

Alder Bridge School

Bridge House, Mill Lane, Padworth, Reading, Berkshire RG7 4JU

Inspection dates

26–28 February 2019

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an inadequate school

- Trustees and leaders have not ensured that all of the independent school standards are met.
- The curriculum does not take into account pupils' previous attainment, knowledge, understanding and skills. As a result, pupils make poor progress, especially in English and mathematics. This is particularly true for the oldest pupils in kindergarten.
- Attainment in reading, writing and mathematics is too low.
- Overall rates of attendance are poor.
- Teachers do not make effective use of the time available in lessons to help pupils make adequate progress over time.
- Teaching, especially of early reading, does not take account of pupils' previous attainment. As a result, pupils, including the most able, make limited progress.
- Pupils are not taught how to stay safe out of school, for example when using the internet.
- Older pupils do not receive the impartial careers guidance they are entitled to.

The school has the following strengths

- Changes in the school's leadership have given the school more structure and professionalism. Current leaders have a determination both to improve the school and to maintain the Steiner ethos and values to which the school adheres.
- Parents are very happy with the education and care their children receive at Alder Bridge School, especially in early years.
- Pupils have many positive opportunities to enhance their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. They behave well.
- Pupils make stronger progress in some areas of the curriculum, such as handwork and modern foreign languages.
- Children's social and physical development is effective in early years.

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?

- Trustees and leaders should review the school's curriculum policy and how it is implemented to ensure that:
 - the curriculum takes account of pupils' different starting points and prior attainment, including what pupils have learned out of school
 - there is a greater emphasis on early reading and the teaching of phonics, including for the oldest pupils in kindergarten
 - pupils are taught from an early age about how to be safe when not in school, including how to be safe online
 - secondary-aged pupils receive impartial careers guidance.
- Improve teaching so that pupils make stronger progress, by ensuring that:
 - time is used well in lessons to develop new knowledge and skills
 - teachers use assessment information and their knowledge of individual pupils to adapt tasks where necessary
 - the most able pupils are moved on to more challenging work when they are ready
 - pupils are taught to read as early as possible, initially using a phonetic approach.
- Work with families to improve attendance.
- 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

- Leadership and management are inadequate because those responsible for leading the school have not ensured that the independent school standards are consistently met.
- Most importantly, there are unmet standards relating to the curriculum and the quality of teaching. These unmet standards are indicative of the inadequate teaching and learning in the school. This has led to pupils making substantially less progress than they are capable of and not achieving as well as they should for their age.
- The curriculum does not build adequately on what pupils can already do. For example, leaders and teachers know that some children are able to read before they join the school. The school has an exemption from the teaching of literacy in early years. However, this exemption does not apply to the oldest pupils in the kindergarten, who are not taught to read. This is because the curriculum does not plan for the teaching of reading at this stage. This holds back pupils' learning and means they do not achieve as well as they should for their age.
- Leaders are aware that the curriculum does not do enough to teach pupils to be safe when out of school, including when they are online. There are fledgling plans in place to introduce a 'life lessons' theme to the curriculum to enhance personal, social, health and economic education. There is currently no opportunity for secondary pupils to receive impartial careers advice.
- The appointment of the operations manager and education manager has been helpful. They have distinct but complementary roles that have contributed well to the smooth running of the school.
- The education manager has rightly begun to challenge the status quo in relation to the curriculum and hold teachers to account. She has stimulated debate and is working with teachers to implement change. Aply supported by the lower-school special educational needs coordinator (SENCo), the education manager has also planned new training for all teaching staff in phonics so that this essential aspect of early reading can be introduced in the future.
- Provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) is improving. The appointment of a new lower-school SENCo with the relevant qualification and experience in mainstream settings has been very helpful. She has been able to assess pupils accurately and provide teachers with information to help pupils with SEND to progress. She is also able to advise other leaders about how low standards are compared with national norms.
- There are some strengths in the curriculum. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is strong. Pupils have many opportunities to learn about the world's major religions and to visit different places of worship. Links with the worldwide Steiner community promote a strong cultural understanding, while weekly lessons in eurythmy are used well to promote spiritual development.

