

St John's Special School and College

Austin Canons, Bedford Road, Kempston, MK42 8AA

Inspection dates 17–18 September 2014

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected
	This inspection:	Outstanding 1
Leadership and management	Outstanding	1
Behaviour and safety of pupils	Outstanding	1
Quality of teaching	Outstanding	1
Achievement of pupils	Outstanding	1
Early years provision	Good	2
Sixth form provision	Outstanding	1

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school.

- Leaders, managers and governors are highly ambitious for the school and have a clear vision for its future development.
- Senior leaders' high expectations, combined with excellent opportunities for staff training, promote outstanding teaching and achievement.
- The school gathers a great deal of information about pupils' needs and progress. Teachers use this very well in planning lessons that match the next steps in pupils' development.
- Achievement is outstanding because a high proportion of students make more progress than expected. Pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties and those with autistic spectrum disorders do exceptionally well.
- Pupils enjoy school a great deal and have excellent attitudes to learning. Their behaviour and safety are outstanding.
- Pupils are valued as individuals and the school does much to raise their self-esteem. It promotes their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development outstandingly well.
- The curriculum closely reflects the learning needs of the pupils and prepares them extremely well for taking the fullest possible role in society.
- The sixth form is outstanding. It is the 'jewel in the crown' of the school's work. There is an excellent match between learning opportunities provided and students' individual hopes for the future.
- The Early Years Foundation Stage is good. New early years accommodation is currently being built.

Information about this inspection

- The inspection team visited 22 lessons, many jointly with members of the senior leadership team. The inspectors visited the school's annexe at Biddenham International School and the sixth form study centre, Stewart House.
- An inspector had lunch with a group of pupils, inspectors talked informally with pupils and listened to a number of pupils read.
- Meetings were held with the executive principal, the interim headteacher, other members of the senior leadership team and with some other staff with responsibility for areas of the school's work. The lead inspector met with six members of the governing body.
- The inspection team considered the four responses to the online survey (Parent View) and looked at parents' comments in home-school books and at pupils' annual reviews. Inspectors took into account 91 completed staff questionnaires.
- The inspectors observed the school's work and looked at a range of documentation, including records of pupils' progress, planning for individual pupils' learning and for managing their behaviour. They sampled pupils' work, looked at records of leaders' checks on teachers work and at documents relating to safeguarding.

Inspection team

Margaret Goodchild, Lead inspector	Additional Inspector
Margaret Jones	Additional Inspector
Sandra Teacher	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- St John's Special School and College converted to become an academy on 1 September 2011. When its predecessor school, St John's School, was last inspected by Ofsted, it was judged to be outstanding.
- This is a school for pupils with severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties. A high proportion of the pupils have complex needs and an increasing proportion have autistic spectrum disorders. All pupils have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan.
- Some of the students at Key Stage 4 and most in the sixth form are based at the school's annexe at Biddenham International School and Sports College. Some students in the sixth form spend much of their time at Stewart House, which is a sixth form study centre shared with Biddenham.
- The proportion of pupils eligible for the pupil premium is a little above average. (This is government funding for pupils known to be eligible for free school meals or who are looked after by the local authority.)
- The long-serving headteacher who retired in July 2014 is continuing to lead the strategic development of St John's in the role of executive principal. An interim headteacher, who was previously an assistant headteacher at the school, took over day-to-day leadership at the beginning of this term. The school intends to appoint a permanent headteacher later this year though the executive principal will remain in post.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Build on existing strengths in teaching and enable pupils to make even better progress by:
 - drawing on best practice in other settings to inform the development of the new accommodation and outdoor area in the early years
 - making sure that teachers' expectations are always high so that they do not miss any opportunities to extend pupils' learning
 - simplifying the way information about the school's strengths and areas for development are shared with staff and governors, especially in relation to the quality of teaching.

