

Inspection of an outstanding school: Middleton School

Walnut Tree Walk, Ware, Hertfordshire SG12 9PD

Inspection dates: 21 and 22 June 2023

Outcome

There has been no change to this school's overall judgement of outstanding as a result of this ungraded (section 8) inspection. However, the evidence gathered suggests that the inspection grade might not be as high if a graded (section 5) inspection were carried out now. Inspectors are recommending the next inspection to be a graded inspection.

What is it like to attend this school?

Middleton School is a happy place. From the time they arrive, pupils are busy learning and doing. Every pupil is warmly greeted by staff. Pupils settle quickly. They are eager and ready for the work that lies ahead. However, in a few subjects, teachers' subject knowledge is not strong enough. This means that some pupils do not achieve as well as they could.

Pupils enjoy trusting relationships with adults. Staff understand each pupil's needs well. Pupils quickly understand leaders' high expectations of how to behave at school. Bullying is rare. Playtimes are harmonious occasions. Everyone gets along with one another. Pupils are safe at Middleton. If they have any concerns, pupils are confident that adults will help them.

Pupils greatly benefit from the off-site curriculum offered at the school. They develop important life skills through the wide range of visits and enriching experiences. They learn to become more independent. Pupils increase their resilience and self-esteem. This prepares them extremely well for their life beyond the school.

Parents are highly positive about the school and recognise the hard work of staff. Parents typically describe the school as one 'with a lot of love' where staff 'pour everything they have into teaching these children.'

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

Leaders aim to provide a 'learning for life' curriculum. This is evident through their subject plans. Teachers plan for purposeful practical experiences to bring learning alive. For example, visits to cafes and supermarkets provide opportunities for pupils to apply their

knowledge in real-life contexts. This helps them to build their understanding in a meaningful way.

Leaders have developed a well-planned curriculum. It sets out learning in small steps. The curriculum takes account of pupils' individual starting points. Teachers tailor plans to meet pupils' individual learning needs. Most teachers use subject plans well to teach pupils to remember their learning. Concepts are frequently re-visited to remind pupils of what they have learned before. In a few subjects, the curriculum is not as well implemented. Some teachers' subject knowledge is not secure. This leads to gaps in pupils' knowledge. Consequently, some pupils do not learn as successfully as they should.

Teachers are creative in their delivery of the curriculum. They consider pupils' communication needs, seamlessly moving between visual representations and signing. This supports teachers to make thorough checks of pupils' understanding during lessons. Staff use this information well to plan for pupils' future learning needs.

All pupils who attend the school have education, health and care plans. Leaders break down pupils' individual targets into smaller achievable steps. Pupils practise their targets as part of whole class learning or when working one to one with skilled adults.

Leaders aim to ensure all pupils become functional readers by the time they leave the school. Staff introduce phonics to pupils when they are ready to start reading. Leaders have recently changed their programme for delivering phonics. Leaders have provided training for staff. However, a few adults do not use these strategies well when hearing pupils read. Pupils enjoy the stories teachers read to them. Adults bring stories alive through props and toys. Pupils immerse themselves in books during library time. They enjoy selecting from a wide range of reading materials. The love of reading is well promoted.

Pupils' behaviour is exemplary. Clear and consistent routines mean the school environment is calm. Pupils work hard in their lessons. They follow directions without question. Adults provide positive role models for the behaviour they want to see. Pupils genuinely care for one another.

Pupils take part in a wide range of enrichment activities. During weekly 'jolly time', adults share their own hobbies. Pupils benefit from this exposure to different experiences. It encourages them to try new things and further develop their interests. Pupils have a voice through the school council. This teaches them about responsibility and working for the good of the school community. Trips and visits develop pupils' understanding of what it is to be a good citizen.

Governors share leaders' vision to prepare pupils for adulthood. They are highly supportive. They make thorough checks to assure themselves that leaders' decisions improve the school. Alongside leaders, governors ensure staff have a manageable workload.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders ensure that staff are acutely aware of the vulnerabilities pupils with complex needs face. They provide training, so that staff know how to recognise the signs that pupils may be at risk. Staff understand how to report their concerns, no matter how small. Leaders are tenacious in pursuing any concerns they identify. Leaders work effectively with their own in-house teams as well as external agencies to provide the right support. Records about safer recruitment are thorough and well maintained.

Through the curriculum, pupils learn how to keep themselves safe, both in and out of school.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- A few teachers do not have the secure subject knowledge to deliver all of leaders' curriculum plans well. They do not always identify gaps in pupils' knowledge. This means that some pupils do not achieve as well as they could. Leaders must ensure that staff are trained and provided with the subject knowledge they need to teach consistently well across the curriculum.
- Leaders' approaches to teaching early reading have recently changed. A few adults are not yet sufficiently confident in using the new approaches to support pupils with their early reading. This is especially so when adults listen to pupils read. Pupils do not always build their phonic knowledge effectively. Leaders should continue with their plans to provide staff with the training they need. Leaders must then check that the strategies to support reading are used consistently well.

Background

When we have judged 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 April 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	117676
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	10240108
Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	4 to 11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	110
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governing body	Pauline Wallace
Headteacher	Debbie Hartley
Website	www.middleton.herts.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	23 March 2017, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- This school provides education for pupils with learning difficulties that include autistic spectrum disorders and speech, language and communication needs. All pupils have an education, health and care plan.
- The headteacher took up post in September 2019. A new deputy headteacher started at the same time. The assistant headteacher was appointed in January 2020.
- The school opened an additional building on the school site in April 2023. The capacity of the school will be increased to 104 pupils in September 2023.
- The school does not make use of any alternative providers.

Information about this inspection

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed any continued impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors met with the headteacher, the deputy headteacher, the assistant headteacher, school staff and five members of the governing body, including the chair of governors.

- The lead inspector held a telephone conversation with a representative from the local authority.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: early reading, mathematics and personal, social, health and economic education. For each deep dive, the inspectors discussed the curriculum with subject leaders, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to pupils and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- The lead inspector listened to some pupils read to a familiar adult.
- Inspectors reviewed the school's documentation related to safeguarding, including the safeguarding checks carried out on staff working at the school. Inspectors also spoke to staff and governors about their understanding of safeguarding and to pupils about how they keep themselves safe.
- Inspectors scrutinised a range of school documentation, including the school's development plan and the school's self-evaluation.
- Inspectors observed pupils' behaviour in and out of classrooms, including at lunchtimes.
- Inspectors considered parent responses to the Ofsted online questionnaire, Parent View, including free-text replies and the responses to Ofsted's staff survey.

Inspection team

Steve Mellors, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Mary Abeyasekera

Ofsted Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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Textphone: 0161 618 8524
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