- Subject specialists in modern foreign languages and handcraft follow the Steiner Waldorf curriculum in these subjects. As a result, pupils make stronger progress at an earlier age in modern foreign languages and handwork, than in other subjects.

Governance

- Trustees have taken steps to reorganise the leadership of the school. In trustees' own words, this has stemmed 'the chaotic manner in which the school was run' and has brought about a sense of order and a higher level of professionalism. The new leadership structure has allowed trustees to take a step back from the operational running of the school. There are now clear lines of accountability between the trustees, operations manager, education manager and college of teachers who uphold the Steiner traditions of the school.
- Trustees are dedicated to the principles of Steiner education. However, they also recognise the school's role in preparing pupils for 21st-century Britain and the next stages of their education. They are currently grappling with the tensions this causes to find a way forward that fulfils their statutory duties to meet the independent school standards without completely giving up the values they hold dear.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- The designated safeguarding lead is well trained and has extensive knowledge about safeguarding. She has ensured that all staff and trustees are also trained in line with statutory requirements.
- Staff were able to clearly demonstrate to inspectors that they understand their roles and responsibilities in safeguarding and what they would do to express and refer any concerns about a pupil. They also know how to raise the alarm if they had any concerns about a colleague or leader in the school.
- The school site is safe. Health and safety procedures are well considered and implemented consistently. Pupils know how to stay safe while they are at school, but the curriculum does not include enough content on how to stay safe outside school, including when online.
- The safeguarding policy published on the school's website when the inspection was announced did not reflect the latest statutory guidance that staff were following. Trustees approved the updated policy during the inspection, and it now meets requirements. Leaders made a minor typographical change to the single central record during the inspection to ensure it met the required standards.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Inadequate

- Teaching does not build effectively on what pupils already know or can do. As a result, pupils do not make sufficient progress in their learning.
- Time is not used effectively in lessons to introduce new knowledge and skills to pupils or to give pupils opportunities to practise or apply what they can already do.

- Expectations are inconsistent across subjects and year groups. Teachers' expectations are too low in English and mathematics for the younger pupils. Pupils are not currently taught phonics, although there are plans to do this in the future.
- Staff know pupils well as individuals and understand clearly what pupils know and can do. However, staff do not use this assessment information to adapt tasks or modify the curriculum to meet the needs of different pupils.
- Teaching throughout the school is characterised by friendly and supportive relationships between adults and pupils. Consequently, pupils have positive attitudes to learning and enjoy their lessons.
- There is a consistent approach to teaching across the school that is underpinned by the Steiner principles and enforced by the college of teachers. At times, teaching contributes strongly to pupils' spiritual development.
- Teachers have strong subject knowledge, especially in German, eurythmy and handwork.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Requires improvement

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare requires improvement.
- Pupils are not taught how to keep themselves safe when they are out of school or when they are online. For example, pupils have not learned about basic fire and water safety. Plans to introduce e-safety lessons are well intended but too late.
- Older pupils do not have access to impartial careers guidance. The school has not yet put in place plans for this to take place.
- Pupils feel safe and well cared for at school. They have no current concerns about any type of bullying.
- The school works well with parents and carers, and other agencies, to help and protect some of the most vulnerable pupils.
- Some pupils take on the responsibility for caring for younger peers during free time, while others have previously set up and published a school magazine.
- Older pupils are not currently provided with suitable changing accommodation or showers for use before or after physical education.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils requires improvement.
- Attendance is low and not improving, despite the recent efforts of leaders to challenge parents about frequent absence.
- Pupils take pride in their work and often present it with great care. Pupils behave well in class and enjoy their lessons.
- At lunchtimes, pupils eat together sociably and sensibly. They then engage in a wide range of play activities during their free time in the delightful outside space. Inspectors

observed pupils engrossed in physical play, creative projects, conversation and 'mining for treasure' in the mud. Pupils care about each other and are kind to their peers.

