

School inspection report

14 to 16 May 2024

St Michael's Preparatory School

Oxford Court

Row Dow

Oxford

TN14 5RY

The Independent Schools Inspectorate is appointed by the Department for Education to inspect association independent schools in England. Our inspections report on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards and other applicable regulatory requirements are met, collectively referred to in this report as 'the Standards'.

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Summary of inspection findings

1. St Michael's Preparatory School is a place where the school's motto *perseverantia, sapientia, gratia* (perseverance, wisdom and gratitude) is brought to life. Pupils work hard during lessons and successfully gain new knowledge, improve their skills and develop their understanding. Pupils appreciate the many opportunities they have to learn and flourish.
2. The school manages risks appropriately and effectively, which enables teachers to offer pupils a range of diverse experiences. For example, the school is able to capitalise on its substantial fields and woodland.
3. Governors maintain comprehensive and close oversight of the school's work. They check that leaders fulfil their duties effectively so that the Standards are consistently met.
4. In early years, children thrive in an encouraging and caring environment. They quickly make friends with each other. They develop positive relationships with the adults who help them. As a result, children feel comfortable and confident to make mistakes. They view their mistakes as opportunities to learn. Throughout the school, pupils maintain this positive approach to new challenges.
5. The school values diversity and individuality. Staff encourage pupils to develop their interests and capitalise on the opportunities available to them. Pupils in Years 3, 4, 5 and 6 all participate in 'St Michael's Challenge'. They research diverse topics of particular significance to themselves (which range from corgis to dementia) and then present their findings to others in the manner which they consider most appropriate.
6. Leaders provide many opportunities for pupils to work together, both within the same year group and across different year groups. Consequently, a strong culture of collaboration and mentorship characterises school life. The 'St Michael's Challenge' involves pupils from Years 7 and 8 providing useful and valued guidance and mentorship to younger pupils when they carry out research and deliver presentations. Pupils also help each other to develop socially, such as when older pupils provide daily guidance and support to younger pupils after they transition from the pre-prep to the prep. These carefully planned events benefit the younger and older pupils alike. Older pupils are well prepared to take on leadership opportunities in their later lives. This is a significant strength of the school.
7. Pupils' aspirations for careers and entrepreneurship are raised through a diverse programme of visiting speakers. Pupils experience various opportunities to run enterprises that generate funds for good causes.
8. Pupils are prepared well for the next stages of their education both within the school and when the time comes for them to move on, including any examinations that they are required to take.
9. The school engages in successful self-evaluation procedures. Leaders continuously look to improve and develop the school's offer. They consult with all those involved with the school, including pupils, to gain different opinions and views. The school has recently decided to encourage pupils to focus on five different learning behaviours: collaboration, independence, resilience, creativity and engagement. Leaders and staff track how well pupils use these behaviours to enhance their learning. This approach is evident in classroom displays and on documentation, including pupils' progress and achievement reports. However, it is not sufficiently referred to during lessons so that pupils

understand what is expected of them and how they can demonstrate these behaviours and learn successfully.

10. Leaders, including governors, and staff promote pupils' wellbeing effectively through the full implementation of suitable safeguarding protocols, detailed risk assessments that are followed and rigorous health and safety procedures.

The extent to which the school meets the Standards

- Standards relating to leadership and management, and governance are met.
- Standards relating to the quality of education, training and recreation are met.
- Standards relating to pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing are met.
- Standards relating to pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society are met.
- Standards relating to safeguarding are met.

Recommended next steps

Leaders should:

- ensure that teachers emphasise the school's five learning behaviours during lessons (collaboration, independence, resilience, creativity and engagement) so that pupils understand and demonstrate these behaviours and in doing so maximise their learning and achievement.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

