a section 8 inspection. However, if we find some evidence that the school could now be better than good or that standards may be declining, then the next inspection will be a section 5 inspection. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the section 8 inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour or the quality of education, we will convert the section 8 inspection to a section 5 inspection immediately.

This is the first section 8 inspection since we judged the predecessor school, Courtlands School, to be good in June 2013.

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 Ofsted Parent View information 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.

If you are not happy with the inspection or the report, you can [complain to Ofsted](#).

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, '[disadvantaged pupils](#)' refers to those pupils who attract government pupil premium funding: pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years and pupils in care or who left care through adoption or another formal route.

School details

Unique reference number	144009
Local authority	Plymouth
Inspection number	10119946
Type of school	Special
School category	Academy special converter
Age range of pupils	4 to 11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	97
Appropriate authority	The board of trustees
Chair of governing body	Tom Whiteside
Headteacher	Lee Earnshaw
Website	www.courtlands.acemat.uk
Date of previous inspection	19–20 June 2013

Information about this school

- Courtlands is a special school for primary-age pupils with moderate learning difficulties and social, emotional and mental health needs.
- All pupils who attend the school have an education, health and care plan. Admission to the school is through a referral from the local authority where the pupils live.
- The school became part of the ACE multi-academy trust (MAT) in February 2017.
- The school does not use any alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

- We held meetings with the headteacher, deputy headteacher, senior leaders, the leader with responsibility for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), and teaching and support staff.
- The lead inspector held a meeting with three trustees, including the chair and the chief executive officer for ACE schools MAT.
- We examined a range of documentation provided by the school, including the school's self-evaluation document, the school's improvement plan, and documentation relating to behaviour.

- A significant proportion of the inspection focused on ensuring that pupils are safe. Inspectors scrutinised training records, tested staff’s safeguarding knowledge, and spoke with pupils about their safety and well-being. The lead inspector also met with the designated safeguarding leads.
- We reviewed the school’s provision in reading and communication, writing and personal, social and health education (PSHE). This included visiting lessons, looking at pupils’ work, meeting with senior leaders and having discussions with staff and pupils.
- We observed pupils’ behaviour at various times during the day and reviewed attendance information.
- We reviewed 13 responses to the online survey, Parent View, and additional free-text comments. We reviewed the 40 responses to Ofsted’s online staff questionnaire and 15 responses to the pupil questionnaire.

Inspection team

Jen Southall, lead inspector

Her Majesty’s Inspector

Susan Costello

Ofsted Inspector

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