Inspection judgements

The leadership and management are outstanding

- Leaders are ambitious for the pupils and highly committed to preparing them as well as possible for life after school. A culture of high expectations underpins pupils' achievement and personal development, and systems for promoting positive behaviour are very well established.
- Senior leaders continuously work to make the school as effective as possible and they have a clear vision for its further development. The current arrangement, with an executive principal and interim headteacher, is providing increased opportunities for leaders to look creatively at the best way forward for the school.
- Members of the senior leadership team are dynamic and enthusiastic. They work very well together and receive good support from other leaders, for instance, those responsible for subject areas.
- Leaders conduct rigorous checks on teachers' work and provide clear information to individual teachers on their performance, focusing on strengths and areas for development. Teaching staff have excellent opportunities to develop their skills through training and involvement in research. A number of teachers are doing masters degrees, including in autistic spectrum disorders in response to the increase in the number of pupils with this type of difficulty.
- The school has thorough systems in place for the assessment and tracking of pupils' progress. It has worked with several other leading special schools to moderate its assessments of pupils' learning. The removal of National Curriculum levels has little impact on the school, as nearly all pupils are working at P levels. Assessment anyway focuses very much on the progress pupils make against their individual learning targets which are broken into small steps.
- The school works exceptionally well in partnership with Biddenham International School and Sports College and with local businesses to extend learning opportunities for its students. It works very closely with parents, involving them and providing a regular flow of information about their children's learning. The school has excellent relationships with a range of other agencies and therapists.
- The curriculum is broad and highly relevant to pupils' needs. An excellent range of learning opportunities reflects the needs of the pupils, backed up very well by specialist resources and facilities. As pupils move up the school, staff provide them with outstanding advice and support in making choices about their options and plans for the future.
- An extensive programme of enrichment activities, trips and residential visits, support pupils' achievement and their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. The school supports a school in Kenya and celebrates its own multicultural intake as well as supporting pupils in taking as full a role as possible as citizens of the United Kingdom.
- The school uses its primary sport funding very effectively. This has given pupils greater access to specialist sports coaching, which has increased their skills in football, cricket and tennis. Pupils have gained added confidence in the water when swimming, experienced more after-school sports clubs and taken part in games with other schools, including attendance at the East of England Games.
- The executive principal and senior leaders hold regular meetings with managers and staff to discuss school improvement and provide detailed information to the governing body. Nevertheless, communication about strengths and areas for development in teaching is not as clear and simple as it could be to ensure everyone knows exactly what needs to be done to raise achievement further.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - The governing body is very active and makes a good contribution to the school's work. It has been instrumental in the school's continued success since gaining academy status three years ago. Governors bring a wealth of professional expertise to their role in supporting the school and share leaders'

ambition for the future.

- The governing body ensures that the school is financially stable and members gather information for themselves through visits to the school in order to hold leaders to account. They have a clear understanding of how the school promotes tolerance and prepares pupils for life in modern Britain.
- Senior leaders share detailed information about the management of teachers' performance with the personnel and curriculum committee of the governing body, whose members have the most detailed knowledge of the school's effectiveness. Other governors are not as clear as they might be about the quality of teaching or what could be done to make it even better.
- Governors meet their statutory duties including for the safeguarding of pupils.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are outstanding

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding. Pupils enjoy school a great deal and their positive attitudes to learning contribute greatly to their achievement. The attendance rate is above average and nearly all absences are for medical reasons.
- Staff are highly skilled in managing pupils' behaviour and the school has effective systems for monitoring any behavioural incidents. It makes only occasional use of fixed-term exclusions and has very effective methods for supporting pupils whose difficulties mean they sometimes exhibit challenging behaviour. As a result, pupils learn and play in a calm and harmonious environment despite the high level of need.
- The school's work to keep pupils safe and secure is outstanding. The high quality care and support the school provides ensures that pupils feel very safe and have trusting relationships with the staff. As pupils get older and develop greater independence, the school does all that it can to make them aware of how to keep themselves safe. It conducts thorough risk assessments for activities that take place in the local community and ensures pupils all learn about using computers safely.
- Pupils are happy and relaxed and the school's records show that there is no evidence of any bullying. This is because staff know and value pupils as individuals and they, in turn, learn to treat one another with kindness and respect. Relationships are excellent throughout the school.
- Lunch and break times are exceptionally well organised. In the dining room, staff provide excellent supervision and support to pupils, encouraging good manners and social skills. In the primary and secondary play areas, there is excellent outdoor provision, with zoned areas for age-appropriate activities designed to improve pupils' co-ordination and movement.

The quality of teaching is outstanding

- Teachers and teaching assistants are highly knowledgeable about the learning needs of the pupils in their classes and about how best to support their development.
- Almost without exception, lessons are very well planned so that activities closely reflect the next steps in pupils' progress and their individual targets. For example, the task for more-able pupils in a mathematics lesson involved answering word problems and doing subtraction while those working at a more basic level developed their counting and matching skills.
- Teaching assistants are used to very good effect, and both teachers and their assistants provide pupils with a great deal of individual encouragement and support. This instils in them a love of learning and a belief that they can succeed.
- The school has highly developed methods for promoting pupils' communication skills. Staff use a wide variety of approaches to help pupils to understand, including signing, pictures, objects and symbols. The school makes sure that individual pupils have the right equipment, including technological aids, to make the most of their engagement with learning. For example, a pupil who was unable to use speech to answer the teachers' questions was able to operate a technological aid that 'spoke' his reply for him.

- Very occasionally, teachers' expectations are not high enough to enable all pupils to make rapid progress. When this happens, they do not always move pupils on quickly enough to new activities when they have succeeded with a task, they miss opportunities to introduce pupils to new words linked to an activity or do not write key words on the interactive white board for those who can read.

