

School inspection report

7 November 2023 to 9 November 2023

Abbot's Hill School

Bunker's Lane
Hemel Hempstead
Hertfordshire
HP3 8RP

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. The governors ensure that the school's senior leaders have the necessary expertise to actively promote the wellbeing of pupils. They carry out their responsibilities effectively in supporting and monitoring the work of the leadership team, through a range of committees. They have a robust approach to managing risk, so that the wellbeing of pupils is supported.
2. The school's leaders have introduced a range of new initiatives to improve the quality of teaching and learning. This has helped to promote good progress throughout the school. Pupils' GCSE results demonstrate pupils' good progress from their starting points.
3. Relationships between teachers and pupils are positive. This can be seen in the focused atmosphere in lessons and in pupils' commitment to work hard. It is also evident in pupils' appreciation and enthusiasm for the extensive extra-curricular programme.
4. Pupils present themselves as positive, confident and happy individuals, comfortable in their school. A small proportion of pupils are less positive about school and feel that their views are not always valued and listened to.
5. The changes brought about by senior leaders to the way pupils' work is assessed, have resulted in pupils benefiting from more effective feedback. This approach to assessment means that pupils now have a greater understanding of their progress. These systems are recent and still in the process of becoming fully embedded in departmental practice.
6. Pupils understand the importance of showing tolerance and respect for all in their community. This is reinforced by the school's code of conduct. This is an aspect of their school that has notably improved in recent years.
7. The governors and school leaders have strengthened the pastoral system in the last year. They have established an effective culture of safeguarding.
8. Early years provision is effective. Children develop their knowledge and skills successfully in terms of communication and language, their physical skills and personal, social and emotional development, so they are prepared for the next stage of their education.

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 the school's processes in assessing pupils' progress and providing feedback is followed consistently across all subjects
- further develop opportunities for pupils to express their opinions so that all pupils feel their views are listened to and valued.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

9. Governors have a clear understanding of their responsibilities, through their involvement in a range of committees and the use of external professional agencies. They have regular and direct contact with the school, visiting regularly and meeting with pupils and staff, as well as receiving annual reports from key members of staff. Consequently, they ensure that the school's leaders have the requisite skills and knowledge to fulfil their roles effectively.
10. Governors review the school's policies annually, making use of their own expertise and that of external professionals, so that the Standards are met consistently.
11. School leaders and governors are successful in promoting the school's aims in all sections of the school. The school seeks to foster a community in which all individuals are happy and inspired to live purposeful and fulfilling lives, while remaining true to the founding values of strength and character.
12. The school's leaders have the wellbeing of pupils at the centre of their thinking and the newly created pastoral team lead the way on this. The curriculum provides useful information and guidance on living healthy lives, both in terms of their physical and emotional health. The medical centre supports this through delivering sessions on specific topics such as diet and first aid, as well as enabling pupils to seek advice from external agencies.
13. The school's leaders and managers have created a safe working environment for the whole school community, ensuring that the relevant policies are implemented effectively. Health and safety records are fully recorded and reviewed regularly.
14. Leaders take a proactive approach to managing risks, both on and off the site. There is a systematic approach to the assessment of risk, in all areas of school life, using a common framework to identify any issues. The school's leaders provide online training for staff in the management of risk, and it is an integral element of the induction programme. The assessment of risk is put into the context of the situation and the pupils are involved, so that the safety and wellbeing of pupils is paramount.
15. Governors conduct an annual review of safeguarding and monitor procedures rigorously. Leaders have made significant changes to the school's pastoral arrangements in the last year. As a result, support for pupils is effective and there are positive links with external agencies.
16. The complaints' process is available from the school and establishes that there are three stages with the final one involving a complaint's panel, which includes a member who is independent of the school's management. The details of complaints in all three stages are recorded fully with clear information on any action taken to resolve concerns.
17. Reports to parents, as well as discussion meetings, provide useful information on pupils' progress and attainment. Leaders ensure that all other relevant information is made available to parents as required.
18. The governors and school leaders are committed to ensuring that the school meets the needs of all pupils, in line with the terms of the Equality Act. Teaching does not discriminate between groups or individuals and the leaders work to create successfully an inclusive and accessible environment.

