



ISI Independent
Schools
Inspectorate

Focused Compliance and Educational Quality Inspection Report

The Firs School

May 2022

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School's Details

School College	The Firs School			
DfE number	896/6004			
Early Years registration number	EY6045			
Address	The Firs School 45 Newton Lane Upton Chester Cheshire CH2 2HJ			
Telephone number	01244 322443			
Email address	admin@firsschool.org			
Headteacher	Miss Rosemary Evans			
Proprietor	Firs Education Limited			
Age range	2 to 11			
Number of pupils on roll	138			
	EYFS	35	Infants	36
	Juniors	67		
Inspection dates	17 to 20 May 2022			

1. Background Information

About the school

- 1.1 The Firs School is a co-educational independent day school situated in Chester. It was founded in 1945 by Mrs Florence Longman and became a limited company in 2009. Firs Education Ltd has two directors, both of whom are members of the founding Longman family, and provides oversight of the school, supported by an advisory board of governors.
- 1.2 The school comprises three sections: the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), for children aged two to five years; infants, for pupils in Years 1 and 2; and juniors, for pupils in Years 3 to 6.
- 1.3 The current headteacher was appointed in September 2019.
- 1.4 The inspection took into account the circumstances faced by schools during the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions imposed by government guidance at various points of the pandemic.

What the school seeks to do

- 1.5 The school aspires to provide a secure, stimulating and caring environment where childhood is celebrated and the partnership between child, parent or carer and staff can flourish. It aims for every child to progress educationally, socially and emotionally to their full potential. It endeavours to live out the values of the Christian faith while respecting and valuing those of all faiths or none.

About the pupils

- 1.6 Pupils come from a variety of locations, predominately around Chester. Nationally standardised test data provided by the school indicate that the ability of the pupils is average compared to those taking the same tests nationally. The school has identified 28 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), all of whom receive additional support, due to a range of needs. Three pupils have an education, health and care (EHC) plan. There are 18 pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL), all of whom receive additional support for their English. The school modifies the curriculum for the most able pupils in its population.

2. Regulatory Compliance Inspection

Preface

The Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) is approved by the Secretary of State to inspect schools which are, or whose heads are, in membership of the associations which form the Independent Schools Council (ISC) and report on the extent to which they meet the Independent School Standards ('the standards') in the Schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014. Inspections of schools with early years settings not requiring registration also report whether the school complies with key provisions of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework. Additionally, inspections report on the school's accessibility plan under Schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010 and the ban on corporal punishment under section 548 of the Education Act 1996. Inspections also comment on the progress made to meet any compliance action points set out in the school's most recent statutory inspection.

ISI inspections are also carried out under the arrangements of the ISC Associations for the maintenance and improvement of the quality of their membership.

This is a FOCUSED COMPLIANCE INSPECTION which was combined with an inspection of EDUCATIONAL QUALITY. The FOCUSED COMPLIANCE inspection reports only on the school's compliance with the standards. The standards represent minimum requirements and judgements are given either as **met** or as **not met**. All schools are required to meet all the standards applicable to them. Where the minimum requirements are not met, this is clearly indicated in the relevant section of the report and the school is required to take the actions specified. In this focused compliance inspection, key standards have been inspected in detail. These are the standards on safeguarding; measures to guard against bullying; arrangements for pupils' health and safety; arrangements to check the suitability of staff; the provision of information; the handling of parents' complaints; and other related aspects of leadership and management. The remaining standards and requirements are deemed to continue to be met unless evidence to the contrary has been found.

Inspections do not include matters that are outside of the regulatory framework described above, such as: an exhaustive health and safety audit; compliance with data protection requirements; an in-depth examination of the structural condition of the school, its services or other physical features; contractual arrangements with parents; an investigation of the financial viability of the school or its accounting procedures.

Inspectors may be aware of individual safeguarding concerns, allegations and complaints as part of the inspection process. Such matters will not usually be referred to specifically in published reports in this document but will have been considered by the team in reaching its judgements.

Links to the standards and requirements can be found here: [The Education \(Independent School Standards\) Regulations 2014](#), [Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework](#).