The achievement of pupils is outstanding

- Achievement is outstanding because a high proportion of pupils make better progress than expected in reading, writing, speaking and listening and mathematics. Other pupils nearly all make at least the expected amount of progress.
- The achievement of pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties is a particular strength of the school. The high staff-to-pupil ratio means that these pupils receive a great deal of stimulation and interaction with adults which promotes their learning and development exceptionally well. They develop ways of expressing themselves, making choices and taking an active part in lessons through gesture, movement and vocalising.
- The increasing numbers of pupils with autistic spectrum disorders make outstanding progress. This is because staff are highly skilled in managing the autistic behaviour which can jeopardise their progress to a minimum through providing a learning environment and approaches ideally suited to each pupil. This enables the pupils to concentrate on their work and make continuous progress.
- The progress of pupils with severe learning difficulties is consistently good or better. Some of these pupils are the more-able in the school and they have good opportunities to develop their reading, writing and mathematical skills. As they get older, these pupils increasingly apply their skills to real-life situations, for instance, using money independently in local shops and writing using words and/or symbols.
- Pupils have regular opportunities to develop their reading skills and those who read aloud to inspectors showed a clear understanding of phonics (the sounds that letters make). More-able pupils become confident readers, often reading with understanding and expression.
- Pupils' excellent progress in communication is closely supported by work with the speech and language therapist. Work with physiotherapists and other specialists ensures that the individual physical, medical and sensory needs of the pupils are met very well. This strong teamwork does much to support their achievement and personal and social development.
- Pupils who receive support through pupil premium funding make at least as much progress as their classmates. This is because the school matches this spending very carefully to pupils' individual needs, for example, purchasing electronic tablets for pupils who would benefit from the facilities they provide.
- Older pupils and students in the sixth form make excellent progress in developing independent living skills and learning about the world of work. For instance, they gain skills in horticulture, looking after the environment, arts and crafts and performing arts. By the time they leave, all students gain recognised qualifications in communication, numeracy, information and communication technology and personal and social education. Students meet with a high level of success in moving on to college when they leave St John's.

The early years provision is good

- Children quickly settle into the Early Years and develop confidence as learners. At the time of the inspection, some children had started school very recently. They readily took part in activities because the staff had quickly made them feel safe.
- Most children make good or better progress in their learning. Children make excellent progress in their personal, social and emotional development and in their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. They make great strides in their communication and physical development in preparation for the next

stage of their education.

- Systems for assessing children's needs when they join the school are very thorough and staff work extremely well with parents and other agencies in identifying children's learning difficulties.
- Teaching in the early years is good and staff work closely with therapists in meeting children's needs and ensuring their emotional health, safety and well-being. Teamwork between teachers and teaching assistants is strong and activities are well planned.
- Leadership and management of the early years are good. The school identified that the accommodation and outdoor area did not promote children's learning as well as they could. New early years accommodation is currently being built to include an extended outdoor area. Leaders are exploring ways of developing the new outdoor area to best meet children's needs and ways of using the improved facilities to enrich teaching and learning.

The sixth form provision

is outstanding

- Students achieve exceptionally well in the sixth form and the school does everything possible to prepare them for the next stage of their lives. The matching of learning programmes to the aspirations of individual students and the way they are prepared for life after school are exemplary.
- The curriculum provides students with exceptionally good opportunities to develop their basic skills and take part in work-related activities, including work experience in the local community, to increase their employability.
- Having the sixth form annexe on the Biddenham International School campus and sharing the sixth form study centre with students in mainstream settings contribute greatly to St John's students' academic and personal achievement. They have access to many additional facilities on the Biddenham site and excellent opportunities to socialise with students from mainstream settings. This helps to promote their independence and increases their confidence.
- Teaching is outstanding, with work matched extremely well to students' individual needs. The school closely tracks students' achievement to make sure they meet their challenging targets.
- The behaviour and attitudes of students in the sixth form are outstanding, reflected in their high attendance rate. Students are confident and co-operative, helpful and supportive towards one another. They gain great enjoyment from the activities the school provides and take pride in their work, for instance, writing neatly and carefully in the diaries where they record their learning.
- Rigorous systems ensure that students are kept safe, including when they undertake work experience. Students receive a great deal of support in learning how to keep themselves safe as they become increasingly independent, including through travel training.
- Leadership and management of the sixth form are outstanding. The school is relentless in its work to improve and develop opportunities for students.

What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>

School details

Unique reference number	137469
Local authority	Bedford Borough
Inspection number	448146

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Special
School category	Academy special converter
Age range of pupils	2–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	155
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	34
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Kirsten Rimmer
Headteacher	Amanda Rizzo (Interim Headteacher)
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected
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