

Alex Park Democratic School

Alexandra Park Children's Learning Community, Demesne Road, Whalley Range, Manchester M16 8PH

Inspection dates

18–19 June 2019

Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Requires improvement
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Requires improvement
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Requires improvement
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement

- Leadership and management require improvement because the school does not fully meet the independent school standards. The unmet standard is that concerned with the appropriateness of plans and schemes of work which must consider the age, aptitudes and needs of all pupils.
- Pupils make uneven progress in reading, writing and mathematics. This is because lessons are not matched well to pupils' different starting points. This sometimes contributes to pupils lacking engagement in their learning.
- External links with educational consultants are developing well; however, the work undertaken has not had time to bring about improvement.
- Expectations for the presentation of pupils' work, including their handwriting, are not high enough. As a result, pupils' work is often untidy.
- Leaders' school evaluation plans are not fully effective in identifying the strengths of the school and areas where further improvement is needed.

The school has the following strengths

- The headteacher and deputy headteacher lead with dedication and commitment to prepare pupils effectively for their future lives.
- Parents and carers are unanimous in their support for the school. They greatly value the work of leaders and teachers. Many credit the school for positively transforming the behaviour and well-being of their children.
- Pupils personal development, behaviour and welfare is good. This is because of the successful emphasis on nurture and care which pervades the school. Pupils develop confidence and self-esteem.
- The teacher in charge of special educational needs and/or disability (SEND) is bringing about marked improvement in the provision for these pupils.
- Pupils demonstrate creditable views on diversity because of the positive role models of the staff. A respect for equality is at the heart of this school's ethos.
- The attendance of almost all pupils is broadly in line with that seen nationally.
- Pupils feel safe in school. They value the positive relationships they share with other pupils and with their teachers.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school must take action to meet the requirements of the schedule to The Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 and associated requirements. These details are listed in the annexe to this report.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Increase the effectiveness and impact of leadership and management by:
 - ensuring that the plans and schemes of work for subjects including reading, writing and mathematics consider the ages, aptitudes and needs of all pupils
 - provide training and support to staff in any area of reading, writing or mathematics where they lack subject knowledge
 - ensuring that the school's self-evaluation is informed by gathering information about the quality of teaching and learning and pupils' outcomes.
- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, and consequently pupils' progress by:
 - better enabling pupils to develop their reading, writing and mathematical skills according to their age and ability
 - improving the presentation of pupils' work, including their handwriting
 - ensuring that pupils are fully engaged in their learning.
- The school must meet the independent school standards, as set out in the annexe of this report.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Requires improvement

- Leaders have worked with dedication and commitment to develop provision for both part-time and full-time pupils since the school opened in November 2018. Much success has been achieved in terms of meeting the independent school standards. However, the standard relating to the effectiveness of the plans and schemes of work that are in place has not yet been met.
- Leaders have used professional development effectively to ensure that staff working with pupils understand the ethos around the school in terms of it being a democratic school. This training has been successful. Leaders are currently working to support staff in the development of their skills in teaching reading, writing and mathematics by working closely with consultants from other schools. However, it is too soon to see the impact of this work.
- Parents are unanimous in their support of the school. All parents who responded to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, said that they would recommend the school to another parent. They all felt that the school was well led and managed.
- The school's curriculum focuses on the development of curiosity and exploration, with the focus being on pupils directing their own learning. Leaders ensure that pupils have a broad range of opportunities to explore learning through areas that are of interest to them. Pupils are encouraged to undertake learning projects which provide them with opportunities to explore the curriculum, making effective links between subjects. One comment by a parent reflected the view of many others, 'The children are learning to communicate kindly and thoughtfully with peers and adults alike, to care for the environment and animals, to respect each other and their teachers, and to explore passions for learning.'
- Leaders are working hard to align their school's ethos relating to pupils directing their own learning, with the requirements of the independent school standards in terms of the quality of the curriculum. While the school has only been open for a short time, progress is being made in this area. For example, leaders are beginning to restructure the teaching of mathematics and English to ensure that it is more in line with the national curriculum. This is to increase the level of challenge provided to pupils.
- Inspection evidence, and work undertaken by external consultants, has highlighted that existing schemes of work are not sufficiently strong to support staff in their planning and ensure that lessons prepared take full account of pupils' aptitudes and needs. As a result, pupils have made weak progress in some aspects of reading, writing and mathematics.
- Leaders do not provide extra-curricular activities; however, they place great emphasis on the importance of physical education and outdoor learning. As a result, pupils have access to the school garden, allotments, a local park and an area in school where they can care for chickens.
- The school ensures that the promotion of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is woven through the curriculum. Pupils have regular opportunities to undertake visits beyond school, for example to museums, art galleries, a university and to