Key findings

- 2.1 The school meets the standards in the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014, and relevant requirements of the statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage, and associated requirements, and no further action is required as a result of this inspection.**

PART 1 – Quality of education provided

- 2.2 The school's own framework for assessment confirms that teaching enables pupils to make good progress in the context of Part 1 paragraph 3(a).
- 2.3 The curriculum is documented, supported by appropriate plans and schemes of work for the pupils and covers the required breadth of material. The teaching enables pupils to make good progress, encompasses effective behaviour management and is supported by suitable resources. A suitable framework for the assessment of pupils' performance is in place.
- 2.4 Pupils receive relationships education. The school has consulted parents and published a written statement of its policy which has regard to the relevant statutory guidance.
- 2.5 The standards relating to the quality of education [paragraphs 1–4] are met.**

PART 2 – Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

- 2.6 Principles and values are actively promoted which facilitate the personal development of pupils as responsible, tolerant, law-abiding citizens.
- 2.7 The standard relating to spiritual, moral, social and cultural development [paragraph 5] is met.**

PART 3 – Welfare, health and safety of pupils

- 2.8 Arrangements are made to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils by means that pay due regard to current statutory guidance; good behaviour is promoted; bullying is prevented so far as reasonably practicable; health and safety requirements are met, including those relating to fire safety; provision is made for first aid. Pupils are properly supervised; admission and attendance registers are maintained, as required, and there is a strategic approach to risk assessment. A disability access plan is in place.
- 2.9 The standards relating to welfare, health and safety [paragraphs 6–16], the requirement of Schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010, and the ban on corporal punishment under section 548 of the Education Act 1996 are met.**

PART 4 – Suitability of staff, supply staff, and proprietors

- 2.10 The school makes appropriate checks to ensure the suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors, and a register is kept as required.
- 2.11 The standards relating to the suitability of those in contact with pupils at the school [paragraphs 17–21] are met.**

PART 5 – Premises of and accommodation at schools

- 2.12 Suitable toilet and changing facilities, and showering facilities where required by the standard, and appropriate accommodation for pupils' medical and therapy needs are provided. The premises are maintained to a standard commensurate with health and safety; acoustics and lighting are

appropriate; water provision is adequate. Suitable outdoor space is provided for physical education and outdoor play.

2.13 The standards relating to the premises and accommodation [paragraphs 22–31] are met.

PART 6 – Provision of information

2.14 A range of information is published, provided or made available to parents, inspectors and the Department for Education. This includes details about the proprietor, the ethos of the school and the curriculum, and of the school's arrangements for admission, behaviour and exclusions, bullying, health and safety, first aid, details of the complaints procedure, and the number of complaints registered under the formal procedure during the preceding school year, and the provision for any with education, health and care plans or English as an additional language. It also includes particulars of the school's academic performance during the preceding school year, inspection reports and (for parents only) a report at least annually of their own child's progress. The safeguarding policy is posted on the school's website.

2.15 The standard relating to the provision of information [paragraph 32] is met.

PART 7 – Manner in which complaints are handled

2.16 Parental complaints, if any, are handled effectively through a three-stage process, (informal, formal and a hearing before a panel of three, one of whom is independent of the school). Each stage has clear time scales, and at the third stage the panel can make findings and recommendations which are communicated to the complainant. Records are kept appropriately, including of any action taken, whether or not a complaint is successful.

2.17 The standard relating to the handling of complaints [paragraph 33] is met.

PART 8 – Quality of leadership in and management of schools

2.18 The proprietor ensures that the leadership and management demonstrate good skills and knowledge, and fulfil their responsibilities effectively, so that the other standards are consistently met, and they actively promote the well-being of the pupils.

2.19 The standard relating to leadership and management of the school [paragraph 34] is met.

3. Educational Quality Inspection

Preface

The **EDUCATIONAL QUALITY** inspection reports on the quality of the school's work. It focuses on the two key outcomes:

- The achievement of the pupils, including their academic development, and
- The personal development of the pupils.

The headline judgements apply one of the ISI descriptors 'excellent', 'good', 'sound' or 'unsatisfactory'.

Where necessary, National Curriculum nomenclature is used to refer to year groups in the school. Where the school's own names differ from those used nationally, the details are given in the table below:

<i>School name</i>	<i>National Curriculum name</i>
Nursery, Kindergarten and FS1	Nursery
FS2	Reception

Key findings

3.1 The quality of the pupils' academic and other achievements is good.

- Pupils' attainment and progress are good overall. Pupils with SEND or EAL make rapid progress as a result of effective support.
- Pupils display excellent attitudes to their studies and work very well together. They enjoy a high level of success in their wider activities.
- Pupils are highly competent and independent users of information and communication technology (ICT) in their learning.
- Pupils do not always apply higher-order thinking skills strongly.
- More able pupils do not always make fast progress because they receive inconsistent levels of challenge.

3.2 The quality of the pupils' personal development is excellent.

- Pupils are highly collaborative and work very effectively in shared ventures.
- Pupils display a highly developed moral code based upon the values espoused in the Firs Way.
- Pupils show a mature respect for their peers who may display different cultural and academic characteristics to their own.