Outcomes for pupils

Inadequate

- Standards in English and mathematics are low across the school, but particularly in the younger classes. The oldest pupils in kindergarten are not exempt from these parts of the curriculum, but make little or no progress because they are not taught these key subjects.
- Even for the oldest pupils, teaching in mathematics is pitched too low. Therefore, pupils are not given the challenging work they are capable of doing. For example, inspectors observed pupils expanding simple bracket forms in algebra when they were capable of expanding more complex equations. Teachers acknowledge that the most able pupils could be achieving more.
- Throughout the school, teachers do not take account of pupils' starting points. Therefore, pupils often make limited progress in a range of subjects because learning does not build upon what they can already do.
- The school's own assessment information, using age-standardised tests, shows that attainment in reading, spelling and mathematics is low. Pupils do start to make stronger progress in the later years, although they do not catch up with national expectations in English or mathematics before they leave the school.
- Pupils do have enough general skills and knowledge to get by at secondary school. However, they are better prepared in mathematics than in English and even the most able pupils have had few opportunities to write at length. Pupils generally have a limited vocabulary and do not use grammar and punctuation accurately and confidently when they write.
- In some subjects, pupils achieve much more positively. Older pupils have a deep and rich knowledge in science, and younger pupils develop their confidence in modern foreign languages, such as German, very quickly. Throughout the school, the art and craft work, including handwork, is of a very high standard.

Early years provision

Requires improvement

- The school has an exemption from the literacy, mathematics and assessment aspects of the learning and development requirements of the early years foundation stage. It has agreed modifications to other aspects of the learning and development requirements. The well-being and progress of the oldest pupils in kindergarten are not evaluated as part of the early years judgement, as they are of statutory school age.
- The school's current curriculum policy that applies to early years does not comply with the relevant independent school standards because it does not take into account the age and aptitude of individual children. In practice, three-, four- and five-year-olds in the kindergarten often complete the same activities irrespective of their previous experiences. As a result, children in early years make limited progress from their starting points.

- The early years leader is a reflective practitioner and considers what can be done to meet the statutory independent school standards while staying true to the Steiner principles of early education.
- Children in early years develop well physically and socially. They understand the class routines and join in enthusiastically with ring-time and eurythmy.
- In their play inside and outside, children are creative with the natural resources available to them. For example, they sustain extended activity by role playing as 'gnome pirates' in the elaborate dens they create inside or build a 'boat' using logs in the garden.
- Adults model how to behave, how to cook and prepare healthy food and snacks, and how to garden. Children have the opportunity to imitate this and join in with the domestic tasks. However, adults do not model language or problem solving to challenge children further during children's play and individual activities.
- Children's non-academic additional needs are identified quickly, and suitable additional support is offered within the constraints of the exemptions applied to the kindergarten curriculum.
- Safeguarding is effective in early years and all the statutory welfare requirements relating, for example, to space, staffing ratios and paediatric first aid training, are met.
- Parents are extremely positive about the start to education their children receive in kindergarten. One parent explained how their child had been 'encouraged and nurtured to become a confident, caring child with the self-belief and self-worth that every child should have.'

