

Summarised inspection findings

Ardfern School

Alexandria

26 August 2025

Key contextual information

Ardfern School is an independent special school located in the town of Alexandria, West Dunbartonshire. The governance and leadership team comprises of a Director, a Managing Director, a headteacher, a head of school and two depute heads of school.

The school's current roll is 33 children and young people, organised into eight classes ranging from P6 to S6. The school's current registration is for 60 children and young people aged nine to 18. All children and young people have been assessed as having additional support needs. Local authorities can request an education placement for children and young people at the school, following an assessment of needs.

2.3 Learning, teaching and assessment

satisfactory

This indicator focuses on ensuring high-quality learning experiences for all children and young people. It highlights the importance of highly-skilled staff who work with children, young people and others to ensure learning is motivating and meaningful. Effective use of assessment by staff and learners ensures children and young people maximise their successes and achievements. The themes are:

- learning and engagement
- quality of teaching
- effective use of assessment
- planning, tracking and monitoring

- Senior leaders and staff create a climate where most children and young people feel safe and welcome. Staff model positive behaviours to children and young people. They treat children and young people with sensitivity, understanding and respect in relation to their additional support needs. Staff take time to get to know children and young people to provide them with support. As a result, most children and young people improve their engagement in learning. Staff's approach to sustaining personalised, trusting relationships is a key factor in them creating the right emotional conditions for most children and young people to learn when in school.
- Overall, staff attend to children and young people's needs skilfully when they become dysregulated or distressed. Staff's one-to-one relationships, awareness of learning needs, and positive relationships ensure the majority of children and young people return to planned learning activities within a relatively short period of time. On occasion, children and young people become agitated and move towards confrontation with staff to avoid participating in a set task. Senior leaders should now ensure staff use the agreed techniques, approaches and strategies consistently when supporting children and young people to regulate behaviours.
- Teachers provide useful one-to-one support for children and young people who have gaps in their learning or feel they need to catch up. This is helping most children and young people participate positively in learning activities. The majority of teachers outline well the purpose, value and relevance of learning activities. They link well the intended learning to real life contexts that children and young people can relate to. This supports children and young people link the purpose of learning and the skills they develop to their chosen future employment ambitions. Overall, teachers need to improve the consistency of how they help children and young people understand the relevance and purpose of what they are learning.

- Senior leaders need now to develop more robust quality assurance to monitor the quality of learning and teaching across the school. They should now work with teachers to develop a shared understanding of what high quality learning and teaching looks like at Ardfern School. This includes ensuring that all school activities are purposeful, planned and offer progressive learning.
- In most classes, teachers provide learning opportunities using desk-based approaches. Across the school, the majority of children and young people respond positively to this approach as they prefer a predictable routine and class structure. However, other children and young people become disengaged when following worksheet and text-book instructions passively. There is scope for teachers to develop further their range of creative teaching approaches to increase more children and young people's curiosity, engagement and enthusiasm for learning when in class.
- The majority of teachers make effective use of questioning, time for reflection and developing discussion between young people. They judge pace and challenge well which results in the children and young people participating in these activities to improve their higher order thinking skills. Senior leaders should continue to work with teachers to develop their questioning skills further enhance young people's thinking.
- Overall, teachers support children and young people make effective use of digital technologies appropriate to the learning activity. This results in children and young people using digital technologies well to enhance learning across most curriculum areas. Teachers should build upon this work to support all children and young people to use digital technology to reduce any barriers to their learning. For example, teachers could use speech-to-text technology to support reluctant writers record their thoughts and ideas.
- Teachers have limited access to suitable outdoor learning spaces directly in the school grounds. As a result, they are not always able to enhance fully children and young peoples' planned and progressive curriculum experiences in environments within the school grounds. Staff do utilise useful and extensive outdoor environments across the local community and beyond to provide children and young people with activities and outdoor experiences. They should ensure that their use of these outdoor environments for activities and experiences are clearly linked to planned and progressive learning opportunities and fully evaluate the quality of learning taking place.
- Teachers use assessment strategies well to inform their judgements and support teachers to adapt learning to meet the individualised needs of children and young people. This helps them understand the progress children and young people make and identify strengths and next steps in learning. The majority of teachers use formative assessment approaches to determine accurately children's progress with learning. In the senior phase, teachers assess young people's progress and achievements well in relation to Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) National Qualifications (NQs). They have robust verification processes which helps to ensure that all staff understand national standards and supports successful external verification.
- A few teachers are making useful individual connections with peers in other schools. Senior leaders do not yet provide teachers with opportunities to participate in moderation activities beyond the school. As a result, moderation is not informing teachers' professional judgments well enough. Senior leaders should now support teachers to participate in moderation activities in the school and with colleagues from other schools.
- Teachers understand children and young people's individual learning needs and reflect these appropriately in planning. For example, children and young people have a relevant

Individualised Education Programme Report (IEPR). Teachers ensure that the IEPR contains appropriate learning targets for almost all curricular areas. Teachers also plan IEPR targets in areas such as communication and emotional regulation.