Recommendations

3.3 The school should make the following improvements:

- Enhance the progress of more able pupils by consistently providing them with greater challenge.
- Strengthen pupils' development and application of higher-order thinking skills.

The quality of the pupils' academic and other achievements

- 3.4 The quality of the pupils' academic and other achievements is good.
- 3.5 Pupils' attitudes to learning are excellent. Pupils work very well in groups and pairs as seen in a Year 1 mathematics lesson where pupils collaborated very effectively to order coins according to their value. In lessons, pupils are focused and show high levels of concentration for their age and ability. In EYFS, children showed sustained levels of concentration in their chosen activity. Some systematically experimented with capacity using a water tray whilst others were colouring, showing very good application. Pupils can also work well independently, as seen in a Year 3 mathematics lesson when pupils had to find 2D and 3D shapes within the classroom. They did so calmly and efficiently. Pupils stated to inspectors that they appreciated the modelling of good practice undertaken by teachers at the start of a lesson to guide them.
- 3.6 The wider achievements of the pupils are excellent and their success in a range of activities is considerable. Examples of recent successes include the team reaching the national finals of the Independent Schools Association (ISA) athletics competition and finishing third in the ISA north netball regional finals. The football squad recently became northern area third-place finalists. A selection of high-quality artwork from across the age range was selected for the regional and national finals of the ISA art competitions. In music the choir regularly perform in the local community. There have been individual success in piano at the Chester Festival and awards at the London Young Musician of the Year competition. Most pupils who undertook LAMDA awards in drama achieved the highest available grades. Some pupils have earned academic scholarships to senior schools.
- 3.7 Pupils' competence in ICT is excellent. They can independently use devices to access lesson materials, engage with remote learning and research. For example, in a Year 6 English lesson, pupils displayed an excellent competence and familiarity when using their devices to locate and access a shared text. Children's skills begin to develop in EYFS as they role play with electronic tills and begin to investigate programmable toys. Pupils routinely complete and submit assignments via the school's virtual learning environment with independence. Year 6 pupils also utilised their skills to produce a high-quality e-book for their Year 1 buddies. More able pupils showed outstanding skills in their production of a map of the school using a popular application to allow a virtual 3D tour of the site. Some pupils with additional needs have made highly effective use of the assistive features of the technology to aid them in their independent work. Pupils' ICT skills benefit from the availability of equipment and the associated infrastructure, both of which are due to the planning and investment by the proprietor.
- 3.8 Pupils' achievement as measured by examination results and the change in their performance over time are good. Data provided by the school using externally standardised tests shows that attainment is in line with that of pupils taking the same tests nationally. Pupils with SEND and EAL make strong progress and those who are more able achieve in line with their potential. In the EYFS average attainment is above that of the national average for maintained schools. However, the progress of more able pupils is sometimes impacted by inconsistent levels of challenge. In the most successful lessons, teachers provided additional stretch or challenge for these pupils and carefully monitored the fulfilment of those tasks. An analysis of leavers shows that most or all pupils gain entry to their first choice of secondary school including a range of selective independent schools and maintained grammar schools. The school's achievement is in line with its aims.
- 3.9 Pupils' skills, knowledge and understanding across the wide range of subjects are good. Pupils' knowledge and understanding develops well, facilitated by the comments of their teachers and their own self-reflections which are procedures built into the school's marking policy. This represents the fulfilment of a recommendation made in the school's previous inspection report. Additionally, pupils achieve highly in their extensive range of co-curricular clubs and activities covering sport, music, aesthetic and intellectual pursuits. Pupils are effective in applying their knowledge across the curriculum. For example, Year 5 exhibited a good level of understanding across a range of topics in science and Year 3 pupils showed well-developed hockey skills in their physical education session.

Additionally, Year 2 pupils demonstrated excellent skills in manipulating chalks and pastels to create graffiti art in the style of Kashnik. Younger pupils showed rapid progression in French to acquire a good range of vocabulary for their age. Pupils' wide-ranging achievements are due to leaders' effective provision of a broad curriculum and the active role played by subject leaders. This too, represents the successful fulfilment of a recommendation made in the school's previous inspection report.

