

Stepping Stones School

Bowerham Road, Lancaster, Lancashire, LA1 4HT

Inspection dates 10–11 March 2015

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Good	2
	This inspection:	Outstanding	1
Leadership and management		Outstanding	1
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Outstanding	1
Quality of teaching		Outstanding	1
Achievement of pupils		Outstanding	1

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school.

- The senior leaders of the school have taken very effective steps to improve all aspects of the school's provision since the previous inspection.
- All staff, including teaching assistants, carry out their duties and responsibilities exceptionally well, so that pupils make excellent progress in improving their learning and their behaviour.
- Pupils reach national standards in English and mathematics from low starting points, as a result of excellent teaching and support.
- Pupils make rapid progress in improving their literacy levels so they become competent readers, but they do not read sufficiently widely to extend their knowledge and understanding so that they can improve their writing effectively.
- The vast majority of parents greatly appreciate the excellent family support they have received, which enables pupils to settle into learning and achieve very well.
- The assessment of pupils who are working at exceptionally low levels of learning is particularly strong. However, the school does not always assess the progress of pupils working closer to national averages in ways that enable it to compare their progress with national standards.
- The school's teachers and leaders provide highly valued support and training for a large number of schools in the local authority.
- Pupils' behaviour is impressive as a result of skilful support from staff and through the school's 'Values' curriculum. They learn how to manage their own behaviour very successfully.
- The school provides excellent opportunities for pupils to visit theatres and parks, and to work with pupils from other schools. This means that their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is excellent.
- Pupils feel safe and the school's systems for keeping pupils safe are continuously reviewed and improved.
- The school's governing body is very effective in making sure that leaders and teachers continuously improve the progress and behaviour of pupils. Its members understand how leaders have improved teaching, and have worked closely with them to recognise and reward good and outstanding teaching.

Information about this inspection

- The inspector observed teaching in the school, particularly looking at pupils' progress in eight teaching sessions. The inspector looked at a wide range of pupils' recent work in their books across subjects from all classes, and their writing over time. The inspector also attended three of the school's 'Reflection Meetings'.
- The inspector talked to a number of pupils about their work and how the school had helped them to improve. She met with the acting headteacher and the substantive headteacher to discuss the work of the school, and looked at the school's observations of teaching over time.
- The inspector also talked to the Chair and vice-chair of the Governing Body, the local authority representative, and an external consultant who is working with the school.
- The inspector spoke to three parents on the telephone and with one parent in the school. She spoke to a special educational needs professional in the local authority. The inspector also looked at responses from parents and pupils to surveys about the school. There were insufficient responses to Parent View, the online questionnaire, for them to be taken into consideration.
- The inspector also looked at a wide range of documents: school policies, the school's plans to improve further, reports to show the school's views of the quality of its work, reports from the acting headteacher to the governing body, records of pupils' progress and assessments, pupils' attendance, their behaviour and the actions taken by the school, and documents about how the school ensures that pupils and staff are safe.

Inspection team

Nell Banfield, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The school provides short-term education for pupils aged five to 11 years who, because of their behaviour, have been permanently excluded, or who are at risk of being permanently excluded from their mainstream school.
- The school is currently led by an acting headteacher and two assistant headteachers who are also senior teachers. The school's substantive headteacher is currently on maternity leave. The school's acting deputy headteacher is absent from school for health reasons.
- The school provides outreach training and support for 119 of the local authority's primary schools. This includes support for 40 pupils currently at risk of permanent exclusion from their primary school. A small proportion of these pupils attend Stepping Stones School for short periods. They remain on the roll of their mainstream school while also being registered to Stepping Stones School.
- Currently, two thirds of the pupils have been permanently excluded from school and attend Stepping Stones School full time. They are registered only at Stepping Stones School.
- All pupils have special educational needs due to emotional, behavioural and mental health difficulties or autistic spectrum conditions.
- Around half of the pupils are eligible for support from the pupil premium funding; this is well above the national average. The pupil premium is additional funding to support pupils who are known to be eligible for free school meals or are looked after by the local authority. A very small number of pupils in the school are looked after by the local authority.
- Too few pupils in each year group are supported by the pupil premium funding for a comparison to be made between their achievement and that of other pupils nationally.
- The vast majority of pupils are from White British backgrounds. There are no girls currently attending the school.
- The school is part of The Loyne Learning Alliance. In addition to delivering training to other schools in the partnership, the school develops aspects of its own curriculum such as Outdoor Learning.
- The school also delivers aspects of teacher training for the University of Cumbria.
- The school has achieved two Quality Marks with the Lancashire Healthy Schools programme.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise achievement further by ensuring that all staff provide opportunities for pupils to read widely and often so that they increasingly enjoy reading, and use their extended knowledge to help them learn exceptionally well in their new school.
- Improve assessment for those pupils working closer to national standards by using measures of progress and attainment that can be easily compared with national averages.

