

School inspection report

28 to 30 November 2023

Summerhill School

Westward Ho

Leiston

Suffolk

IP16 4HY

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. Summerhill School's distinctive approach to education is understood and implemented by a committed team of leaders and staff. It is highly successful in developing pupils' emotional intelligence and social awareness. Because of the individual attention they receive and the nurturing environment of a close-knit boarding community, pupils quickly become confident, self-aware young people.
2. As a result of the individualised curriculum and well-planned teaching, pupils develop into effective learners who produce work of a high standard. Pupils achieve well when undertaking projects of their own choosing.
3. The leadership's underpinning philosophy is 'freedom not licence'. Pupils choose which lessons and activities to attend and younger children, in particular, learn through play. Pupils develop their understanding of literacy and numeracy through the practical application of these skills across a range of subjects. Pupils are encouraged to learn through the choices they make and to appreciate the importance and consequence of the decisions they make.
4. There is a suitable curriculum for relationships and sex education (RSE). However, some elements of the teaching about relationships are not compulsory, and it is not always clear to staff whether there are gaps in pupils' knowledge and understanding.
5. School leaders have good understanding of risk and ensure that appropriate measures are in place to mitigate them. Protocols for the oversight of risk assessments for trips and visits are adequate but they vary in detail and quality.
6. Leaders provide suitable arrangements for looking after the needs of pupils who are sick or injured, but the protocols for the isolation of sick boarders are not clear.
7. Because leaders afford pupils the opportunity of shaping rules and laws in their community, pupils understand the importance of accepting responsibility for their behaviour and regulating it accordingly.
8. The central pillar of the community is the school meeting. Here, pupils have a genuine voice in the running of the school and the maintenance of a just and fair community. This provides pupils with a heightened appreciation of democracy, decency and fairness.

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:

- track pupil attendance at relationships and sex education sessions in order to identify and fill gaps in pupils' knowledge and understanding
- ensure the consistent quality of risk assessments for trips and visits
- ensure that there are clearly understood protocols in place for the isolation of sick boarders

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

9. Proprietors, senior leaders and staff are passionate about upholding the school's unique heritage, ethos and aims. These pervade all aspects of school life. At the heart of the school's ethos is a determination to promote pupils' wellbeing by defending their right to make their own choices and grow at their own pace. In doing so, they ensure that pupils acquire the skills to make informed decisions about the paths they want to follow, both as learners and as members of the community.
10. Leaders and proprietors protect pupils physically and emotionally through a close oversight of all arrangements that impact on their welfare. Through regular meetings and careful supervision, they closely monitor safeguarding practice and ensure that staff to whom they delegate responsibility manage matters relating to health and safety effectively. This includes an appropriate knowledge of boarding requirements and how these are linked to pupils' wellbeing. Consequently, pupils feel safe and well cared for. The school liaises with the local safeguarding partnership and other agencies as required.
11. Senior leaders have carefully considered the risks associated with a school where strategic and daily decisions are determined by pupils and staff. Pupils effectively have the majority vote and they are free to choose how they spend their time. Underpinning the ethos of the school is the notion of 'freedom not licence', an over-arching principle which, alongside a system of non-negotiable safety controls, ensures pupils' wellbeing. In practice, pupils learn to make mature and sensible choices.
12. There is a clear understanding surrounding the management of risk within an ethos where leaders want children to encounter and develop their own respect for hazards. Leaders permit pupils to participate in some activities that have been risk assessed in locations that are well maintained, keeping a more distant, but effective supervision. Current arrangements for the risk assessment of educational visits and trips are adequate, but there are variations in the quality of risk assessments.
13. Leaders ensure that all pupils are treated equally, regardless of age, gender or disability, by requiring teachers to plan for pupils' learning on an individual basis. Consequently, everyone has equal access to the curriculum, including those who have special needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Where necessary, leaders arrange suitable adjustments to premises and accommodation to cater for physical disabilities.
14. Leaders provide parents and pupils with information in policies and articles on the school's website and through a wide range of literature charting the history and philosophy behind the principles underpinning the school's operation. Policies and other documentation are also available for parents to request, including reports about pupils' progress.
15. There is an appropriate complaints procedure in place. Leaders willingly deal with any concerns or queries so that issues are resolved promptly and openly through discussion.