- 3.10 Pupils' communications skills are good. For example, many displayed high levels of confidence when speaking aloud as seen during a Year 6 play rehearsal when actors played their parts with passion and expression. During break time, inspectors were engaged in articulate conversation by inquisitive Year 1 pupils. Children in EYFS performed an improvised puppet show confidently for their friends who listened attentively. Such opportunities are planned into the curriculum and modelled effectively by teachers.
- 3.11 Pupils' writing shows an age appropriate sophistication using punctuation and grammar correctly and many pupils demonstrate a good knowledge of vocabulary as seen in Year 4 as they wrote a non-chronological report using technical terms about the rainforest. Year 1 pupils offered interesting and exciting adjectives to use when describing a Moon Monster image shown on screen. Pupils read well and enjoy discussing their books. More able pupils read with fluency, confidence and expression and pupils with EAL or SEND are well supported in developing and practising their skills. The opportunities for more able pupils to increase the depth of their learning was sometimes limited as not all staff routinely offer more sophisticated tasks or more teacher prompts in order to maximise their achievement within a lesson.
- 3.12 Pupils' numeracy skills are good. Pupils show effective competency in manipulating number and solving problems. The youngest children in EYFS demonstrated effective early counting skills as they constructed a tower of bricks or counted their dinosaur collection. Year 3 pupils demonstrated a good level of achievement when tackling questions on partitioning, adding and subtracting, understanding place value and writing the number in words. Pupils sometimes use their skills in other areas of the curriculum such as science. For example, Year 5 accurately plotted graphs about how babies grow and develop, and Year 2 made rockets as part of a celebration of *World Maths Day*.
- 3.13 Pupils show good study skills overall. They are able to draw knowledge from a range of sources beyond their teachers. For example, to support vocabulary choices whilst writing a non-chronological report, pupils in a Year 4 English lesson readily utilised a range of sources such as wall displays and word mats. Pupils in Reception showed strong skills in analysing repeating shapes patterns during a mathematics lesson and successfully reasoned what the next shape in the pattern would be. Pupils can plan and organise their work effectively for their age, due to the clear classroom routines devised by teachers. A very large majority of parents who responded to the pre-inspection questionnaire agreed that the school equips their child with the team working, collaborative and research skills they need in later life. However, in the lessons observed, few examples of pupils showing higher-order thinking skills such as hypothesising, or making connections between topics, were seen.

The quality of the pupils' personal development

- 3.14 The quality of the pupils' personal development is excellent.
- 3.15 Pupils' social development and their ability to collaborate with each other is excellent. Year 5 and 6 pupils spoke fondly of their role as buddies for younger pupils and staff report that the pupils take their responsibilities very seriously. Pupils of all ages collaborate well and support each other in ventures around the school, such as business enterprise projects and the range of house activities which span the age range. Pupils recognise that others have differing needs, circumstances and characteristics and readily accommodate these, willingly acknowledging the strengths of such peers. Pupils display a strong appreciation of wider social issues. In their geography work, Year 5 pupils expressed their opinions on issues relating to renewable energy sources and the potential damage to the planet of using fossil fuels.

- 3.16 Pupils' self-understanding is excellent. Almost all pupils display very strong levels of self-esteem in their activities around school, benefiting from the small, nurturing environment. Their high self-confidence is evidenced in their contributions in lessons and was epitomised by pupils playing solo instrumental pieces as their peers entered for Choral Worship. In a Year 5 mathematics lesson, all pupils showed excellent self-discipline as they systematically tackled problems on complementary and supplementary angles. Teachers know their pupils very well and support them in developing this confidence with regular reference to the 'Firs values'. Pupils exhibit well-developed skills of self-reflection and self-awareness, and this is encouraged in a variety of start of day activities (SODA) where children take time to reflect on the academic or emotional issues of the week.
- 3.17 Pupils display an excellent moral understanding and are well-behaved both in lessons and during less structured times. Pupils strongly subscribe to the values enshrined in 'The Firs Way' and those interviewed stated this gave a robust structure to guide their behaviour and decision-making both at school and in their wider life. Older pupils are excellent role models, acting as buddies and mentors to younger pupils. Nursery children showed a sense of understanding systems of rules about not having toys on the carpet during the learning time, as well as sensitivity towards children who found this difficult. On the very small number of occasions when a pupil may become more distracting or lose concentration on the task, adults in the room are very skilful at patiently redirecting them to maintain their progress and that of the class. Pupils reflect well upon any misdemeanours and can articulate why their actions may have been the wrong choice.
- 3.18 Pupils' contributions to others and the community are excellent. Pupils of all ages successfully fulfil a range of roles from classroom monitors to school counsellors. Year 6 make a most effective contribution, serving the school in a variety of leadership roles such as house captains or library leaders. Pupils' welfare and safety are actively promoted by their peers who act as junior safety officers or anti-bullying ambassadors. Members of the gardening club take responsibility for brightening the school grounds by planting flowers. Pupils productively support a range of local and national charities, including a local foodbank. Effective pupil engagement with the local community is fostered through a range of events including the choir singing at a local aged persons' home, events at the local churches and inviting members of the local community to school for seasonal events.
- 3.19 Pupils show an excellent respect for diversity, showing high levels of sensitivity towards their own and other cultures. Pupils of all backgrounds mix easily and are curious to learn about each other's heritage. For example, pupils have shared facts and foods relating to their religious festivals with their class. In a recent celebration of languages, each year group was given the opportunity to discover a new language. Several classes chose the home language of a bilingual peer, valuing the opportunity to learn more about their friends' heritage. The vast majority of parents who responded to the questionnaire agreed that the school actively promotes values of democracy, respect and tolerance of other people. In interview, pupils actively espoused that differences did not matter to them and that they would readily report anyone who was to discriminate against one of their peers because of a protected characteristic. Year 2 pupils showed a strong understanding of the characteristics that make humans the same and different while studying aspects of the works of author Jacqueline Wooden as part of Black History Month. Pupils develop a strong understanding of a range of world religions through their religious studies syllabus and through a range of assembly topics relating to important dates in various faith calendars.
- 3.20 Pupils display an excellent understanding of personal safety and how to stay both physically and mentally healthy. In their questionnaire, almost all pupils agreed that they understood how to be safe online and that the school teaches them about safety. In discussion with inspectors, pupils demonstrated knowledge of a wide range of strategies for keeping safe online and maintaining healthy and respectful online relationships. Through their personal, social and health education (PSHE) Year 6 pupils have gained a detailed understanding of personal risk through studies of the dangers of electricity and road and cycle safety. Pupils have a mature understanding of the dangers of bullying due to the work done by their peers who act as anti-bullying ambassadors. Safety issues such as