their local park. As a result, pupils show a clear understanding of life beyond their school and value opportunities to experience it.

- Pupils' understanding of British values is strong. They have a highly developed understanding of respect, social justice, democracy and the importance of law. For example, pupils recently benefited from a visit by representatives of Manchester City Council. This gave pupils the opportunity to outline to the visitors the structure of a democratic school. Pupils also learned about the role of local councillors and how their role linked to wider representation in parliament.
- Leaders are beginning to build strong links with local schools. Guidance and advice taken has supported leaders as they improve the school. An example of this is the development of school improvement planning. Working with external partners, leaders are focusing on improving pupil engagement and pitching learning consistently at the correct level. This partnership work has also enabled leaders to provide additional support for pupils with SEND, to ensure that they receive learning tailored to their specific needs.

Governance

- The two proprietors are also the school's headteacher and deputy headteacher. They perform the role of governors. They are highly successful in sharing their vision of the school with all staff who work there.
- Parents are fully confident in the ability of the headteacher and deputy headteacher to perform their roles effectively.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. The school site is secure and visitors' identity is checked carefully on arrival.
- Effective procedures are in place to check the suitability of adults working with children at the school. The school works well with other agencies where necessary.
- All health and safety requirements to ensure that the premises are safe and secure are met. The school's health and safety policy is effective in providing support for staff.
- There is a strong culture of nurture and support in school. Many pupils join the school from other schools having experienced social and/or emotional difficulties. The support and guidance they receive results in them developing in both confidence and self-esteem. Pupils spoken with during the inspection said that they feel safe in school. All parents who responded to Parent View agreed.
- The school does not have a website, but all safeguarding policies and procedures are up to date and available to parents on request. The safeguarding policy takes account of current guidelines and many aspects, such as that of 'early help' procedures, are well publicised for parents around the school site.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- Classroom staff have worked with determination and dedication to improve their skills since the school opened in 2018. Work to develop their understanding of teaching in a

democratic school has been effective in terms of creating a classroom where pupils choose what to learn based on many first-hand experiences.

- Relationships between pupils and between pupils and classroom staff are strong. Many pupils join the school with social and emotional difficulties which have made learning elsewhere difficult. From these varied starting points, teachers ensure that pupils' confidence and self-esteem grow.
- All pupils are taught together in one classroom by a teacher and a teaching assistant. Staff encourage pupils to work with positive attitudes so that they can apply themselves and make strong progress. This has been more successful in the wider curriculum where teachers encourage pupils to explore their learning through areas which are of personal interest to them. Within the wider curriculum, pupils are keen learners and are willing to find out new information to develop and consolidate their knowledge, understanding and skills. They use information technology effectively to research many aspects of their learning.
- In line with the school philosophy, teachers do not follow a specific or fixed curriculum. Work in pupils' books shows that learning in reading, writing and mathematics is not consistently strong. The school's focus on self-directed learning, without the support of effective schemes of work for these subjects, has resulted in a lack of challenge in some lessons.
- Classroom staff are benefiting from external support with the teaching of mathematics. This is beginning to ensure that pupils receive additional challenge. As a result, pupils can use problem-solving and reasoning skills to better effect. However, further time is needed to fully embed this new system of teaching to ensure that teachers plan for the steps of progression that pupils need to progress effectively.
- English is currently taught with a focus on communication. However, leaders have put plans in place to develop further the teaching of reading and writing to reflect the standards in the national curriculum. Currently, both subjects lack structure and pupils do not receive the challenge they need to develop their knowledge and skills to full effect. As a result, pupils sometimes lack engagement in their work. Leaders are aware of this issue; they have highlighted it in their development planning and are working effectively with external consultants to develop further the planning, sequencing and teaching of these subjects.
- Staff are not setting consistently high expectations for the quality of pupils' handwriting or for the overall presentation of their work in books.
- Teachers encourage 'freedom to roam'. This means that pupils move between rooms at will and use outdoor learning to supplement what they learn in the classroom. Pupils use such opportunities to make connections between their learning. For example, learning in science is effectively supported by pupils' work in their allotment and gardens and by caring for the school's chickens.
- The classroom staff have been highly effective in developing pupils' curiosity and their communication skills. This is because pupils receive regular opportunities to discuss their learning and to debate issues effectively. As a result, pupils are developing good speaking and listening skills.