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

All the relevant Standards are met

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

19. An effective curriculum is in place. It meets the needs of pupils and ensures that pupils have a firm grounding in literacy, numeracy, languages, science and technology, creative arts and physical education. Teaching does not discriminate against pupils nor undermine British values.
20. There is a positive working relationship between teachers and pupils, and this helps to promote the achievement of pupils throughout the school. Pupils' GCSE results show that they make good progress from their starting points during their time at the school. The same good progress is true of pupils in the prep department.
21. Teachers have secure knowledge and understanding of the subjects they teach. Lessons are well planned and take account of pupils' differing needs. This helps pupils to learn effectively and make good progress. Pupils have strong recall of knowledge, and they apply this to new areas of work. They work equally well as independent and collaborative learners. Pupils develop strong technological, inference and debating skills. They research information well and interpret and evaluate ideas to a high level. Teachers provide 'subject clinics' which support the learning in lessons and enable pupils to clarify their understanding and enhance their progress further.
22. Leadership of the early years is effective. Leaders work closely with the local authority and other agencies and have created a positive environment in which the children flourish. In the early years and the prep school, there is a consistent programme of assessments, ensuring that pupils' progress is monitored carefully, and appropriate actions put in place to support learning. Emphasis is placed on making learning fun, developing pupils' awareness of their next steps and making the process of learning meaningful. Pupils have regular opportunities to check their own learning and do so effectively.
23. Throughout the school, there is a clear framework for the day-to-day assessment of pupils' progress, which is understood by pupils. The prep school uses a variety of assessments to check pupils' progress and then support their learning. Leaders in the senior school have introduced a new approach to monitoring recently and departments are at different stages in the process of embedding it fully, so that the full benefits are not yet firmly established. Pupils often receive valuable verbal feedback in lessons, which helps them to improve their work.
24. Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) make consistent progress and achieve grades above the expectations from their starting points. Pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) make similarly good progress and achieve well. Pupils and their parents appreciate the additional support they receive, which helps them to be successful.
25. Pupils have access to and benefit from specialist facilities, for example in science and art, as well as well-resourced departments. These enhance learning and help them to make good progress. The school's governors and leaders have promoted a strategy for developing the pupils' use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) through devices and other resources, so that pupils are better equipped for learning in the modern world.
26. There is a broad and extensive co-curricular programme throughout the school and pupils' participation is high. Pupils are very enthusiastic about the opportunities available to them and appreciate the opportunities to develop new skills and interests.

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

All the relevant Standards are met

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

27. Leaders provide a wide range of physical education activities, within and beyond the curriculum. Pupils learn about living healthily as part of their physical education programme and through their personal development lessons. They develop a strong understanding of issues such as the importance of following a sensible diet.
28. The curriculum and the assemblies programme provide opportunities for pupils to broaden their thinking beyond the purely factual and understand deeper issues of morality and cultural differences. Topics such as inclusion and diversity are covered in subjects such as history and in personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) lessons which the school terms personal development education (PDE). Pupils learn to appreciate the role that beliefs and values play in society.
29. Leaders actively promote activities and clubs beyond the classroom, responding to pupils' requests and then supporting pupils' leadership of these activities, where appropriate. The school's partnerships' programme with local schools is an example of this. Pupils develop confidence as a result of being involved in and often leading activities. Pupils are strong, reflective learners. Pupils focus well on their learning. They concentrate on the task in hand and make good progress.
30. In the PSHE and relationships and sex education (RSE) programmes, wellbeing is actively promoted. Pupils develop a sound understanding of the range of topics covered, such as the signs of coercive control in Year 11. Pupils discuss issues such as prejudice, discrimination and differences between people with maturity. The school nurse also contributes usefully to the provision for wellbeing and pupils benefit from a range of external agencies that support mental and physical wellbeing.
31. Leaders have updated the rewards and sanctions policy and introduced a new pastoral team and strategy. Behaviour in the school has improved as a result of this. Pupils interact positively with each other, enabling them to develop their understanding of their own characters as well as of others. Pupils' conduct and movement around the school is calm and they present a positive demeanour. Pupils in the prep school exhibit enthusiasm and excitement in their activities.
32. The new pastoral team in the senior school have developed an effective approach towards behaviour, which now addresses issues of relationships between pupils. Consequently, pupils can feel confident that any incidents of poor behaviour or bullying will be dealt with effectively.
33. Pupils are generally very positive about the school. However, a small proportion of older pupils are less so. They feel that their voices are not always heard sufficiently, and their views valued. Leaders are aware of the need to address this and are implementing new initiatives.
34. The school has a positive and happy environment that spurs pupils on and motivates them. There is a supportive atmosphere, where pupils feel they can ask a friend for help. Pupils learn about mindfulness. Those in the prep department, visit the school's 'peaceful pod' area, to discuss their feelings and be calm.
35. The premises and accommodation provide a safe and healthy environment throughout the school. There is a well-developed culture of managing risk. The provision for first aid, supervision of pupils

and fire safety procedures are robust. Similarly, the school fulfils its duties in terms of admission and attendance registers. There are regular reviews of procedures. On the return from every school trip, a review is held and any lessons learned are recorded and acted on.

