

Inspection of an outstanding school: Heathlands School

Heathlands Drive, St Albans, Hertfordshire AL3 5AY

Inspection dates:

7 and 8 February 2023

Outcome

Heathlands School continues to be an outstanding school.

What is it like to attend this school?

All pupils, including children in the early years, thrive in Heathlands School's inclusive, nurturing climate of high expectations. They wear their uniforms with pride, sharing their learning and school experiences enthusiastically with visitors. Pupils are polite and welcoming. New pupils settle in quickly, at whatever stage they join the school. Exceptionally positive relationships are reflected in all aspects of daily school life. Pupils are responsive to the expectation that they will work hard, behave well and be kind. They are safe in school. Bullying is rare, and dealt with quickly if it happens.

Children in the early years, sometimes with few or no language skills, learn routines quickly and learn how to communicate effectively using British Sign Language (BSL). Pupils of all ages enjoy the stories they read with adults. They make great strides in their use of language and vocabulary, as well as in reading and writing, from very different starting points.

Older pupils act responsibly as mentors to other pupils. Popular lunchtime clubs include the choir and sports clubs. Pupils share important messages in assemblies, for example about 'feeling good'. They value opportunities to explain to the wider community what it is like to be a deaf person in a hearing world.

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

Leaders' and governors' ambition for all pupils to be 'The best they can be', regardless of their starting points, is deeply rooted across daily life in the school. The curriculum is challenging, and very effectively implemented by skilled staff. Most teachers have specialist qualifications in the teaching of deaf pupils, or are working towards them. The high level of staff's fluency in BSL and the 'no limits' culture combine with these other important elements to ensure that pupils achieve exceptionally well.

Personalised programmes are carefully tailored to match individual needs. Establishing secure foundations in communicating through BSL is prioritised. In the early years,

children, and older pupils who need to catch up, learn to read and spell new words using techniques such as fingerspelling and visual phonics. Effective use of books, regular practice and a relentless focus on extending pupils' vocabulary mean that pupils improve their reading fluency and accuracy quickly. Their enthusiasm is evident as this begins to open up the extensive range of Heathlands' learning opportunities.

Pupils are supported to learn across pathways, which include English, mathematics, science, physical education, art and music. Some pupils learn how to communicate in French. Older pupils gain awards and qualifications, including with some impressive success in GCSE subjects. Where more formal qualifications are less appropriate, a smaller group of pupils learn important life skills, including how to shop for ingredients and how to cook independently. Numeracy, communication, reading and writing are non-negotiable for all pupils.

Some pupils have special educational needs beyond their deafness, including autism spectrum disorders and medical conditions. The school's special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) and deputy SENCo work closely together to ensure that these wider needs are met. This means that pupils have access to the same high-quality learning opportunities as others in the school.

Staff know their pupils exceptionally well. Planned learning builds on previous content. Key vocabulary is revisited systematically. Teachers' checks ensure that misconceptions and gaps in pupils' knowledge are corrected quickly. Consequently, pupils achieve very well from their different starting points.

Pupils' behaviour is exemplary. Where, occasionally, a few pupils' behaviour falls below the high standards promoted, they are quickly supported to improve. Pupils have a role in shaping expectations of conduct through the 'Student Charter' and by contributing to policy changes. The overarching focus on positive behaviours, 'do', rather than 'do not', ensures that the standard of pupils' behaviour remains impressive.

Pupils' confidence builds quickly during their time in the school. Children in the early years develop independence and learn to make positive choices. They enjoy sharing their learning with their families in weekly 'sign and play' sessions. Older pupils relish opportunities to sing, using BSL, and to act in the Shakespeare festival for schools, with their hearing peers. They are respectful and tolerant of individual differences and ready to help others.

Pupils are well prepared to take the next steps in education through a well-considered programme of careers education. This includes visits to colleges and talks from industry role models. All pupils enjoy work experience in Year 11 before they leave school.

Governors are a strong team. They are challenging and supportive in equal measures. They share an unwavering commitment to ensure that the high-quality provision continues to improve. Leaders value the skilled staff team. They are mindful of workload and well-being, so they consult staff when changes are proposed.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Ensuring that pupils are safe is a high priority for school leaders and governors. Strong and productive relationships with external agencies help to secure this. External support is enhanced in school, with services such as therapy, counselling and a dedicated family support worker. Staff are well trained in spotting concerns, and are quick to respond. Pupils are taught how to stay safe and about the importance of respectful, healthy relationships.

All safer recruitment checks are completed on new staff. Safeguarding records are well managed. Leaders understand the important links between pupils' attendance, behaviour and safeguarding. They use this information effectively to continue to ensure pupils stay safe.

Background

When we have judged a school to be outstanding, we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains outstanding. 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 first ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be outstanding in September 2017.

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](#)' 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	117685
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	10255262
Type of school	Special
School category	Maintained
Age range of pupils	3 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	132
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governing body	Oyin Kalejaiye
Headteacher	Lesley Reeves-Costi and Sarah Shields (Co-Headteachers)
Website	www.heathlands.herts.sch.uk
Dates of previous inspection	26 and 27 September 2017, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The co-headteachers were appointed in September 2019.
- The school offers specialist day and residential provision to pupils. The residential provision was previously inspected in 2022 and was judged to be outstanding.
- Almost all pupils are profoundly deaf and have an education, health and care plan. Some pupils have additional special educational needs.
- School leaders work closely with up to 35 local authorities. Often, pupils travel considerable distance from home to access the provision.
- The number of pupils joining the school at different points during the school year and at different stages of their education has increased.
- The school meets the provider access legislation. This means that pupils in Years 7 to 13 receive information about the full range of education and training available to them. This includes opportunities for a range of education and training providers to speak to pupils about the pathways open to them.
- The school does not use alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in the following subjects: communication and language, early reading, English, mathematics and science. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with subject leaders, visited a sample of lessons and spoke with teachers and other staff. They spoke with pupils about their learning and looked at samples of their work.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, inspectors reviewed safeguarding and associated policies and the record of pre-employment checks on adults at the school. The lead inspector also considered a sample of child protection files and spoke with trustees, leaders and staff about safeguarding arrangements in place.
- Telephone meetings were held with a representative from the local authority and the school's improvement partner.
- Inspectors held meetings with pupils, the co-headteachers, the SENCo and the deputy SENCo, subject leaders, other staff and three governors, including the chair of governors.
- Inspectors reviewed a range of documents, including behaviour and attendance records, meeting notes, the school's self-evaluation and improvement plans.
- The responses to the Ofsted online questionnaire, Ofsted Parent View, were considered alongside free-text responses from parents and 52 responses to the questionnaire for school staff. Inspectors also took account of the school's own survey of staff's and parents' views.
- There were no responses to Ofsted's questionnaire for pupils. However, inspectors spoke with individuals and small groups of pupils during the inspection to gather their views.
- Each inspector was supported by a BSL interpreter during visits to lessons and in meetings with staff and pupils over the two days of the inspection.

Inspection team

Christine Dick, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

Lynda Walker

Ofsted Inspector

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