- Teachers ensure their forward planning provides coverage of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) experiences and outcomes for most curricular areas. Senior leaders meet frequently with each teacher to ensure that they are planning using experiences and outcomes and checking progress against National Benchmarks. They support teachers well to consider children and young people's progress in learning. Senior leaders should now ensure teachers' planning meets children and young people's entitlement to the BGE. For example, children and young people are not receiving their entitlements to progressive modern languages, music, drama or physical education programmes.
- School leaders have identified correctly the need to improve planning. Children and young people in the BGE have significant periods of time each day undertaking activities that are not sufficiently well planned or progressive. Senior leaders should work at pace now to ensure teachers increase children and young people's opportunities to participate in planned, progressive and purposeful learning.
- Teachers are using an online system increasingly well to support them track and monitor learning experiences across most subject areas. Teachers are beginning to provide valuable attainment data and information about individual young people. This helps teachers and senior leaders monitor and evaluate children and young people's progress. Senior leaders should continue as planned to support all teachers develop consistency when using the online system to record relevant attainment data and information.

2.1 Safeguarding and child protection

- The school submitted self-evaluation information related to child protection and safeguarding. Inspectors discussed this information with relevant staff and, where appropriate, children. In addition, inspectors examined a sample of safeguarding documentation. Areas for development have been agreed with the school and the proprietor.

3.2 Raising attainment and achievement

satisfactory

This indicator focuses on the school's success in achieving the best possible outcomes for all learners. Success is measured in attainment across all areas of the curriculum and through the school's ability to demonstrate learners' achievements in relation to skills and attributes. Continuous improvement or sustained high standards over time is a key feature of this indicator. The themes are:

- attainment in literacy and numeracy
- attainment over time
- overall quality of learners' achievement
- equity for all learners

Attainment in literacy and numeracy

- Overall, children and young people make better progress in literacy than numeracy, relative to their additional support needs. Most children and young people in the BGE make progress in literacy from beginning their placement at the school. A few children and young people make accelerated progress. The majority of children and young people make successful progress in numeracy. Senior leaders and teachers should now work to improve children and young people's numeracy progression through the BGE.
- In recent years, most young people attained an SQA NQ literacy course award at National 3 level or better. In numeracy, young people at the senior phase are demonstrating an improvement in SQA numeracy qualifications. Most young people attain an SQA NQ numeracy course awards at National 3 or better. Senior leaders should continue to support young people build upon this positive improvement to ensure that young people attain at the highest level possible.

Attainment in literacy and English

- Overall, children and young people's attainment in literacy and English is stronger in listening and talking and reading. In these areas, children and young people are achieving well. Overall, children and young people need more support now to improve their writing skills.

Listening and talking

- Children and young people are developing their listening and communication skills well showing strong progress from prior levels. They are able to speak clearly and express their needs and opinions with increasing confidence. Children and young people are able to express their own point of view. At first level, young people identify the purpose of key words and use this information correctly for specific purposes. At second level young people select relevant information and organise this in an appropriate way for the purpose and audience.

Reading

- Children and young people read during lessons using a variety of texts, work sheets and presentations to gather information. They develop their reading skills well. Children and young people seek support from staff, where appropriate, to read more challenging words or texts. Children and young people access a well-stocked library with the majority borrowing an increasingly diverse range of reading material. Overall, children and young people have improved their engagement with texts and reading for pleasure. For example, they are enjoying their participating in the school-initiated reading challenge. A few children and young people have developed a stronger interest in reading as a result.

Writing

- Overall, children and young people make satisfactory progress from prior levels in writing. They could accelerate their progress in writing further. Children and young people create texts of their choice using correct spelling rules and self-check techniques. They convey information and explore issues accurately, arguing their point of view and express their opinions. Children and young people now need to produce a wider range of writing, including producing extended texts for a range of purposes.

Numeracy and mathematics

- The majority of children and young people make positive progress in numeracy and mathematics. A minority of young people are making satisfactory progress. Overall, the minority of young people could achieve more.

Number, money and measure

- Children and young people estimate accurately using whole numbers. They round numbers correctly when problem solving and explain clearly their approach and rationale for their answers. Children and young people can place whole numbers and decimals in the correct order. They now need to develop further their understanding and use of fractions, multiplication and division facts appropriate to their CfE level. Children and young people identify and use money accurately. They are less confident in using and converting units of measurement, such as weight and capacity.

Shape, position and movement

- Overall, children and young people describe basic properties of shapes and objects using the correct words. They recognise common shapes in familiar 3-dimensional (3D) objects. Children and young people should continue to develop further their understanding and mathematical language for angles and the description of 2D shapes and 3D objects.

Information handling

- Children and young people present information and data using appropriate diagrams or graphs. They should continue to develop ways to display data using an increasing range of methods including Venn and Carroll diagrams. Children and young people would benefit from more experiences to build their understanding of probability and the likelihood of events taking place.