11. Leaders have the necessary knowledge and skills to fulfil their responsibilities effectively. They have developed a common understanding amongst all staff that the promotion of pupils' wellbeing is the most important aspect of the school's provision. Leaders implement appropriate procedures and practices, including working with external specialists such as fire safety consultants, to ensure that all the Standards are met.
12. Leaders are ambitious for all pupils to achieve, including the younger children in early years. Leaders commit to staff ratios that go beyond the required minimum levels. This enables children to engage in very well supervised activities around the school grounds, including nature walks and learning in the forest. The broad curriculum is taught through an extensive range of indoor and outdoor activities. This supports children to achieve the early learning goals (ELGs).
13. Leaders at all levels, including those in early years, have a robust approach to the identification and mitigation of risk. Through a comprehensive programme of training and regularly updated risk assessments, they ensure that staff understand their responsibilities to identify and monitor potential hazards in all situations. Governors assure themselves that effective action is taken to protect pupils from harm through leaders' detailed reports, alongside governors' own regular and rigorous tours of the school site.
14. The school's aim to foster perseverance, wisdom and gratitude is widely understood. These qualities are readily demonstrated by pupils and staff as the community goes about its daily life. Pupils are encouraged to take calculated, mitigated risks in a natural environment that encourages adventure and discovery. For example, when challenging themselves to climb trees in the school's woodland areas, younger pupils are prompted to 'stop and think' once they reach an appropriate branch. Older pupils are taught how to discern for themselves the maximum height at which they should stop climbing.
15. Pupil and parent focus groups played a part in the formation of the school's five learning behaviours. Leaders and staff plan carefully how these learning behaviours can be promoted from early years through to Year 8. However, during lessons, teachers do not routinely support pupils to apply these behaviours so that pupils maximise their understanding and progress.
16. Governors use their wide-ranging experience and expertise to carry out their roles and responsibilities. Governors complete regular training so that they have the knowledge and skills to ensure the Standards are met. Governors have an accurate understanding of the school's provision through regular discussions with senior leaders and frequent visits to the school to check what they have been told. Governors are enthusiastic participants in the school's activities.
17. Governors monitor key documentation such as the accident book, the safeguarding policy and the complaints and behaviour logs. They look out for any trends and then question and challenge leaders appropriately. Governors contribute to the school's rigorous self-evaluation documentation and the necessary actions that result from it.
18. Leaders and governors handle any concerns voiced, or complaints received, efficiently. Issues are resolved and the school retains records of the decisions made.

19. Required information such as school policies and leavers' destinations are accessible to all parties concerned with the school. Parents receive lengthy and thoughtful annual reports of their children's progress and achievement. These are supplemented with termly updates.
20. Leaders complete annual accounts for any pupils who are wholly or partly funded by the local authority. They send this information to the local authority as required.
21. The school is a community which cherishes individuality and celebrates diversity. The school fulfils its responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010. An accessibility plan is in place which ensures that any pupils who have disabilities can fully access the school's offer.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to leadership and management, and governance

- 22. All the relevant Standards are met.**

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

23. Leaders have developed a rich and diverse curriculum throughout the school. The school's curriculum is planned and taught well to meet pupils' diverse ages, abilities and learning needs.
24. Leaders provide a wide programme of clubs, sports practices and other extra-curricular activities which include observational drawing, running triathlons, card making and performing the works of Shakespeare. This supports pupils to develop their individual interests and talents.
25. Teachers complete regular progress checks through formal and informal testing at all stages to monitor pupils' achievement and progress. Those pupils who have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and those who speak English as an additional language (EAL) receive appropriate support. These pupils make progress in line with their peers.
26. Teachers provide many opportunities for children in early years to develop their vocabulary and language. Adults initiate conversations as children explore the stimulating learning environment around them. Staff model high quality spoken language. They encourage children to extend their vocabulary and express themselves clearly. As a result children's communication and language skills develop quickly.
27. Pupils develop their skills and confidence at guiding, mentoring and leading others. This takes place during lessons, for example, with paired reading and mathematics activities in which older pupils support younger ones. As part of the 'St Michael's Challenge', pupils in Years 7 and 8 receive feedback on how effectively they support pupils' learning in Years 3, 4, 5 and 6. Pupils in Years 7 and 8 demonstrate enthusiasm, confidence and proficiency in their leadership of others. They understand that the help they give is a service to their community. Over time pupils experience being both a mentee and a mentor and become well prepared for leadership opportunities in the future.
28. Teachers plan and structure their lessons well. They include high-quality teaching and learning resources which they use to good effect. Teachers demonstrate secure subject knowledge. Pupils are interested in what they are taught. They readily ask questions to deepen their understanding by capitalising on their teachers' subject expertise.
29. Lessons are characterised by teachers' high aspirations for pupils' progress and achievement. In English, once Year 5 pupils understand metaphors and personification they quickly move on to include explanation and analysis of assonance and consonance in their work as well.
30. The individual needs of pupils who have SEND and EAL are identified and supported through specific help during lessons as well as personalised intervention sessions. Teaching assistants are used effectively, either by providing individual or small group support.
31. Leaders have implemented detailed assessment and tracking systems which monitor pupils' achievements and progress successfully from early years to Year 8. This information is shared with parents. Teachers step in quickly when gaps in pupils' knowledge or barriers to their learning are identified. Pupils are given the support and help that they need. This is either provided by the school's SEND department or from outside agencies such as speech and language therapists.