- Parents receive accurate information on their children's progress across the curriculum. Strong links between school and home ensure that pupils' individual needs are discussed frequently.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good. This is because the strong emphasis that leaders place on pupils' support has resulted in confident and responsible pupils who love school.
- Pupils are confident and self-assured. They take pride in their appearance and enjoy conversations with adults. Pupils spoken with during the inspection felt that the school supported their needs well. This view was reflected by parents. All parents who responded to Parent View said they strongly agreed that their child is happy at school.
- Pupils show a high level of respect for the ideas and views of others. Regular whole-class meetings throughout the day give pupils the opportunity to discuss their learning and the direction in which they would like to take it.
- Pupils are very reflective about the importance of being good citizens. They enjoy helping others and raise money for charity. For example, pupils recently undertook a winter fair to raise money for 'Water Aid'.
- Pupils value the opportunity to be the class representative for the day. This puts them in charge of peace in the classroom. As part of this role, pupils help to sort out other pupils' problems and ensure that all their classmates are happy and coping well with school life.
- Pupils love their school. They value the opportunities they receive to choose what they want to learn. They highlight the friendliness of other children and of staff.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good. Pupils conduct themselves well throughout the day, including lunchtimes.
- There are marked improvements in behaviour for pupils with behavioural needs during their time in school. Pupils spoken with said that they greatly valued the many opportunities provided by staff to choose how they wanted to learn.
- Leaders and classroom staff place great emphasis on equality and diversity together with a strong promotion of British values. Pupils get on very well with each other and say that there is no bullying in school or prejudicial language used.
- The attendance of almost all pupils is in line with that seen nationally. Leaders are working hard to ensure that unauthorised absences are discussed with parents and high attendance is positively encouraged.
- Pupils understand the need for respect and tolerance. This level of respect is a much-prized quality at the school ensuring that pupils feel nurtured and safe. The supportive school climate is greatly assisting pupils' behaviours for learning. As a result, pupils are developing resilience.