Inspection judgements

The leadership and management are outstanding

- All senior leaders and governors work very well together, and with middle leaders and the staff team, to improve rapidly both the achievement and the behaviour of pupils. They have all successfully ensured that all staff take part in planning, and improving teaching and systems for managing and improving behaviour. As a result, all staff use the planned practices and policies consistently so that pupils improve their learning and behaviour exceptionally well. Middle leaders effectively develop their subject or area of responsibility.
- All staff have high expectations that all pupils will achieve more than the progress expected of them. The school uses suitable systems to measure the small steps that pupils need to make, so teachers can plan for the next stage. This is especially successful for those pupils who arrive at the school working at the early stages of learning to read and to write. However, for those pupils who have reached higher levels closer to national standards, the system does not help teachers and leaders to compare pupils' standards and progress regularly enough against the performance of all pupils nationally.
- The school leader responsible for the work done by the outreach team makes sure that staff have excellent skills and are able to demonstrate them effectively when training or working with staff in other schools. She has successfully developed a bank of resources and strategies that can be taken away and tried out by other teachers and teaching assistants. These help them to improve the learning and behaviour of pupils at risk of permanent exclusion, in their own schools. Staff from other schools who attended a training session during the inspection were enthusiastic and positive as a result, and were keen to try out new ways of working.
- Support for staff to gain new skills and to improve current ways of working is excellent and develops teachers' and teaching assistants' skills exceptionally well. Staff views gathered during the inspection were overwhelmingly positive. One member of staff stated, 'Everything is done in the best interests of all the pupils in the school. An open-minded staff share ideas and experiences to achieve this.' Professional development plays a key role in the school's procedures for successfully improving the performance of teachers so that they deliver consistently high quality teaching.
- The school's evaluation of its performance is accurate and searching. It is used effectively to plan further improvement. Leaders, teachers and support staff are relentless in pursuing excellent learning and personal development for their pupils. In turn, staff are held accountable for the progress of pupils.
- Pupils follow a mainstream curriculum to prepare them for their return to mainstream or specialist school. The curriculum is enhanced by a range of trips, visits and lessons that extend their knowledge and understanding of art and music, and of different beliefs and lifestyles. Pupils learn how to plan and execute enterprise projects, such as how to set up a business and sell products at local outlets. They explore global issues such as recycling and conservation, and also find out about the different lives children lead in other countries. These experiences enhance pupils' spiritual, social, moral and cultural development very well.
- A significant strength of the school is the 'Reflection Meetings' and sessions where pupils are sensitively taught to recognise and articulate their own strengths and the achievements of others, as part of the school's 'Values' curriculum. The sessions provide pupils with a clear voice to express their views about the school, and the day-to-day incidents and struggles they have, in an appropriate way. This helps them to build improved relationships with friends and adults when they return to school. Stepping Stones uses these experiences to foster good relationships, to tackle discrimination, and prepares pupils well for the future.
- The meetings also help pupils to learn how to take turns, how to listen to others and how to contribute to a shared school view about how, for example, a problem in the playground could be better managed. This enables pupils to understand how a democracy works and why a shared decision is accepted by all. The experience prepares them well for life in modern Britain by extending their understanding of British values, laws and customs.
- The school, and particularly the family support worker, supports the whole family once a pupil arrives at Stepping Stones. Staff work exceptionally well with parents and other agencies to make sure that pupils attend regularly, learn increasingly well, and improve their behaviour both at home and at school.
- The pupil premium funding is partially used to pay for the family support worker, for resources to improve the low literacy levels of pupils on arrival to the school, to fund visits and trips that will widen experiences, and to add music to the curriculum. These all contribute effectively to the rapid progress of pupils supported by the funding, so that they make the same rates of progress as other pupils, including in reading and writing. This is evidence of the school's clear commitment to all pupils having equal opportunities to succeed.