32. The school's diploma award system for the oldest pupils ensures that their learning and performance is evaluated thoroughly and regularly across the curriculum. For example, in physical education, pupils are assessed in six separate and distinctive areas.
33. Pupils enjoy their learning. They make rapid progress throughout the school. They experience considerable success in local and national competitions in a range of subjects. Pupils secure places in a variety of selective secondary settings. Some pupils choose to defer their transfer date to the end of Year 9 so that they can extend their time at St Michael's.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to the quality of education, training and recreation

- 34. All the relevant Standards are met.**

Section 3: Pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing

35. As pupils move through the school, their self-knowledge, self-esteem and self-confidence all increase. Pupils enjoy positive relationships with staff and their peers alike.
36. Teachers provide pupils with many thought-provoking topics to discuss and reflect upon. Pupils demonstrate an awareness of, and interest in, lives beyond their immediate experience. This develops their sense of empathy, morality and spirituality. A programme of assemblies, held in the tranquil setting of the school chapel, fosters pupils' understanding of personal sacrifice for the greater good. Older pupils explore different aspects of assisted dying. They consider the legal aspects, case studies, and how religious beliefs can interplay with this topic.
37. Pupils value the content they are taught through the personal, social and health education (PSHE) curriculum, including the programme of relationships and sex education. Pupils understand that this helps them to become their best selves as they grow up and contribute to British society. The school is successful in nurturing a well-informed and harmonious community. In early years, children's personal and social development is encouraged through a range of activities. Children are taught that personal space needs to be respected. Pupils in the prep school can explain how to let someone know if they find a situation uncomfortable. Similarly, they understand what action they must take should anyone tell them that they are causing discomfort in others.
38. Pupils enjoy the many physical and sporting activities that they encounter as part of their daily school lives. They understand the importance of a healthy lifestyle. Pupils embrace the opportunities to improve their physical skills. They demonstrate these when participating in competitive matches on the fields, in the sports hall, or in the swimming pool. Pupils take pride when chosen to represent the school in a team, where they work together and perform at their best.
39. The school implements the behaviour and anti-bullying policies fairly and consistently. Mutual respect between pupils is encouraged and inappropriate conduct is rare. Sanctions involve pupils reflecting on their actions, whilst rewards are given for demonstrating positive behaviours as well as academic work. Pupils proudly explain how their kind and helpful acts result in greatly valued house points.
40. Leaders ensure that all health and safety checks are undertaken in a timely fashion. First aid is administered, recorded and reported in a manner which assures pupils' wellbeing.
41. All areas of the school's buildings and extensive rural grounds are well maintained.
42. Pupils are well supervised by staff throughout the school day.
43. The school's admission and attendance registers are maintained correctly. When pupils leave or join the school at non-standard times, the local authority is informed as required.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing

44. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 4: Pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society

45. An ethos of mutual trust and respect for everyone characterises the whole school community. Pupils collaborate with each other well and socialise successfully. This begins in early years when children are encouraged to be kind to each other. Children understand and respond to the 'kind hands' rule. Staff model how to behave and children respond by working and playing happily together.
46. Leaders and staff make their expectations of pupils' conduct clear in all year groups. They encourage pupils to reflect on any misbehaviour and discuss this with an adult. This supports pupils to distinguish right from wrong and accept responsibility for their actions.
47. Teachers in early years establish rules and routines for children to follow right from the start. Children are taught to work together as a team. They learn about their differences and similarities, whilst being reminded that everyone is unique and special. Children learn to take responsibility through the roles they are given such as being the leader of a line or handing out snacks. Children learn about democracy when they vote for the stories they want to hear and understand that the majority vote wins.
48. Teachers provide extensive opportunities for pupils to work together in pursuit of a common goal. For example, the school council understand how to represent the views of others. They meet with appropriate members of staff, such as the estates manager, to suggest improvements to the school's operations. Consequently, pupils know that their voices and opinions are heard, valued and acted upon.
49. Pupils contribute to the local community. This includes raising funds for good causes chosen by the school council, serving lunch to senior citizens in a nearby church and running a stall at the village fete.
50. Pupils are taught the knowledge of, and respect for, public institutions in a variety of ways. For example, pupils visit the Royal Courts of Justice to reinforce what they had been taught about how laws are created and implemented. Pupils can articulate why the school's Remembrance Day services are always held outside, regardless of weather. Some pupils visit commemorative plaques in honour of six fallen Old Michaelians, at a local Royal British Legion site.
51. Pupils understand that careers and jobs provide money and that budgeting helps them to spend wisely. They run their own enterprises such as selling the keyrings and necklaces they have made in design and technology lessons in aid of charity at the school's Christmas fair. The items are advertised and marketed beforehand. Pupils decide the price that covers costs and generates profit.
52. Careers education is delivered through an annual event and a separate programme of visiting speakers. Pupils hear from a range of practitioners who represent the diversity of modern British society.
53. The school takes effective steps to ensure that balanced perspectives are always presented, both by teaching staff and by visiting speakers.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society

