

Conifers School

Egmont Road, Midhurst, West Sussex GU29 9BG

Inspection dates

21–23 November 2017

Overall effectiveness	Inadequate
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Inadequate
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Requires improvement
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Inadequate
Outcomes for pupils	Requires improvement
Early years provision	Inadequate
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an inadequate school

- The proprietor and leaders have not complied with latest safeguarding guidance. They do not fully understand or carry out their responsibilities to keep pupils safe.
- The proprietor has not ensured that all of the independent school standards have been met.
- Leadership and management are inadequate. The headteacher has too much to do alone. There is no formal leadership or management team to support her.
- The proprietor has not taken sufficient interest in the quality of education the school is providing. Self-evaluation is very weak.
- The early years provision is inadequate. Welfare requirements are not met. Learning does not build on children's previous experience.
- Teaching requires improvement. Assessment information is not used well enough to plan challenging learning, especially in key stage 1.
- Leaders do not routinely check the quality of teaching. Plans for improvement lack focus and urgency.
- Outcomes vary greatly between subjects and key stages. Too much teaching is not good enough.

The school has the following strengths

- Parents are very happy about the education and care the school provides.
- Pupils' behaviour is good, both in class and around the school.
- The headteacher has successfully expanded the curriculum to offer pupils a broad and balanced choice of subjects and an impressive range of extra-curricular activities.

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. The details are listed in the full report.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- The proprietor should take immediate action to confirm that the school complies with the government's latest safeguarding guidance. This includes ensuring that:
 - the school's safeguarding policy and procedures reflect the requirements set out in 'Keeping Children Safe in Education 2016' and any subsequent guidance that is issued
 - the required recruitment checks on new staff are made prior to them starting in their post and are recorded correctly on a single central record
 - the necessary checks on members of the proprietary board (governing body) are carried out on appointment and are recorded correctly on a single central record.
- Improve the leadership and management of the school by ensuring that:
 - the proprietor fulfils all of its responsibilities around safeguarding, health and safety, and the quality of provision
 - appropriate leadership roles are delegated so that teachers other than the headteacher have a role in improving standards
 - the headteacher's work is refocused to include improving the standard of education
 - improvement plans have clear targets and measurable milestones to judge success.
- Improve the early years provision by ensuring that:
 - leaders responsible for the early years provision understand the requirements of the early years foundation stage framework
 - planned learning takes into account children's varied capabilities and interests
 - the environment inside and outside is developed so that it enables children to make choices about their play and learning
 - there is clear progression planned through the early years so that children are well prepared for Year 1 by the end of the Reception Year
 - there is always at least one member of staff with a current qualification in paediatric first aid available in the setting.
- Improve teaching, learning and assessment by ensuring that:
 - assessment information is used accurately to plan pupils' next steps in learning
 - the most able pupils are challenged sufficiently in lessons
 - leaders check the quality of teaching effectively and provide teachers with feedback to help them improve.
- The school must meet the independent school standards, as set out in the annex of this report.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Inadequate

- Leaders and governors have failed to meet the requirements of the independent school standards. They have been too focused on growing pupil numbers and balancing the school's finances.
- Leaders' failures to meet standards associated with safeguarding, fire safety, health and safety and maintaining an admissions register compromise pupils' welfare.
- Despite her many skills, and well-intentioned dedication to the school, the headteacher has too much to do alone to raise standards. There are no other members of staff with formal leadership roles. As a result, the school's capacity to improve is currently very fragile.
- The school's self-evaluation is weak and overgenerous. It takes no account of the impact of any actions on improving outcomes for pupils. Similarly, long-term strategic planning and shorter-term improvement plans are not fit for purpose. There are no measurable targets for improvement and it is not clear how planned initiatives will improve the quality of teaching or the outcomes for pupils.
- Systems to monitor the performance of teachers are not well developed. There has not been a cohesive approach to improving teaching through training or performance management. Leaders have been reluctant to tackle some weaker teaching.
- The headteacher has taken some initial steps in improving teaching in key stages 2 and 3. Some strategic appointments of staff with specialist strengths have helped to improve both the quality of teaching and the curriculum. As a result, pupils are beginning to make faster progress in some subject areas.
- The headteacher has successfully reorganised the curriculum so that pupils are able to study a full range of subjects. The curriculum is broad and balanced and makes very effective use of the specialisms of staff. For example, pupils are now able to choose between learning French or Spanish and can also learn Mandarin.
- The range of extra-curricular activities during the school day and after school is also very good. The wide range of activities enables pupils to develop their skills and interests in areas such as dancing, judo, jewellery making, photography and a whole variety of different choirs. All pupils have the opportunity to develop their sporting skills with the increased provision for physical education and the opportunity to represent the school in competitive matches.
- The provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is strong. Cultural development is enhanced, for example, by the families from Argentina and Brazil who visit each year. Pupils are well prepared for life in modern Britain. The headteacher takes a personal interest in helping pupils to be well prepared for the next stage of their education.
- Since the school has begun to accommodate pupils in Years 7 and 8, the headteacher has successfully started to focus the school on helping pupils to work towards future placements through scholarships or the common entrance examination.