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

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

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

17. Leaders' approach to curriculum design is based on the philosophy of educating the whole child. Consequently, the curriculum embraces everything that happens within the school. Leaders place equal emphasis on social and emotional development and academic learning. The latter is achieved through lessons which enable pupils across all age groups to make progress in the mandatory areas.
18. Because leaders supplement the curriculum with opportunities for pupils to make decisions about school routines and to learn through play, project work and independent study, pupils have control over the direction they take in their learning. This means, for example, that if a pupil wants to pursue a particular academic interest, whether it be learning about psychology, speaking an additional modern foreign language or undertaking an advanced metalwork project, the school will provide the expertise and resources to facilitate these studies.
19. Overall, pupils make good progress, and develop their skills and knowledge in the required areas. Younger pupils build and apply their skills in numeracy and literacy in a range of contexts and applications. Older pupils make significant progress in those areas where they have chosen to make themselves experts because they both have a strong motivation to do so and receive the guidance of their teachers. A wide range of activities, often arranged and led by pupils, ensures that they develop skills in many areas, including music, gardening, debating and philosophy.
20. Central to the Summerhill philosophy is the notion that children should develop at their own pace and make choices about what and when they learn. The absence of adult expectations can at times mean that younger pupils do not complete tasks or projects when conventional wisdom might see a need for more resilience or perseverance. However, these skills develop over time, as their sense of perseverance increases. Older pupils develop greater fortitude and determination in their learning.
21. Leaders tailor learning to the aptitudes and preferred styles of individual pupils. This approach is not confined to pupils who have SEND, although teachers cater for their needs in a sensitive and effective manner. It extends to all pupils. Teachers track and monitor pupils' progress and how to meet their individual needs in staff meetings. The outcome is that pupils develop their knowledge, skills and understanding at a pace which is comfortable and appropriate for them. They become effective learners who learn on their own terms.
22. Leaders ensures that pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) receive effective individual or small group teaching as appropriate. This, combined with the emphasis given to discussions and community interactions, leads to rapid development of their fluency in English.
23. Teaching enables pupils to make good progress. Teachers are skilful in their choice of activities and resources, ensuring that pupils are both fully engaged and have a range of stimuli to advance their learning. Teachers have secure subject knowledge and have a great passion for their subjects. The physical environment that teachers create in their classrooms is particularly conducive to effective learning. Teaching spaces are calm, welcoming and attractive.
24. Because teachers are generous with their time and offer extra support beyond normal timetabled lessons, pupils are often able to consolidate their learning on a one-to-one basis. The school's ethos and approach ensure that teaching is characterised by supportive relationships built on mutual respect so that behaviour in class is almost always of a high standard. A strong spirit of co-operation prevails.

25. In non-examination classes, teaching encourages pupils to focus on those areas of the curriculum that capture their imagination. This is particularly so in creative subjects. Pupils take full advantage of these opportunities, applying themselves assiduously to produce work in drama, art and technology of a high standard.