54. All the relevant Standards are met.

Safeguarding

55. Leaders have developed a culture within the school that prioritises pupils' welfare and wellbeing. Staff work together to identify, communicate and take effective action in response to any safeguarding concerns.
56. Governors maintain effective oversight of the school's rigorous safeguarding policies and procedures through regular meetings with school leaders, detailed reviews of provision and an annual audit delivered to the board.
57. Newly appointed staff receive thorough induction training which includes all necessary aspects of safeguarding. All staff receive regular training and updates so that they are knowledgeable and confident to keep pupils safe. Leaders check that staff know how to record any concerns using the school's online system. Leaders take swift and appropriate action when safeguarding concerns are raised. They liaise with external agencies when necessary. The school's safeguarding arrangements are up to date and comply with statutory guidance.
58. Staff understand and follow a comprehensive code of conduct. They know how to report any safeguarding matters about other staff, including low-level concerns and whistleblowing.
59. Governors and senior leaders monitor the school's record of appointments regularly. All necessary safer recruitment checks are carried out and records are maintained as required.
60. Pupils understand the different ways they can voice any concerns. They know that they will receive a supportive response from any member of staff with whom they wish to talk. They are confident to report matters and raise issues through the school's online system and the 'worry boxes' situated around the school site.
61. Pupils understand how they can keep themselves safe in different situations, including when online. The school site includes natural woodland which supports both formal learning and less-structured explorations. Leaders take appropriate action to protect pupils from harm when using the woodland.
62. Pupils' access to the internet is filtered and monitored appropriately.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

- 63. All the relevant Standards are met.**

School details

School	St Michael's Preparatory School
Department for Education number	886/6016
Registered charity number	1076999
Address	St Michael's Preparatory School Otford Court Row Dow Otford TN14 5RY
Phone number	01959 522137
Email address	office@stmichaels.kent.sch.uk
Website	www.stmichaels.kent.sch.uk
Proprietor	St Michael's Trust Association Limited
Chair	Rashid Chinchawala
Headteacher	Nik Pears
Age range	2 to 13
Number of pupils	486
Date of previous inspection	January 2020

Information about the school

64. St Michael's School is an independent co-educational day school for pupils aged between two and 13 years. The school was founded in 1872 in Croydon and moved to its present site in 1925 as a boarding school for boys. The school first admitted female pupils in 1990. The school is a charitable trust administered by a governing body. The current headteacher took up role in 2021.
65. The school is structured into two departments. The pre-prep department includes the early years foundation stage (EYFS) organised as one Nursery group, two Kindergarten groups that work together and three Reception classes, alongside Years 1 and 2. The prep department includes Years 3 to 8.
66. The school has identified 83 pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). A very small proportion of pupils have an education, health and care (EHC) plan.
67. There are 92 pupils who speak English as an additional language.
68. The school states that its aims fall into the three groups of *perseverantia, sapientia, gratia*: perseverance, wisdom and gratitude. Under perseverance, the school aims to help pupils develop self-confidence, self-awareness and determination. Pupils learn to be considerate, courteous and collaborative through displaying high standards of manners, behaviour, self-discipline, resilience, initiative and respect. With regard to wisdom, the school aims to provide a broad and balanced curriculum that recognises how pupils learn as well as what they learn so that pupils are prepared sufficiently for a smooth transition to their next schools. Pupils learn to think critically as responsible, independent learners through developing lively and inquiring minds. The school also aims to cultivate a sense of gratitude and joy in the wonder of the universe, alongside a sense of environmental responsibility as global citizens as well as being part of an inclusive, diverse community that celebrates difference.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

14 to 16 May 2024

69. A team of five inspectors visited the school for two and a half days.

70. Inspection activities included:

- observation of lessons, some in conjunction with school leaders
- observation of registration periods and assemblies
- observation of a sample of extra-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection
- discussions with the chair and other governors
- discussions with the head, school leaders, managers and other members of staff
- discussions with pupils
- visits to the specialist teaching areas, including facilities for physical education
- scrutiny of samples of pupils' work
- scrutiny of a range of policies, documentation and records provided by the school.

71. The inspection team considered the views of pupils, members of staff and parents who responded to ISI's pre-inspection surveys.

How are association independent schools in England inspected?

- The Department for Education is the regulator for independent schools in England.
- ISI is approved by the Secretary of State for Education to inspect independent schools in England, which are members of associations in membership of the Independent Schools Council.
- ISI inspections report to the Department for Education on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards, the EYFS statutory framework requirements, the National Minimum Standards for boarding schools and any other relevant standards are met.
- For more information, please visit **www.isi.net**.

Independent Schools Inspectorate

CAP House, 9-12 Long Lane, London, EC1A 9HA

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