ensuring visibility in the dark winter months by wearing appropriate clothing, is actively promoted by pupils who act as junior safety officers. Pupils can effectively describe the benefits of mental health and know to whom they can speak if they need help. Pupils who spoke to the inspectors said that they appreciate the provision of dedicated staff for this purpose.

- 3.21 Pupils understand how to be physically healthy through topics in their PSHE programme, such as *'Healthy Body, Healthy Mind'*, where they explore the value of exercise. This is augmented by activities in their physical education (PE) and games syllabus which they enjoy. These activities are described as wide-ranging by the pupils, who appreciate the opportunities available. Staff describe pupils at the school as being physically active and healthy. Year 1 pupils at lunch were able to describe the requirements for a healthy diet, for example, explaining why cucumber and fruit was a healthier option than the cake. They then made appropriate selections that reflected their desire to stay well.
- 3.22 Pupils demonstrate a strong spiritual understanding and a good capacity to appreciate the non-material aspects of life. Older pupils reported that they appreciate opportunities to balance the demands of their academic studies with moments to concentrate on well-being and creative activities such as pottery work. Pupils recognise the uplifting nature of collective singing, and nearly all participated in choral worship with great enthusiasm. Pupils said that this helped to release 'happy hormones'. Pupils demonstrated a mature ability to contemplate philosophical issues. This was seen in a Year 4 religious education (RE) lesson when pupils discussed the symbolism associated with Sikhism. They offered thoughtful ideas about the meaning and discussed sensibly how certain aspects apply to modern life. Pupils with SEND take full part in such discussions, for example, offering an incisive view of a link between 'temporal' and 'temporary' during the discussion of Sikhism's view of Temporal Authority on Earth.
- 3.23 Pupils display well-developed decision-making skills. They recognise that they can affect their environment by voting for school councillors, contributing to surveys or standing for posts of responsibility. For example, pupils in each class had to work together to decide how best to allocate funds they had been given by the school to purchase indoor and outdoor activities. Some pupils showed maturity when they took an active role in helping to formulate the school's homework policy. EYFS children develop good decision-making skills for their age. For example, during a Nursery session, children showed confidence in selecting which activities to engage with whilst outdoors. The school's leadership provides a range of opportunities for the pupils to be involved in decisions which directly affect them, such as aspects of the lunchtime menus and pupils state that they are proud to be part of a school that listens to them.

4. Inspection Evidence

- 4.1 The inspectors observed lessons, had discussions with pupils and examined samples of pupils' work. They held discussions with members of staff and with the proprietor and members of the advisory board, observed a sample of the extra-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection period, and attended form meetings. Inspectors visited the facilities for the youngest pupils, together with the learning support and educational resource areas. Inspectors considered the responses of parents, staff and pupils to pre-inspection questionnaires. The inspectors examined curriculum and other documentation made available by the school.

Inspectors

Mr Robert Lilley	Reporting inspector
Mr Will Newman	Compliance team inspector (Head, IAPS school)
Mr Warren Honey	Team inspector (Head, ISA school)