- All of the parents who completed the Parent View questionnaire are happy with the education the school provides. They rightly believe that their children benefit greatly from the wide range of extra-curricular clubs and opportunities to perform to an audience. Parents feel well informed about the progress their children are making.

Governance

- Prior to this inspection, by their own admission, governors were not aware of their statutory duties as representatives of the proprietor in regards to safeguarding, the curriculum and standards. For this reason, many of the independent school standards are unmet.
- Records of meetings demonstrate that the main focus of governors has been on pupil numbers and school finance. While the headteacher has provided governors with information about the school, none of it relates to safeguarding or standards of achievement. Therefore, governors could not challenge leaders about this, even if they did know they should.
- In recent years, the governing body and headteacher have had three simple measures of success: increasing the number of pupils on roll, an absence of parental complaints and a balanced budget. In all three regards, the school has been successful.
- During the inspection, members of the governing body who met inspectors reflected candidly on the board's previous failings. They resolved to put things right quickly.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are not effective.
- The school publishes a safeguarding policy on its website. However, when this was scrutinised before the inspection, it was found not to follow the latest government guidance. At the start of the inspection, leaders were not aware of the latest government guidance, and that the school's procedures and policies did not adhere to it.
- Only during the inspection did staff and governors read the safeguarding guidance they have a statutory obligation to read. This was despite the guidance being published in September 2016. This demonstrated a real lack of urgency and typifies the school's complacency about safeguarding matters.
- On the first day of the inspection, many of the required checks on the suitability of staff had not been completed. The single central record of recruitment checks was littered with omissions. In particular, the required checks on members of the governing body had not been made. During the inspection, the headteacher completed many of the required checks on staff to reassure herself, and the inspection team, of their suitability to work in schools. By the end of the inspection, the single central record of staff checks met requirements. However, gaps relating to checks on a member of the governing body remained.
- Required actions from the latest fire risk assessment have not been followed up. Governors do not monitor the effectiveness of the health and safety policy. The school does not keep an accurate admissions register. These deficiencies all have the potential to put pupils at risk of harm.

- Parents, staff and pupils are confident that the school is a safe place. Staff know individual pupils and families well and this helps them to provide support at times of need. On the very rare occasions it is required, the school works well with other agencies to support pupils' welfare.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- The quality of teaching is inconsistent throughout the school. It is weak in the early years. Assessment information is not always used well to plan activities that build on what pupils can already do. Pupils are frequently given work that is too easy for some pupils and too difficult for others. Teachers in key stage 1, in particular, do not plan challenging work for their pupils.
- There is not a consistent approach to the teaching of phonics and reading. Different teachers use different approaches, and this slows pupils' progress considerably.
- In mathematics, pupils are given opportunities to develop their fluency with number, to solve problems and to reason. However, sometimes these skills are applied at too simple a standard and, as a result, pupils are not always challenged in key stage 1. More effective teaching in key stages 2 and 3 since September 2017 is starting to make up for previous underachievement caused by weaker teaching in the past. However, pupils have not yet reached the expectations for their age.
- Classrooms are positive places with respectful relationships between teachers and pupils. There are high expectations in terms of behaviour, presentation and learning.
- Many teachers have strong subject knowledge. Subject specialists share their passion and enthusiasm for their subjects very clearly. For this reason, pupils in key stages 2 and 3 make the fastest progress in subjects such as art, French, Mandarin, music, physical education, science and Spanish.
- The strongest teaching is characterised by challenging activities and effective questions to make pupils think and to check what they understand. Carefully planned and interesting activities stretch and challenge pupils to achieve very well in art and music.
- Pupils are encouraged to apply their literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum. In key stage 2, pupils use technology effectively to demonstrate their learning in subjects such as history.
- Additional teaching to help those pupils who have fallen behind age-appropriate expectations to catch up is usually successful.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Inadequate

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is inadequate. Arrangements for safeguarding pupils are not effective. This poses an unacceptable risk to pupils' welfare and safety.
- Pupils are polite, confident and well-mannered. They value the opportunity to contribute to the school. Pupils in Year 6 take seriously extra responsibilities, such as being house captains. One pupil explained that Conifers is 'a small school but big in friendship'.