Attainment over time

- Using the school's own data, most children and young people increase or have similar attendance when comparing their attendance rates before their placement at Ardfarn begins. Just over half of the children and young continue to improve their attendance during their time at the school. The minority of children and young people have levels of attendance at or above 90%. Too many children and young people continue to have attendance levels below 80% which impacts upon their overall attainment. Senior leaders should continue to focus on approaches to raising attendance so that an increasing number of children and young people improve patterns of attendance over time.
- Data provided by senior leaders relating to exclusions rates is not yet accurate enough. Senior leaders need to ensure all instances of exclusion are now recorded in line with national guidance and expectations. However, between August 2024 and December 2024, the recorded rate of exclusion increased significantly. This was directly related to children and young people presenting with seriously disruptive behaviours. Senior leaders and staff have since been successful in reducing recorded exclusion rates since December 2024. This includes adapting children and young people's curriculum and considering different

approaches to learning that may be required. For example, they reviewed their PSE curriculum to meet the learning needs of young people more appropriately.

- Most children and young people in the BGE make satisfactory or better progress with their learning and engagement over time. These children and young people are developing their learning progressively across most curriculum areas. There is a need for senior leaders to ensure that children and young people make progress across all curriculum areas. Senior leaders should now analyse data and information provided more systematically. This should help them check that children and young people are making the best possible progress. This can also support them to identify children and young people who are ready to accelerate their learning and raise their attainment.
- Young people in the senior phase attain a range of relevant SQA NQs at National 3. For example, they attain awards in Numeracy, literacy, art, hospitality, craft, biology, history, media, admin, information and communication technology (ICT), and modern studies. Young people who continue their senior phase into S5 and S6 build upon prior attainment progressively moving through National 4 and National 5 level qualifications. A minority of young people could attain higher levels of NQs at an earlier point in their senior phase. Senior leaders and staff should ensure that young people have the opportunity to attain at a higher level where appropriate.

Overall quality of learners' achievements

- Children and young people develop a useful range of knowledge and skills when participating cross-curricular learning. They particularly enjoy developing skills and knowledge through creative whole school projects. For example, children and young people have undertaken learning linked to recycling, creative design, charity work and physical health. The majority of children and young people gain and improve a range of skills through these activities, in particular, improved teamworking and communication skills.
- In the senior phase, young people engage well in a range of useful work experience opportunities. They access work-based placements in the catering, childcare, agriculture, engineering, retail and hospitality industries. Feedback provided by employers demonstrates that young people improve their communication, time management and teamwork skills as a result of their time on the work-based placements. For a few young people, these placements have led to further training and post-school employment.
- Children and young people participate well in a range of national initiatives such as International Women's Day, Careers Week, National Apprenticeship week, Sports Relief and West Dunbartonshire's toy appeal. A few young people have been able to showcase and sell their own artwork at an art exhibition in Paisley. Senior leaders should now evaluate the impact and the quality of skills developed through these initiatives for all young people. They should increase children and young people's opportunities to work towards accreditation and recognition of their skills, where appropriate.

Equity for all learners

- All children and young people have experienced disruption to their learning and education prior to their enrolment in the school. Senior leaders and staff have a robust awareness of the social and economic context for children, young people and families. They use this information well to increase children and young people's participation in education from the point of enrolling at the school. Senior leaders ensure that there is no cost to the school day. Almost all children and young people participate in a range of activities beyond the classroom free from cost. All children and young people have access to free school meals and access to school clothing should they require this. As a result, children and young people across the school have no

financial barriers to accessing or engaging in educational experiences. They have all their resource needs met very well allowing them to focus on learning when in school.

- At points of transition for young people, staff provide helpful support to them to access training opportunities from selected partners. For example, a few young people were successful in their training and have achieved Saltire, Food Hygiene and Health & Safety in the Kitchen awards. Most young people achieve a positive post-school destination.
- Senior leaders and staff offer children and young people additional activities during the summer holiday period. This is helping children and young people who engage with the activities the opportunity to participate in enjoyable activities during the summer period. All costs for the summer programme are met by the school. Senior leaders should continue to engage with families to encourage an increasing number of children and young people to attend the additional summer activities.
- Senior leaders should ensure that they address the length of the school week for all children and young people. This will support senior leaders meet children and young people's full entitlements to education and has the potential to help children and young people in the BGE and senior phase improve or accelerate their attainment. In doing so, senior leaders should now work with teachers to review periods during the school week where no planned or progressive learning taking place. Children and young people in the BGE receive significantly fewer planned and progressive learning experiences than those in the senior phase. This should be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Explanation of terms of quantity

The following standard Education Scotland terms of quantity are used in this report:

All	100%
Almost all	91%-99%
Most	75%-90%
Majority	50%-74%
Minority/less than half	15%-49%
A few	less than 15%

Other quantitative terms used in this report are to be understood as in common English usage.