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

26. All the relevant Standards are met.

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

27. Summerhill's approach enables pupils to develop their self-knowledge, self-esteem, and self-confidence. The freedom they enjoy enables pupils of all ages and abilities, whatever their needs, to develop skills that are often advanced for their age. This fosters maturity due to the need to make informed decisions which impact on others. Most pupils board at some point, which gives them an understanding of the importance of community.
28. The sense of community that leaders model and instil means that pupils' relationships with each other and with adults are highly positive. Leaders work hard to make children feel valued and be comfortable in themselves, gaining confidence in their talents along the way. Staff promote pupils' spiritual development by encouraging imagination and creativity. They expect pupils to reflect on their own beliefs and perspective on life and to develop a curiosity and fascination for the world around them. This can be seen in pupils' learning, their play and the individual projects they pursue.
29. Pupils' moral understanding develops through a system of shared leadership which involves every member of the community. Everyone is responsible for the wellbeing of others. In the school meeting, pupils are able to raise concerns about the behaviour of their peers and vote on appropriate sanctions. This forum is an effective tool in regulating behaviour and establishing rules and expectations. As a result of this, the conduct of pupils is measured and considerate. Potential bullying incidents are prevented before they can escalate.
30. Leaders provide appropriate facilities and opportunities for pupils to develop skills in physical education through provision for football, tennis, swimming and dance. Leaders facilitate participation in a range of activities such as biking, skateboarding, frisbee competitions and numerous games organised by the pupil-led social committee. As a result, pupils embrace an active and healthy lifestyle, enjoying the freedom to explore the outdoors and learn the skills of problem-solving, negotiation and self-discovery.
31. Staff teach personal, social and health education (PSHE), which incorporates relationships and sex education (RSE), across the curriculum. Much of the social education that pupils receive happens through discussions in formal school meetings. Additional PSHE teaching takes the form of talks given by houseparents, visitors and senior staff. Leaders have drawn up a formal curriculum for the teaching of RSE which allows for the teaching of key information and the opportunity for pupils to explore issues and values. Whilst the core content is compulsory, some aspects are not, so that leaders can not always readily identify gaps in pupils' knowledge.
32. Leaders are keen that supervision by staff should not be intrusive in order to support the school's emphasis on personal freedom and self-regulation. In making this conscious choice, leaders are aware of the associated risks. Consequently, they advocate and implement discreet vigilance, aided by the high ratio of staff to pupils.
33. Health and safety and fire safety arrangements are well-managed through the appropriate maintenance of premises and equipment. Pupils know what action to take in the event of a fire.
34. There is a suitable programme of induction for new boarders. Boarding houses are comfortable, and welcoming. Boarders' privacy is respected. Boarders have extensive opportunities to involve

themselves in activities both on and off-site. The food is of a suitable standard. Boarders have numerous formal and informal opportunities to feedback their views and suggestions for improvement to leaders.

35. Leaders monitor pupils' attendance in line with statutory guidance. Leaders take appropriate precautions to protect children, potentially missing education through the effective maintenance of admission and attendance registers. Protocols are in place to manage the potential added risks caused by optional attendance in lessons.
36. Sufficient staff with appropriate first-aid training ensures that pupils receive prompt treatment if they are ill or injured. However, protocols are not clear for the isolation of boarders who are sick.

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

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

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

38. Leaders use pupils' educational experiences as opportunities for relevant learning, in particular, their participation in and contribution to the school community. As a result, pupils understand the way in which they fit into wider society. Pupils have an acute awareness of the responsibilities this brings, and they exercise them with maturity and integrity. Leaders draw on the experiences of a culturally diverse boarding community to encourage discussion and exploration of issues affecting pupils from different parts of the world. As a result, pupils are well informed and readily see both sides of an issue.
39. Leaders' commitment to the promotion of mutual respect and tolerance ensures that these are apparent in school life and the attitude of pupils towards each other. Leaders also promote pupils' awareness of the wider world by ensuring that pupils have access to outside news and they are aware of current affairs. Extra-curricular activities enable pupils to learn about and discuss issues of interest.
40. Pupils learn to understand and contribute to their locality, whether it be exploring environmental issues, researching access to facilities in the local community or contributing to it by organising musical performances. Pupils look beyond their community, for example in choosing to make donations to local and national charities. This enables pupils to appreciate the importance of service, which they first learn within the school community itself. Leaders provide pupils opportunities for leadership. For example, as ombudsmen, who act as a sounding board for pupil concerns or as members of the various committees which oversee recreational activities and events.
41. Pupils contribute in a purposeful way to shaping and ensuring observance of the school rules, known as the 'Summerhill Laws'. Pupils of all ages have the opportunity to chair the school meetings democratically and to contribute fully. They are principled and informed when judging others and pupils accept the judgement of their peers in a mature way. Most not only accept responsibility for rare incidents of poor behaviour but also learn from their mistakes. Pupils regard issues such as racism and bullying as abhorrent.
42. Pupils have a highly developed sense of right and wrong, which they transfer to their formal learning. This could be debating the morality behind current world conflicts or the aims and objectives of the League of Nations. The provision of opportunities to develop practical skills gradually prepares pupils for their future lives. This includes learning financial skills such as how to budget by managing a weekly cash allowance and heading behavioural investigations on behalf of the school meeting or preparing food and decorations for parties.
43. Leaders provide each pupil with an 'After Summerhill' advisor to explore issues such as careers, areas of interest, curriculum choices linked to desired qualifications and advice about future pathways. These one-to-one conversations enable pupils to make informed choices. These include the lessons they attend, the formal examinations they need to take and any other activities which they might consider to expand their skills and experience, thus ensuring that pupils are realistic in their aspirations.