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

All the relevant Standards are met

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

36. Respect and tolerance are an integral part of the school community, reinforced by the school's code of conduct. This is an area which has greatly developed in recent years. There is a clear moral tone around the school. Pupils learn about British values, through the curriculum and assemblies. For example, during the inspection, Year 9 pupils learned about suffragettes, tackling issues of discrimination and democratic rights. In a Year 10 media lesson on magazine covers, pupils showed their grasp of images' positive messages and the subliminal connotations and assumptions which may lie behind them. The recently formed inclusion team, which staff continue to develop, is having a positive impact on further developing pupils' appreciation of the importance of a tolerant society.
37. Pupils have a clear understanding of the school's discipline system. They understand how sanctions can build up and show a strong understanding of right and wrong. This moral understanding is well-developed, particularly in the prep school. Here pupils benefit from a wide-ranging programme of activities that extend their learning and provide skills for their future lives.
38. Pupils have become more involved in volunteering projects in recent years due to the development of initiatives such as the 'inspired' project, the Duke of Edinburgh's award scheme (DofE) and the new partnership programmes. The school has strong links with other local schools, inviting pupils to attend school workshops in mathematics and 'come and perform' events in drama and music. Throughout the school, pupils raise funds for local and international charities. For example, pupils collected food at their Harvest festival for a local homeless charity. At Christmas, pupils visit local care homes to sing carols.
39. The PSHE curriculum helps to develop pupils' economic understanding. Pupils build up useful skills, such as budgeting, banking and student finance. Teaching delivers these themes in age-appropriate and relevant way, so that younger pupils look at budgeting in terms of spending pocket money, whereas older pupils might look at managing money in life beyond school.
40. Pupils receive impartial careers guidance from Year 7 upwards and have the opportunity for work experience in Year 10. They receive support for their next steps in further education and this provision is being continually developed. Leaders ensure that different pathways are discussed, both vocational and academic, so that pupils can make reasoned choices. Consequently, pupils are well informed and ambitious for their futures.
41. In the school's 'clan' system, pupils have the opportunity to lead and to make democratic decisions, such as making plans to vote for and support house charities. Pupils show involvement and understanding of issues in wider society, through their lessons in personal development.
42. Through the co-curricular programme, pupils develop social skills across year groups. Year 10 pupils have established a chess club for both themselves and pupils from Year 6, for their mutual benefit. This activities programme extends the range of pupils' learning and helps them to understand the value of teamwork, an important skill for their future lives.

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

All the relevant standards are met

Safeguarding

43. Arrangements to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils are robust. There have been changes to the organisation and planning of safeguarding in the last year, which have strengthened systems and procedures. Safeguarding concerns are recorded fully and show that effective measures are in place to manage any concerns. There are positive working relationships with external agencies, as appropriate.
44. At least termly, the safeguarding governor discusses procedures with the safeguarding team and there is an annual review of processes by governors. Governors ensure that the school's safeguarding policy reflects the most recent guidance and is published on the school website.
45. Arrangements to keep pupils safe through leaders' identification and management of risk are effective. The school adopts a holistic approach towards safeguarding, where the staff responsible for assessing risk do so in concert with other relevant members of staff to consider the wellbeing of pupils.
46. Leaders ensure that staff and volunteers receive safeguarding training as they join the school, and this is updated at regular intervals. Those with designated safeguarding lead responsibilities receive appropriate training. Staff know the school's safeguarding procedures well. They report safeguarding concerns promptly when they arise. Leaders foster a culture of safeguarding that is vigilant with a coherent approach across all areas of the school. As a result, pupils feel safe at school.
47. Safer recruitment checks are completed for staff, volunteers and governors and a suitable record of appointments is kept.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

All the relevant standards are met

The quality of the early years foundation stage in the registered early years provision

