

Inspection of an outstanding school: Ellen Tinkham School

Hollow Lane, Pinhoe, Exeter, Devon EX1 3RW

Inspection dates:

10–11 March 2020

Outcome

Ellen Tinkham School continues to be an outstanding school.

However, inspectors have some concerns that one or more areas may be declining, as set out below.

What is it like to attend this school?

Staff at this school care deeply for the pupils. They are united in ensuring pupils get the best possible start in life. The school's core values that 'everyone will be the best that they can be, everyone has a voice and no-one is excluded' shine through. Staff see beyond pupils' disabilities. This raises pupils' self-esteem and their belief that anything is possible.

Many pupils enjoy school and what they learn in their lessons. Trips and visits make learning exciting. Pupils welcome experiencing new challenges, such as rock climbing and trampolining. Pupils especially enjoy the opportunity for residential visits, for example to South Africa.

Staff ensure that the school is a calm and welcoming place for pupils. The school community is built on mutual trust and respect. Staff know individual pupils extremely well and have high expectations of them. They are able to support pupils and help them in regulating their anxious behaviours. This means pupils' behaviour in lessons and around school is of a high standard.

Pupils are confident that bullying is extremely rare and, if it happens, staff sort it quickly.

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

The executive headteacher leads the school with passion and determination. She conveys strongly that children are what matter most at Ellen Tinkham. Everything staff do is about helping pupils realise their potential. Staff know their pupils well. Along with leaders, they maintain a focus on the goals set out in pupils' education, health and care (EHC) plans and incorporate these goals into their individual personal learning programmes. This means that teachers focus on the things that matter in order to help pupils to achieve the best they can. Many parents appreciate the work of the school. 'All I can do is praise Ellen

Tinkham School for the fantastic work they do' and 'all staff show kindness and genuine interest in her life both inside and outside of school' are two of the positive comments received.

Throughout the school, there is a strong focus on communication. The use of technology, signs and symbols promote pupils' communication skills. Staff help those pupils with the most complex needs to appreciate the world around them through sensory activities, using sound, smell and touch. This focus on communication starts in the early years, where children get off to a good start. Staff work well as a team. They know the children well and form strong relationships which are very supportive and caring. This means children quickly settle and enjoy being at school.

The curriculum enables pupils to access a range of learning experiences across many national curriculum subjects, including English, mathematics, physical education and geography. For example, pupils were able to talk to us about their interest in history, particularly the impact of the Nazis during the war.

Education staff work together with other agencies to ensure pupils get the support and help they need. For example, pupils were showing great enthusiasm when playing skittles with the physiotherapist. Their sense of pride and achievement in knocking down the skittles was evident from the excitement and wide smiles on their faces.

The executive headteacher and her staff share a determination that every pupil will learn how to read. Therefore, leaders make sure that reading is a high priority. There are book areas in each class with a range of texts and authors. For example, in early years, children listen to stories written by Julia Donaldson, such as 'The Gruffalo', 'The Highway Rat' and 'Room on the Broom'. This develops children's enjoyment of listening to stories. However, the systematic teaching of phonics and early reading is not secure across the school and the college. The subject knowledge of teaching assistants is not consistently strong in the teaching of phonics and early reading. Books are not always well matched to pupils' age or stage of development. Leaders of reading have the knowledge and expertise in the teaching of reading. However, they do not check the quality of the teaching of reading well enough. This means some pupils are not developing their reading skills quickly enough. Leaders recognise there is work to do to ensure pupils can gain the functional reading skills they need for the next stage of their education.

Leaders are determined that pupils experience life to the full. For example, students at the college relish the opportunity to work on mechanics, such as the maintenance of lawn mowers. Woodwork is also popular and we viewed students' high-quality work, which included oak chopping boards and wooden storage containers.

Sixth-form and further education (FE) studies provide students with opportunities for meaningful work experience. For example, students who have a clear vision of what they want to do are well supported in gaining the necessary accreditations and qualifications, such as construction, land skills and BTEC National Diploma in cooking. This enables pupils to gain crucial skills that help them achieve their aspirations and prepare them well for life when they leave Ellen Tinkham.

Staff made a point of telling us how well leaders support the work they do. They appreciate the executive headteachers' approach and her recognition of all that they do. This means staff are confident that they are free from bullying or harassment and that their workload is manageable.