- Parents rightly appreciate the strong pastoral support their children receive. Pupils say they feel safe in school. They have no concerns about bullying.
- Pupils are taught well about how to stay safe in a range of situations, for example when crossing the road to the school field and when working online.
- The curriculum promotes physical activity and healthy lifestyles very well. Every pupil receives a tasty healthy lunch each day. Pupils develop their own likes and interests very well through wide-ranging enrichment opportunities, including playing musical instruments.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- Attendance is above average because pupils enjoy coming to school. It is very rare for pupils to miss a day at school without a very good reason. Pupils are punctual for school and for their lessons. One parent explained that their child had 'grown hugely in confidence and now looks forward to going to school every day'.
- Pupils, parents and staff confirmed that the good behaviour inspectors observed during the inspection is typical. Pupils are attentive in lessons and move around the school sensibly.
- Any minor off-task behaviour is rare and usually a result of pupils not feeling challenged in their lessons.

Outcomes for pupils

Requires improvement

- Pupils in key stage 1 make limited progress in English and mathematics because their work is not challenging enough. For example, pupils very rarely have the opportunity to write at any length to demonstrate their writing skills.
- From the early years onwards, children and pupils do not make consistently strong progress. Although the majority of pupils achieve age-related standards in English and mathematics, many start school already demonstrating knowledge, skills and understanding beyond those typical for their ages.
- The most able pupils are not challenged consistently well in English and mathematics. In the school's annual tests, very few pupils demonstrate achievement that is significantly above average.
- The headteacher checks pupils' outcomes regularly. Pupils who start to fall behind age-related expectations, or who join the school later, having fallen behind in their previous schools, are identified. Additional teaching helps them to catch up and achieve age-expected standards.
- Much more effective teaching leads to the strong development of skills, knowledge and understanding in a range of other subjects, including art, history, music, modern foreign languages, physical education and science.
- Pupils are generally prepared well enough for the next stage of their education. Many move on to well-chosen state or private schools that are well suited to their individual personality, skills or talents. A small number of pupils receive scholarships, in a range of subjects, to secondary schools.

Early years provision

Inadequate

- The welfare requirements of the early years foundation stage framework are not met. While leaders have considered appropriate staff-to-child ratios, they have not ensured that at least one member of staff in the setting has a current paediatric first aid qualification. The overall judgement on the school as a whole, that safeguarding is ineffective, with related unmet independent school standards, also applies to the early years provision.
- Leadership of the early years is weak. The headteacher has limited expertise in this area. Nobody has oversight of the progression between the different class groups. Therefore, the early years curriculum lacks continuity and children make limited progress because of the compartmentalised approach.
- Assessment information is not used well to plan next steps in learning. Teachers do not take enough account of children's different abilities or interests. Teaching does not stimulate the curiosity of each child and children rarely have the opportunity to make choices about their learning or play. The environment indoors and outdoors does not enable children to develop their knowledge, skills and understanding in all areas of learning. The teaching of phonics is inconsistent and in some classes very poor.
- Children enter the provision for two-year-olds with skills and knowledge that are above those found typically for their age. They make progress in this initial setting because adults model conversations well to help them develop their speaking skills.
- Despite the positive start and small classes, children make disappointing progress by the end of Reception. Children do not build well on their above average starting points so that, over time, a broadly similar proportion as seen nationally have achieved a good level of development at the end of the Reception Year.
- Children feel safe and well looked after in the provision. They behave well and play nicely together. They learn to have very good manners.
- Communication between teachers and parents is regular and positive. This helps parents to feel reassured that their children are well cared for.