Overall effectiveness: the quality and standards of the early years provision

48. The overall effectiveness of the early years provision is good.
49. Staff have a firm and common understanding of the curriculum offer and what it means for their practice. Across all parts of the provision, staff interactions with children are of a high quality and contribute well to delivering the curriculum. The curriculum supports the children's development in the prime areas of learning very well, including for those children who have SEND.
50. Children make good progress in relation to their starting points. Children meet the expected level of development. Children are well prepared and carefully supported in the transition process and ready for the next stage in their education.
51. Children are cared for well within a safe environment, where they are all valued as individuals. Strong relationships and quality time with trusted adults enable children to feel safe, secure and happy. Due to the thoughtful care adults provide, children's personal and emotional development is supported well. All staff understand their safeguarding and welfare responsibilities and work together diligently to keep the children safe.
52. Leaders demonstrate a strong commitment to continuous improvement through thoughtful self-evaluation and a clear vision for future development.

Quality of education

53. The quality of education is good.
54. The curriculum is ambitious and designed to give children the knowledge and skills they need to succeed. Leaders have identified a need for improvement in regular monitoring of the curriculum and evaluation of the activities provided across all areas of the setting to ensure that children's experiences over time are consistently and coherently arranged to build sufficient knowledge and skills for future learning.
55. The curriculum provides rich opportunities for children to develop communication and language, physical and personal skills, and to develop socially and emotionally. Staff have a clear understanding of how children learn at this age. They carefully plan activities and have high expectations of what children can achieve in relation to their stage of development. These experiences allow children to explore, discover and be curious. For example, a toddler playing in the water tray in the outdoor area was gently prompted to use the guttering to explore how to make balls move more quickly into the tray. Staff make good use of opportunities when interacting with children, to introduce mathematical language by counting and talking about shape and size. This was evident when babies understood the concept of more at snack time, toddlers could cut playdough in half and older children realised the key person was too big to successfully hide in a hide and seek game.

56. Children are prepared and feel comfortable making the transition to their next stage of their education. They are very well supported by staff who are positive role models and provide high-quality communication and language experiences.
57. Staff readily engage with children during routine activities and take every opportunity to develop communication and language skills. They read and sing with the children, encouraging them to repeat words, answer simple questions and join in with songs and actions. Babies copy actions and respond positively to familiar songs. Children are encouraged to borrow books from the library to share at home. Parents and children enjoy this initiative. Positive feedback is given to the children. Staff praise and encourage them sensitively so they know when they are doing well and how to develop their skills and attitudes for learning.
58. Each child's progress is carefully monitored to ensure their needs are met.

Behaviour and attitudes

59. Behaviour and attitudes are outstanding.
60. Children show great enjoyment in their learning. They are very curious and inquisitive and are keen to explore their surroundings. They have consistently positive attitudes to their play and learning.
61. Children are able to access resources freely and explore real life objects and experiment with different textures, thereby fostering the children's innate curiosity.
62. Children have consistently high levels of respect for others. Children clap and smile when watching other children successfully throw balls into containers. Children increasingly show high levels of confidence in social situations and are happy to talk to unfamiliar adults and ask questions. They confidently demonstrate their understanding of why behaviour rules are in place and recognise the impact that their behaviour has on others. They respond well to gentle reminders from staff about how to share things and play cooperatively.
63. Younger children were given opportunities to test their ideas when pouring water into containers in the water tray. Toddlers demonstrate confidence and perseverance when challenged to climb a rope ladder and ring a bell.
64. The setting has a highly effective partnership with parents which successfully promote children's attendance. Suitable procedures are in place to investigate unexpected absences.

Personal development

65. The personal development of children is outstanding.
66. Extremely effective care practices support children's emotional security and development of their character, so children feel very safe and happy in a secure environment. Staff demonstrate high-quality interactions and respond in a sensitive and caring manner to individual children's needs. Parents value the high standard of emotional support given to their child.
67. Staff encourage children to take appropriate risks and challenges as they play and learn both inside and outdoors. Toddlers try to do adventurous things with confidence such as balancing on beams

and climbing carefully on the climbing frame in the rain. The youngest children are encouraged to negotiate and enjoy splashing in puddles and walk on uneven surfaces.

