

Inspection of a school judged outstanding for overall effectiveness before September 2024: Stepping Stones School

Bowerham Road, Lancaster, Lancashire LA1 4HT

Inspection dates:

11 and 12 February 2025

Outcome

Stepping Stones School has taken effective action to maintain the standards identified at the previous inspection.

What is it like to attend this school?

Warm and caring relationships with staff underpin pupils' experiences at this school. Pupils understand that staff have their best interests at heart. This helps them to feel safe.

The school's values of respect, kindness, trust and tolerance are threaded through everything that it does. Pupils understand these values and their importance. Over their time at the school, pupils begin to embody them. For instance, pupils demonstrate kindness to their peers if someone is upset.

The school equips each pupil with a toolkit that helps them to manage their emotions. Staff are adept at giving pupils choices and, typically, pupils make the right ones. Over time, pupils' behaviour improves. They enjoy being rewarded for their successes. For instance, pupils are keen to win bonus points each day.

Pupils start to enjoy learning and begin to take pride in their work. Their negative perceptions of education fade. Pupils gradually rise to meet the school's high expectations of their achievement. They learn well from their starting points.

Pupils enjoy contributing to the wider life of the school. For example, the house captains were recently consulted about the design of the school's safe spaces. At breaktimes, pupils are keen to help staff to set out equipment.

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

Pupils benefit from a well-thought-out, broad and ambitious curriculum. There is a focus on developing pupils' communication and language skills. To this end, staff are clear about the key vocabulary that pupils should learn. Some pupils use subject-specific vocabulary successfully. In the main, staff design activities that are well matched to what they want pupils to learn. However, at times, some staff do not check well enough if pupils have understood this learning or whether there are any misconceptions. This means that some pupils struggle to build knowledge over time because of gaps in their learning.

The school caters well for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The school accurately identifies pupils' additional needs when they arrive at the school. Staff are highly skilled in adapting learning to meet pupils' needs. Pupils with SEND learn well.

The school has prioritised reading. Pupils are encouraged to read often. They enjoy listening to stories each day. Nevertheless, reading remains a barrier to some pupils' learning. Many pupils arrive at the school with gaps in their phonics knowledge. Some of these pupils do not benefit from high-quality support that helps them to catch up with their peers. In addition, some staff do not deliver the phonics programme consistently well. This hinders how quickly pupils become confident and fluent readers.

The school employs some successful strategies to improve pupils' attendance. As a result, pupils' attendance, from their starting points, improves.

There is a calm atmosphere around the building. Generally, pupils behave well. Most follow the school's expectations of 'ready, respectful, learning'. The small number who do not, are supported effectively to reflect on their behaviour, without judgement. They understand that tomorrow is a new day.

The school's programme for wider development gives pupils new opportunities. Some pupils enjoy visits to an outdoor adventure centre to develop their perseverance and teamwork. They enrich their history learning with a visit to a local castle. The school is mindful of developing pupils' ability to keep themselves safe in a range of situations. Pupils learn about stranger danger, water safety and consent. They understand how to keep themselves safe online, including how to spot scams. They have a strong understanding of fundamental British values, and this prepares them well for life in modern Britain.

Staff are given sufficient support to develop their subject curriculums. Furthermore, their workload has been reduced, for example through the use of ready-made resources.

The school makes decisions in the best interests of its pupils. Parents and carers are exceptionally happy with the school and how it transforms their children. The management committee has extensive knowledge of the school. Committee members use their expertise well to challenge the school.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Some staff lack expertise in the school's chosen phonics scheme. This leads to inconsistencies in how well the phonics programme is delivered. The school should ensure that staff are equipped with the knowledge and skills to deliver the phonics programme as intended so that pupils can secure their phonics knowledge as quickly as possible.
- At times, misconceptions in pupils' knowledge are not effectively identified and addressed. This means that gaps in some pupils' knowledge persist. The school should ensure that routines for checking understanding and addressing misconceptions and gaps in learning are applied effectively across the curriculum.

Background

Until September 2024, on a graded (section 5) inspection we gave schools an overall effectiveness grade, in addition to the key and provision judgements. Overall effectiveness grades given before September 2024 will continue to be visible on school inspection reports and on Ofsted's website. From September 2024 graded inspections will not include an overall effectiveness grade. This school was, before September 2024, judged to be outstanding for its overall effectiveness.

We have now inspected the school to determine whether it has taken effective action to maintain the standards identified at that previous inspection. 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's work has improved significantly or that it may not be as strong as it was at the last inspection, then the next inspection will be a graded inspection. A graded inspection 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 outstanding for overall effectiveness in March 2015.

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	119103
Local authority	Lancashire
Inspection number	10348132
Type of school	Pupil referral unit
School category	Pupil referral unit
Age range of pupils	5 to 11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	33
Appropriate authority	The local authority
Headteacher	Michael Hooper
Website	www.steppingstones.lancs.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	19 March, 2019, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The headteacher joined the school in September 2024.
- There is a new chair and vice chair of the management committee since the previous inspection.
- The school does not make use of any alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

- Inspections are a point-in-time evaluation about the quality of a school's education provision.
- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. 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, other senior leaders and members of staff.
- An inspector held telephone conversations with the school's adviser and a representative of the local authority.
- Inspectors visited a sample of lessons, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.

- Inspectors observed behaviour at break- and lunchtimes.
- Inspectors considered the responses shared through Ofsted Parent View, including the free-text comments. An inspector also spoke to some parents about their views of the school.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, 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 reviewed a range of documentation including the school's self-evaluation document, improvement plan, and attendance and behaviour records.
- There were no responses to Ofsted's staff and pupil surveys.

Inspection team

Jenny Jones, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Paul Edmondson

Ofsted Inspector

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