In discussion with the headteacher, we agreed that the teaching of phonics and reading may usefully serve as a focus for the next inspection.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders take safeguarding seriously. Staff vetting checks are in line with current legislation and fit for purpose. The induction for new staff is thorough. Staff receive effective training and regular updates on keeping pupils safe. There is a shared understanding by staff of the need to protect each pupil from all possible risks. Staff are able to spot concerns quickly and take the necessary action with confidence. The online referral system is well organised, and staff record information carefully. This means safeguarding staff are able to take appropriate and timely action to keep pupils safe.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Leaders are ambitious for every pupil to become a functional reader. However, the teaching of phonics and early reading is not secure. Leaders need to ensure that there is a systematic approach to the teaching of phonics and reading so that staff are confident in the use of phonics and other strategies that supports pupils' reading skills.
- Leaders of reading are confident in their subject knowledge. However, they do not hold staff well enough to account for the quality of their work in teaching pupils to read. Senior leaders need to ensure these subject leaders develop their leadership skills to enable them to develop the teaching of reading effectively.
- The subject knowledge of teaching assistants is not universally secure in reading. This is impacting on pupils' reading fluency. Subject leaders need to ensure that all teaching assistants have the training, and subsequently the expertise, needed to enable pupils to achieve well in reading.
- Reading books are not consistently age appropriate or do not match pupils' phonics knowledge. This means that, on occasion, pupils struggle and get despondent with their reading. Leaders must ensure books match pupils' phonics knowledge precisely and are age appropriate.

Background

When we have judged a special school, pupil referral unit or maintained nursery 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 a section 8 inspection of a good or non-exempt outstanding school. We do not give graded judgements on a section 8 inspection. However, if we find some evidence that a good school could now be better than good, or that standards may be declining, then the next inspection will be a section 5 inspection. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the section 8 inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour or the quality of education, we will convert the section 8 inspection to a section 5 inspection immediately.

This is the second section 8 inspection since we judged the school to be outstanding on 2–3 March 2011.

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 Ofsted Parent View information 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.

If you are the school and you are not happy with the inspection or the report, you can [complain to Ofsted](#).

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

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| Unique reference number | 113633 |
| Local authority | Devon |
| Inspection number | 10122388 |
| Type of school | Special |
| School category | Community special |
| Age range of pupils | 3 to 19 |
| Gender of pupils | Mixed |
| Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision | Mixed |
| Number of pupils on the school roll | 229 |
| Of which, number on roll in the sixth form | 39 |
| Appropriate authority | The governing body |
| Chair of governing body | Steve Cleverly |
| Executive Headteacher | Jacqui Warne |
| Website | www.ellentinkham.devon.sch.uk |
| Date of previous inspection | 8 February 2016 |

Information about this school

- Ellen Tinkham is a special school with provision for children from the Early Years Foundation Stage through to FE students in Year 14. The school operates across two sites: early years and primary at Hollow Lane, and secondary and FE at Wayside Crescent.
- Ellen Tinkham is federated with Bidwell Brook School in Dartington and together form the Learn to Live Federation.
- All pupils have an EHC plan.
- The school is equipped to cater for pupils with severe learning difficulties, profound and multiple learning difficulties, autism spectrum disorder and physical impairments.

Information about this inspection

- We held meetings with the executive headteacher, deputy headteacher, senior leaders, teaching and support staff.
- We held a meeting with five governors, including the chair via the telephone.
- We spoke on the telephone with a representative from Devon children's services.
- We examined a range of documentation provided by the school, including the school's self-evaluation document, the school's development plan, and documentation relating to behaviour.
- A significant proportion of the inspection focused on ensuring pupils are safe. We scrutinised training records and tested staff's safeguarding knowledge.
- We reviewed the school's provision in reading, communication, and personal, social and health education. This included visiting lessons, looking at pupils' work, meeting with senior leaders and discussions with staff and pupils.
- We observed pupils' behaviour at various times during the day and reviewed attendance information.
- We reviewed 41 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, and additional free-text comments. We reviewed the 54 responses to Ofsted's online staff questionnaire and 29 responses to the pupil questionnaire.

Inspection team

Jen Southall, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Gill Hickling

Ofsted Inspector

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