68. Staff know each child very well. The nurturing key person system helps children form very secure attachments. Key people greet the children with warmth and sensitivity, holding their hands and talking to them at child height. The high standard of care given to each child promotes their wellbeing and independence most effectively.
69. Staff help children to lead a healthy lifestyle from the very beginning of their time in the setting. They are provided with high-quality home-cooked food, access to fresh drinking water and healthy snacks. Mobile babies enjoy waving to the nursery chef when they walk down the corridor.
70. Hygiene practices ensure that the personal needs of children of all ages are met appropriately. Staff teach children to become increasingly independent in managing their personal needs. Staff encourage older children to understand the need for, and the importance of, hand washing before mealtimes. Parents are supported to understand how to help their child.
71. Staff follow and promote strict guidelines about the use of mobile phones, photography and media. All staff give high priority to safeguarding and are aware of their responsibilities to ensure they meet the statutory requirements for safeguarding, welfare and learning and development.
72. The setting values and promotes equality and diversity and prepares children successfully for life with a suitable range of resources and room displays. Age-appropriate activities are swiftly planned to challenge stereotypical behaviours when children demonstrate these.
73. As staff encourage children to share and take turns, children learn to respect and care for one another. Staff are positive role models and respectfully seek consent from children before attending to their personal needs.
74. British values of fairness, tolerance and kindness towards one another underpin the setting, as seen in the way displays consistently make reference to these values.

Leadership and management

75. Leadership and management are outstanding.
76. The strong direction from the leadership team results in an enthusiastic team of staff who share the ambitious vision to provide high-quality education and exemplary care practices.
77. Leaders focus on improving practitioner's knowledge of the areas of learning and understanding of how children learn to enhance the teaching of the curriculum and appropriate use of assessment.
78. Staff are well qualified. Leaders monitor their performance carefully through appraisals and supervision meetings, which enable staff to discuss issues including their own wellbeing. Staff feel very well supported.
79. The setting has strong links and engages effectively with parents. Responses to the survey and discussions reveal that parents have an extremely positive view of the setting. They reported that they feel very well informed about the progress their child is making.

80. Leaders know the children very well and respond quickly to the needs of children, including those who have pupils who have SEND. The setting accesses specialist help when required together with outside agencies. Thorough systems are in place to ensure that every child's needs are met. The needs of the setting are well known and understood by the school governors.

81. Leadership and management ensure that all staff are updated on matters of child protection and safeguarding. They are clear in their responsibility to fulfil the statutory duties, for example under the Equality Act 2010.

Safeguarding

Safeguarding is effective.

Recommended next steps

- To continue to monitor, review and ensure the consistent implementation of the curriculum across the provision.

The extent to which the school meets the requirements of the early years foundation stage

The school's registered provision for childcare meets the requirements of the Childcare Act 2006.

School details

School	Abbot's Hill School
Department for Education number	919/6000
Registered early years number	EY490982
Registered charity number	311053
Address	Bunker's Lane Hemel Hempstead Hertfordshire HP3 8RP
Website	abbotshill.herts.sch.uk
Proprietor	Abbot's Hill School Limited
Chair	Mr Debashis Dasgupta
Headteacher	Mrs Kathryn Gorman
Age range	0–16
Number of pupils	418
Number of children in the early years registered setting	56
Date of previous inspection	January 2020

Information about the school

82. Abbot's Hill is an independent day school, divided into three sections: nursery, prep and senior. The school is registered as a single-sex school for female pupils from Reception, with boys and girls in the Nursery. The school was opened on its present site in Hertfordshire in 1912. It is a registered charity overseen by a board of governors. Since the previous inspection, the wider leadership team has undergone significant change with the majority of middle managers being new in post, as well as changes within the safeguarding and pastoral team and a new chair of governors appointed in 2022.
83. There are 65 children in the early years, which includes a separately registered co-educational setting for children from six months to 4 years.
84. The school has identified 110 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities. A very small proportion of pupils in the school have an education, health and care (EHC) plan.
85. English is an additional language for 74 pupils though many of these are bilingual children.
86. The school states that its aims are to foster a community in which all individuals are inspired to live purposeful and fulfilling lives and to have the space to truly be themselves while remaining true to its founding values of strength and character.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

7 November 2023 to 9 November 2023

87. A team of six inspectors visited the school for two and a half days. The onsite inspection was quality assured by a monitor from ISI and the early years registered setting inspection was quality assured by Ofsted.
88. Inspection activities included:
- observation of lessons and other activities
 - learning walks with senior leaders
 - discussions with the chair and other governors
 - discussions with school leaders, managers and staff
 - discussions with pupils
 - observation of registration periods and assemblies
 - visits to the learning support area and facilities for physical education
 - scrutiny of, and discussion about, pupils' work
 - examination of a range of policies and documentation provided by the school
89. 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.

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