School details

Unique reference number	126118
DfE registration number	938/6072
Inspection number	10020825

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	2 to 13
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	100
Number of part-time pupils	24
Proprietor	Trustees of Conifers School Ltd
Chair	Mark Drysdale
Headteacher	Emma Smyth
Annual fees (day pupils)	£7,110–£9,450
Telephone number	01730 813 243
Website	www.conifersschool.com
Email address	admin@conifersschool.com
Date of previous inspection	26–27 June 2013

Information about this school

- Since the previous inspection, a material change was approved by the Department for Education. As a result, the school has extended its age range to two to 13. However, there are currently only small numbers of pupils in Year 7 and Year 8. At the same time, the school was also authorised to admit up to 136 pupils.
- The headteacher has joined the school since the previous inspection, which took place in June 2013.

- There are too few pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities to report on their progress. There are currently no disadvantaged pupils attending the school.
- The proprietor is the Trustees of Conifers School. The trustees are also known as the governing body.
- Early years takes place in four separate classes organised by age, ranging from provision for two-year-olds to a Reception class. There are two classes for three-year-olds and rising fours.
- The school does not use any alternative provision.
- The aim of the school is to 'foster a happy and stimulating environment in which each child can prosper academically, socially and emotionally'. The school also aims 'to prepare all children for their continuing education and enhance their awareness of the world in which they live, sending them on to their next school well prepared for the challenges ahead'.

Information about this inspection

- Her Majesty's Inspectors met with the headteacher regularly throughout the inspection to discuss many aspects of the school's work and how the school complies with the independent school standards. They also met with teachers responsible for safeguarding, early years provision, English and mathematics.
- The lead inspector met with a member of the governing body as a representative of the proprietor.
- Inspectors observed learning in all year groups and a wide range of subjects. Some of the observations were carried out jointly with the headteacher. A range of pupils' work from all areas of the curriculum was scrutinised.
- The views of pupils were explored by talking to them informally in classrooms, around the school and on the field at breaktime. An inspector met more formally with pupils who have additional responsibilities. Inspectors also heard a few pupils from Year 2 and Year 7 read.
- An inspector spoke to parents informally at the start of the school day. Inspectors considered 40 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including 31 free-text comments.
- Inspectors considered 13 responses to the confidential staff questionnaire.
- Inspectors scrutinised a wide range of school documentation relating to the independent school standards, safeguarding, the curriculum and self-evaluation.

Inspection team

Lee Selby, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Phil Minns

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex. Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school must meet the following independent school standards

- The proprietor must ensure that arrangements are made to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils at the school; and such arrangements have regard to any guidance issued by the Secretary of State (paragraph 7, 7(a), 7(b)).
- The proprietor must ensure that relevant health and safety laws are complied with by the drawing up and effective implementation of a written health and safety policy (paragraph 11).
- The proprietor must ensure compliance with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 (paragraph 12).
- The proprietor must ensure that first aid is administered in a timely and competent manner by the drawing up and effective implementation of a written first aid policy (paragraph 13).
- The proprietor must ensure that an admission and attendance register is maintained in accordance with the Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006 (paragraph 15).
- The proprietor must ensure that the welfare of pupils at the school is safeguarded and promoted by the drawing up and effective implementation of a written risk assessment policy (paragraph 16, 16(a)).
- The chair of the proprietary board must carry out all required checks on members of the proprietary board when they are appointed. The outcome of these checks should be recorded on the single central record (paragraph 20(6), 20(6)(a), 20(6)(b), 20(6)(b)(i), 21(6), 21(7), 21(7)(a), 21(7)(b)).
- The proprietor must ensure that particulars of the arrangements for meeting the standard contained in paragraph 7 are published on the school's internet website or, where no such website exists, are provided to parents on request (paragraph 32(1), 32(1)(c)).
- The proprietor must ensure that persons with leadership and management responsibilities at the school:
 - demonstrate good skills and knowledge appropriate to their role so that the independent school standards are met consistently
 - fulfil their responsibilities effectively so that the independent school standards are met consistently; and
 - actively promote the well-being of pupils(paragraph 34(1), 34(1)(a), 34(1)(b), 34(1)(c)).
- In addition, the school must comply with the safeguarding and welfare, and the learning and development requirements of the early years foundation stage.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Raising concerns and making a complaint about Ofsted', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.gov.uk/government/publications/complaints-about-ofsted. If you would like Ofsted to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone 0300 123 4234, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

Parent View

You can use Parent View to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school. Ofsted will use the information parents and carers provide when deciding which schools to inspect and when and as part of the inspection.

You can also use Parent View to find out what other parents and carers think about schools in England. You can visit www.parentview.ofsted.gov.uk, or look for the link on the main Ofsted website: www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at www.gov.uk/ofsted.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 4234
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

© Crown copyright 2017