- The primary school sports funding is used effectively to buy resources to enhance playground activities and to fund sports coaches to widen the range of sports played. Due to these enhanced resources, pupils are more active, enjoy playtime and build more effective relationships with each other.
- The local authority supports the school very well, particularly in relation to its measurement of pupils' performance at the end of each key stage against national standards. School leaders and governors have sought additional challenge from an external adviser, particularly to ensure that teaching is of high quality.
- The school's systems, for ensuring the safety of pupils and staff, meet statutory requirements. All procedures are very effectively followed by all staff and are regularly reviewed and improved.

■ **The governance of the school:**

Governors have excellent expertise and knowledge and use them effectively to challenge and support school leaders. They know how high quality teaching has been achieved and where support was needed. Governors regularly visit the school and are well informed about pupils' progress, and the standards that pupils reach. They use information about the impact of teaching to recognise and reward rapid pupil progress and consider any steps needed where progress is less evident. Detailed information in regular reports ensures that they know all pupils are making the same rapid progress towards high standards and no pupils are underachieving. They fulfil their statutory duties well.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are outstanding

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding. All staff follow the school's procedures for managing pupils' behaviour and, as a result, pupils settle well and understand and follow routines. Pupils learn in a calm and positive atmosphere. Any pupil who is upset, angry or distressed is very effectively supported in finding more constructive ways of managing strong feelings.
- Pupils have excellent attitudes to their work and behave exceptionally well in and around the school. They are polite and helpful, and proud to show their work and areas of their school to visitors. Pupils trust staff to help them and they respond very well to the skilled support and positive ways in which staff guide and help them to produce their best work.
- There is very little discriminatory or derogatory language used in the normal run of things, unless a pupil is agitated or struggling to cope. In these cases, staff apply the school procedures so it is clear that such language is unacceptable and inappropriate. The school's rewards and sanctions system is clear and well developed, and pupils understand clearly how it works. Staff support pupils well in accepting the loss of points and sanctions with relatively good grace, and in understanding how they could behave differently in a similar situation next time.

Safety

- The school's work to keep pupils safe and secure is outstanding. The school is very effective in improving the behaviour of the vast majority of pupils, some of whom arrive with extremely challenging behaviour. Arrangements to manage any risk to pupils are robust. Risk assessments are thorough, and governors regularly monitor and check policies and procedures.
- The school's records demonstrate a clear and rapid movement away from staff management of pupils' anger and frustration, to pupils independently identifying and using strategies to manage their own behaviour successfully. The school uses closely monitored, yet discreet, spaces where pupils can sit, for example in a designated space for 'thinking time', while they remind themselves what they should be doing. Similarly, there are spaces where pupils who are in the early stages of managing their behaviour can be safely helped to become calmer. The safe use of these spaces is regularly monitored and reviewed.
- Pupils are very well supervised around the school and in arriving and leaving the school. The vast majority of pupils say they feel safe and their parents agree. There are no incidents of bullying. If any conflicts arise, they are dealt with constructively in the Reflection sessions where pupils are guided to understand how the other person feels and are helped to make things right.
- Opportunities are identified in the curriculum to enable pupils to keep themselves safe. For example, pupils learned that you cannot tell by looking at a medicine or a tablet whether it is safe or not. They were able to say how they would store medicines safely in a home where there was a young child.
- Pupils improve their attendance dramatically on arrival at the school and the vast majority sustain their high levels of attendance.