Outcomes for pupils

Requires improvement

- The school has been open since November 2018 and most pupils attend on a part-time basis. Pupils do not undertake any standardised assessments unless they choose to do so. This is in line with the school's democratic ethos.
- Work in pupils' books evidences weak progress in some areas of writing. This is because the school's scheme of work does not provide the detail needed for teachers to plan lessons which build systematically on pupils' knowledge, understanding and skills. Additionally, the presentation of pupils' work, including their handwriting, does not show consistent improvement over time.
- Leaders are working well to develop the scheme of work in mathematics. This is helping classroom staff to ensure that increased progress is being achieved by pupils, but further work is needed to embed this further.
- Pupils enjoy reading and say that they read regularly at home. Teachers provide opportunities within the curriculum for pupils to listen to stories. Through their individual projects, pupils can develop their skills in reading non-fiction. However, a lack of a system to develop pupils' reading skills systematically affects the progress that they are making in this subject. Work in books, for example, showed that some older pupils struggle to give clear answers to questions posed by classroom staff about the content of texts they have read.
- A lack of guidance on selecting reading books means that pupils sometimes choose books to read which do not fully challenge their thinking, develop their vocabulary or ensure that they are reading widely enough. Those who read to the inspector did so from books that contained vocabulary that did not challenge them.
- Pupils are confident in applying information learned in one subject within the wider curriculum to other subjects. For example, one pupil was able to express a preference for the work of Gaudi compared to Van Gogh. He talked about different textures that artists use in their work was able to cross-reference his learning in art to that of science. A focus on developing pupils' critical thinking skills is evident when pupils discuss their work.
- Effective partnerships with secondary schools are being built up by leaders to enable pupils who will leave Year 6 to settle into their new schools. This work, together with the highly effective work undertaken by the school to support pupils' social and emotional well-being, foster high levels of respect and develop their critical thinking skills means that they are well prepared for the next stage of their education. Parents spoken with during the inspection said that they feel that their children are better prepared for the world because they attend Alex Park Democratic School.

School details

Unique reference number	146337
DfE registration number	352/6014
Inspection number	10092289

This inspection was carried out under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008, the purpose of which is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

Type of school	Other independent school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	5 to 11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	25
Number of part-time pupils	20
Proprietor	MPECC Limited
Headteacher	Susana Lopez Penedo
Annual fees (day pupils)	£4,212 to £6,435
Telephone number	0161 226 8080
Website	None
Email address	enquiries@alexandraparkclc.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this school

- Alex Park Democratic School is an independent co-educational day school for boys and girls aged five to 11, from Year 1 to Year 6.
- The school is to be housed in the premises of the existing Alexandra Park Children's Learning Community.
- The school promotes a democratic curriculum. Leaders aim to foster in pupils the values and skills needed to be citizens able to take part in society by becoming active members of their communities.

- Alex Park Democratic School presents an educational environment within which pupils can develop a largely experiential curriculum which is developed with staff and pupils in mixed-age social groups.
- Some pupils have an education, health and care plan.
- Most pupils attend on a part-time basis of no fewer than three days per week.
- Pupils are currently admitted to the school following referrals from other schools, local authorities or other agencies.

Information about this inspection

- The inspector gathered a wide range of evidence during the inspection, including through observations of pupils working in the classroom and looking at pupils' workbooks.
- Meetings were held with members of the school staff, including the headteacher, the deputy headteacher, the leader for SEND and the school's teacher.
- Account was taken of four responses to Ofsted's pupil questionnaire, two responses to the staff questionnaire and 11 responses to each of Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire and the free-text questionnaire.
- The inspector spoke with pupils in a formal interview and during lessons.
- The inspector considered a variety of documentation related to the school's work, including the school's current schemes of work, plans and attendance information.
- The inspector scrutinised documents and records concerning safeguarding, health and safety and pupils' behaviour.
- The inspector spoke to parents at the start of the school day.
- The inspector conducted a tour of the premises with the headteacher.

Inspection team

Gill Pritchard, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex. Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school must meet the following independent school standards

Part 1. Quality of education provided

- 2(1) The standard in this paragraph is met if—
 - 2(1)(a) the proprietor ensures that a written policy on the curriculum, supported by appropriate plans and schemes of work, which provides for the matters specified in sub-paragraph (2) is drawn up and implemented effectively; and
 - 2(1)(b) the written policy, plans and schemes of work—
 - 2(1)(b)(i) take into account the ages, aptitudes and needs of all pupils, including those pupils with an EHC plan; and

Part 8. Quality of leadership in and management of schools

- 34(1) The standard about the quality of leadership and management is met if the proprietor ensures that persons with leadership and management responsibilities at the school—
 - 34(1)(a) demonstrate good skills and knowledge appropriate to their role so that the independent school standards are met consistently;
 - 34(1)(b) fulfil their responsibilities effectively so that the independent school standards are met consistently.

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