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

44. All the relevant Standards are met.

Safeguarding

45. Leaders and proprietors have a well-informed and rigorous oversight of the school's safeguarding procedures, thus ensuring that they promote the welfare of pupils. Arrangements outlined in the school's safeguarding policy are in line with current statutory guidance.
46. The training provided by school leaders ensures that staff have a strong understanding of their roles and responsibilities. In particular, staff have a clear sense of the importance of vigilance in a community that is largely self-governed and where children have significant freedom. They understand the risks posed by radicalisation and extremism. Leaders and staff are knowledgeable about the processes involved in working with local and external agencies. Staff report incidents and disclosures that might affect a child's welfare promptly and assiduously and these are carefully recorded so that there is continuity of care.
47. The safeguarding system is supported and complemented by thrice-weekly school meetings, where pupils and staff come together to share concerns that might impact on safeguarding. This allows for effective whole-school education on what is acceptable or not. Pupils of all ages confidently challenge the behaviour of others in this public forum, which helps to ensure that pupil welfare is at the forefront of everyone's thinking.
48. Well-used avenues for pupils to share concerns exist at all levels. Clear policies ensure that pupils stay safe online, and compulsory 'chats' on the topic reinforce key messages in an age-appropriate manner. There are suitable filtering and monitoring mechanisms in place.
49. Leaders carry out appropriate checks on all adults before they begin to work or volunteer at the school and an accurate record of appointments is kept.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

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

School details

School	Summerhill School
Department for Education number	935/6016
Address	Westward Ho Leiston Suffolk IP16 4HY
Phone number	01728 830540
Email address	office@summerhillschool.co.uk
Website	www.summerhillschool.co.uk
Proprietor	Mr and Mrs Readhead Partnership
Principal	Mrs Zoë Readhead
Age range	5 to 18
Number of pupils	50
Number of boarding pupils	36
Date of previous inspection	5 – 6 June 2019

Information about the school

51. Summerhill School is a co-educational boarding school located in Leiston, Suffolk. Pupils are taught in mixed aged classes. The school is owned by a partnership of two proprietors, one of whom acts as the principal.
52. Boarders are accepted from the age of six years and are accommodated in one of five boarding houses according to their age.
53. The school has identified 18 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). A very small proportion of pupils in the school have an education, health and care (EHC) plan.
54. English is an additional language for 25 pupils.
55. The school states its aims are to offer a democratic, self-governing establishment where adults and children have equal status and where children can grow up happily, free from the anxieties of the outside world. It strives to enable its pupils to compromise, communicate, negotiate, assume responsibility and to gain empathy and consideration for the feelings of others.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

28 to 30 November 2023

56. A team of 4 inspectors and a shadow team inspector visited the school for two and a half days.

57. Inspection activities included:

- observation of lessons, some in conjunction with school leaders
- observation of registration periods and a school meeting involving pupils and staff
- observation of a sample of extra-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection
- discussions with the head, school leaders, managers and other members of staff
- discussions with pupils
- visits to the learning support area and facilities for physical education
- visits to boarding houses accompanied by pupils and staff
- scrutiny of samples of pupils' work
- scrutiny of a range of policies, documentation and records provided by the school.

58. 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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