School details

Unique reference number	110175
DfE registration number	869/6013
Inspection number	10094397

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	3 to 14
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	60
Number of part-time pupils	20
Proprietor	Alder Bridge Association for Steiner Waldorf Education
Chair	Dorit Ferreira
Headteacher	Rachel McCrory (education manager) Joanna Box (operations manager)
Annual fees (day pupils)	£6,015 to £8,880
Telephone number	0118 971 4471
Website	www.alderbridge.org.uk
Email address	info@alderbridge.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	13 May 2008

Information about this school

- Alder Bridge School provides Steiner-based education for pupils aged three to 14. The school is located in Padworth, near Reading in Berkshire. The school consists of Bridge House, which contains the school's administrative department and kindergarten. The lower school is located in a separate building which is reached by walking through the ample school grounds.
- The school aims to provide an education that accords with the principles of Rudolf Steiner. This is based on staff, pupils and parents working closely together in establishing

a learning community in which pupils' learning and achievement are developed in tandem with their self-esteem and self-confidence through a strong emphasis on experiential learning.

- The kindergarten provides early years education for children in Nursery and Reception. The school has an exemption from the literacy, mathematics and assessment aspects of the learning and development requirements of the early years foundation stage.
- Year 1 pupils are also taught in the kindergarten. In the lower school, there is a separate Class 1 (Year 2), while Classes 2 and 3 (Years 3 and 4), Classes 4 and 5 (Years 5 and 6) and Classes 6 and 7 (Years 7 and 8) are taught in mixed-age classes.
- The school is led jointly by an education manager and an operations manager. They act as the day-to-day leaders of the school and provide a link between the trustees and the college of teachers.
- The proprietor is the Alder Bridge Association for Steiner Waldorf Education, which is led by a board of elected trustees. Some trustees have had long associations with the school, and most trustees are current or past parents.
- The school does not use any alternative provision.
- The school was last inspected by Ofsted in 2008 and was judged good. Since 2008, the school has been inspected by the Schools Inspection Service (SIS). The last full standard inspection was conducted by SIS in 2017, when the school's effectiveness was judged as good.

Information about this inspection

- This full standard inspection took place at the request of the Department for Education. It was conducted with one day's notice.
- Inspectors met regularly with the education manager and operations manager throughout the inspection. They also met with other staff with leadership responsibilities, the chair of the college of teachers, and with a group of staff.
- The lead inspector held three separate meetings with trustees, including the current chair.
- Inspectors scrutinised the school's website prior to the inspection. They toured the premises and checked a range of documentation to check compliance with the independent school standards.
- Inspectors visited the kindergarten and classrooms in the lower school to observe learning. Most of these observations were carried out with the education manager or the lower-school SENCo. The school has a lower-school SENCo and a kindergarten SENCo.
- Inspectors spoke to pupils informally at break- and lunchtimes and also heard pupils from Class 2 (Year 3), Class 5 (Year 6) and Class 7 (Year 8) read.
- Inspectors considered the 14 responses to the staff questionnaire.
- To gain parents' views, an inspector spoke to parents at the start of the school day, and 35 responses to Parent View were also considered, including four free-text comments. The lead inspector also received and considered a telephone message from a parent.

Inspection team

Lee Selby, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Clive Dunn

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)(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
 - 2(2)(e) for pupils receiving secondary education, access to accurate, up-to-date careers guidance that–
 - 2(2)(e)(i) is presented in an impartial manner;
 - 2(2)(e)(ii) enables them to make informed choices about a broad range of career options; and
 - 2(2)(e)(iii) helps to encourage them to fulfil their potential.
- 3 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that the teaching at the school–
 - 3(c) involves well planned lessons and effective teaching methods, activities and management of class time;
 - 3(d) shows a good understanding of the aptitudes, needs and prior attainments of the pupils, and ensures that these are taken into account in the planning of lessons.

Part 5. Premises of and accommodation at schools

- 23(1) Subject to sub-paragraph (2), the standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that–
 - 23(1)(c) suitable changing accommodation and showers are provided for pupils aged 11 years or over at the start of the school year who receive physical education.

Part 6. Provision of information

- 32(1) The standard about the provision of information by the school is met if the proprietor ensures that–
 - 32(1)(c) 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;

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; and
 - 34(1)(b) fulfil their responsibilities effectively so that the independent school standards are met consistently.

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