The quality of teaching**is outstanding**

- Teaching is of consistently high quality so that pupils make outstanding progress in literacy, reading and mathematics. Pupils arrive at the school working at low starting points for their age compared with pupils nationally. Their improved learning skills help them to continue to make progress in their next school.
- In the event of pupils not making rapid progress, staff skilfully plan work that takes them through the necessary steps to master what they are learning. This builds their confidence so that they can progress to the next stage.
- Pupils work independently, with adults only giving necessary support to help them complete tasks and investigations. Teaching assistants are careful to question pupils so they find out for themselves how they can tackle a question or where they may have gone wrong. In a Year 5 science lesson, pupils extended their understanding of how a minibeast with an exo-skeleton grows. Effective questioning helped them firstly to clarify what an exo-skeleton was, and secondly to identify what was most likely to happen as the beast grew.
- Teachers plan lessons that interest pupils. In a Year 2 English lesson, pupils were engaged by a photograph of a house on a cliff being washed out to sea because of coastal erosion. As a result, they were keen to write a newspaper story about this.
- Teachers and teaching assistants have high expectations of what pupils can achieve. One Year 3 pupil who was working at the early stages of writing carefully wrote a number of sentences with rudimentary punctuation and spelling, to re-tell a story. His pride in his writing was evident as he said suddenly, 'I can write!' His writing on the following day included improved spelling, more consistent punctuation and accurate spacing.
- Pupils with low literacy levels improve their literacy skills quickly because of the regular daily reading and practising of sounds and letters. However, although they read in lessons, it is mainly reading of material linked with a task they are to complete. There are few examples of pupils enjoying reading more widely, or seeking out information from books, newspapers or magazines. As a result, pupils do not rapidly become skilled readers, and are not always able to apply what they learn from wider reading to their own written work.
- In 'Reflection Meetings' and group sessions, the teaching provides pupils with frequent opportunities to explain what they are thinking or feeling. This is very effective in helping them to develop their communication skills. For example, two younger pupils were each helped to nominate another pupil and describe not only what achievement they had nominated him for, but why it was a valuable achievement.
- All staff assess pupils' written work regularly and use this information to challenge pupils to strive to reach even higher standards in the ensuing lessons. When a Key Stage 2 class was asked what they had learned from the lesson, one pupil said, 'If you put your mind to it, you can do anything.'

The achievement of pupils**is outstanding**

- Achievement is outstanding because pupils make rapid progress in reading, writing and mathematics from low starting points. During the time they are in the school, they close the gaps between their progress and the progress made by pupils of their age nationally, because of excellent teaching and effective support. This helps them to work at similar levels to their peers when they move to their next school.
- Pupils in Year 2 and Year 6 take the end-of-key-stage tests and these add to the measures of progress so the school can make sure that pupils are continuing to make exceptional progress. In 2014, the vast majority of pupils achieved average standards in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of Key Stage 1. At the end of Key Stage 2 in 2014, a similar proportion achieved national standards in reading and mathematics in national tests, although their achievement in writing was slightly lower.
- Scrutiny of pupils' English books shows regular and frequent examples of rapidly improving and extended writing. Pupils' writing in science is very well structured and contains clear explanations of science investigations, illustrated by carefully drawn and accurate diagrams.
- The school's checking of pupils' progress shows that there is little variation in the rates of progress of different groups of pupils in the school. All make rapid progress from their starting points because teachers plan learning to accommodate pupils working on a topic at differing levels and from lower starting points. In a Year 3 and 4 mathematics lesson on identifying equivalent fractions, some pupils were guided to counting blocks into groups to strengthen their understanding of a half. At the same time, another pupil was calculating more complex equivalent fractions without blocks.
- The most able pupils achieve exceptionally well as they tackle increasingly challenging work. In a Year 6 mathematics lesson, one able pupil had to use his existing knowledge to calculate three angles out of four,

where only the size of one angle was given. The teacher guided him highly effectively in developing trial-and-error skills in arriving at an accurate answer.

- Around two thirds of pupils successfully move on to attend either a mainstream or a specialist school and sustain their placement. This is because the skills and knowledge that pupils gain during their time at Stepping Stones help them to learn more effectively and to manage their behaviour more successfully. Their time in the school sets them up well for the future.

What inspection judgements mean

School	Grade	Judgement	Description
	Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
	Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
	Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
	Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>

School details

Unique reference number	119103
Local authority	Lancashire
Inspection number	448011

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Pupil referral unit
School category	Pupil referral unit
Age range of pupils	5–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	21
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Sandra Thornberry
Headteacher	Alison Dodd
Date of previous school inspection	8 February 2012
Telephone number	01524 67164
Email address	bursar@steppingstones.lancs.sch.uk

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