

Inspection of Marchbank Free School

Mowden Hall, Barnes Road, Darlington, County Durham DL3 9BL

Inspection dates: 23 to 24 January 2024

Overall effectiveness

Good

The quality of education

Good

Behaviour and attitudes

Outstanding

Personal development

Outstanding

Leadership and management

Good

Previous inspection grade

Requires improvement

The executive principal of this school is Caroline Green. This school is part of Education Village 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, Mike Butler, and overseen by a board of trustees.

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils thrive at Marchbank Free School. Staff know each individual pupil well and develop strong professional relationships with them. As soon as they start at the school, pupils receive close attention, nurture and care. The nurturing environment helps pupils to feel safe and ready to learn once again.

Establishing routines and boundaries is important here. Adults are consistent in their expectations of pupils' behaviour and achievement. Pupils understand the school systems that contribute to purposeful learning in the classrooms. At times, some pupils do struggle with managing their emotions. Adults are adept at spotting the signs when this occurs and provide skilful intervention. This helps pupils to calm and rejoin their class and their learning quickly.

Pupils enjoy valuable experiences that broaden their horizons beyond the classroom. They are carefully planned to help pupils develop self-esteem and prepare for later life. They play a significant part in rebuilding confidence through enjoying success. Opportunities include learning new skills such as those of forest school, cooking, gardening and sports skills, or developing musical talents.

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

Leaders and their staff team have a relentless ambition for all pupils to achieve success. From difficult starts, pupils receive exemplary levels of support for their development around all aspects of their self-worth, presentation and achievements. The sharp focus on pupils' needs drives a well-organised curriculum from which all pupils benefit.

The curriculum makes clear all the important things pupils need to know. Leaders have carefully considered key knowledge and skills and the sequence, which effectively builds pupils' learning over time. Staff collect valuable information that they use methodically to improve curriculum plans across the subject areas. Manageable and achievable targets are set for pupils' personal and academic success. This means that learning is tightly focused on pupils' starting points and is well matched to pupils' individual needs. In most subjects, the curriculum is implemented well. However, in a minority of subjects, curriculum implementation is less effective. On occasion, gaps in pupils' learning and mistakes are not swiftly identified and addressed. This hampers pupils' progress.

A highly effective programme of professional development ensures all adults are well trained in working to support pupils with special educational needs. Leaders constantly review this. High-quality training makes an effective contribution to improving the practice of all staff. This leads to pupils quickly developing the resilience and skills they will need in their future, more independent lives.

The school recognises it is important for pupils to be able to read. Pupils build their knowledge of sounds in a systematic way. Skilful teaching supports pupils' reading

confidence and fluency. Reading activities for building comprehension are well planned. Pupils strengthen their range of vocabulary. For example, in science and design technology, pupils use accurate vocabulary to describe the properties of materials and their potential uses in designing new products. Pupils have opportunities to read high-quality texts. There are inviting areas around school, which promote reading at times outside of the daily reading lessons. This encourages a love of reading.

Pupils' holistic needs are well understood. A therapeutic approach supports the building of trusting relationships between pupils, families and adults in school. Staff use clear routines and expectations to engage pupils in their learning. Quiet spaces and reflection rooms provide pupils with opportunities to calm when they do become dysregulated. These times are well managed. Pupils reflect this situation through being more positive about themselves and their achievements.

The school's approach to developing pupils' personal development is impressive. A wide range of activities provides opportunities to promote talents and interests. Building life skills is at the core of the school's programme. It is skilfully crafted so that it meets every pupil's needs. Pupils learn about different jobs and develop links with professionals who work in the wider community. Pupils are exceptionally well prepared for their next steps beyond this school.

The school's leadership, including the trust, has been highly effective in transforming this school. All leaders have a deep knowledge of the school's strengths and areas where they continue to develop. The trust uses this to provide appropriate levels of challenge and support. A strong team ethic ensures staff are well supported.

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 minority of subjects, the implementation of the curriculum is inconsistent. Sometimes, teachers do not identify or address misconceptions swiftly, leaving pupils with gaps in their learning. The school needs to ensure that all staff have the confidence, knowledge and skills they need to implement the curriculum with clarity and conviction in all subjects.

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	139691
Local authority	Darlington
Inspection number	10297390
Type of school	Special
School category	Academy free school
Age range of pupils	5 to 11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	53
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Helen Radcliffe
Principal	Caroline Green (Executive Principal)
Head of School	Tess Wright
Website	www.educationvillage.org.uk
Dates of previous inspection	15 and 16 June 2021, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The school is a member of the Education Village Academy Trust.
- All pupils who attend Marchbank Free School have an education, health and care plan.
- The school does not make use of alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

The inspectors carried out this graded inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

- Inspections are a point-in-time judgement 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.

- Inspectors met with the executive principal, head of school, assistant headteachers, teachers, family well-being lead and support staff.
- The lead inspector also met with the chief executive officer, a number of trustees, the chair of the educational standards committee, members of the educational standards committee and the school improvement partner.
- The inspector carried out deep dives in these subjects: early reading, mathematics, science and design technology. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with leaders, visited lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to pupils about their learning and looked at a range of pupils' work.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, the inspector: reviewed school policies and 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 took account of the views of parents through their responses to Ofsted's online survey, Ofsted Parent View, and parents' free-text comments. Inspectors also considered responses to the Ofsted staff survey.

Inspection team

Catherine Beard, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

Jenni Machin

Ofsted Inspector

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