

Inspection of The Promise School

Dartmoor View, Okehampton, Devon EX20 1GH

Inspection dates:	17 and 18 June 2025
The quality of education	Inadequate
Behaviour and attitudes	Inadequate
Personal development	Requires improvement
Leadership and management	Inadequate
Previous inspection grade	Not previously inspected under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

The principal of this school is Gareth Howells. This school is part of Dartmoor Multi-Academy Trust, which means other people in the trust also have responsibility for running the school. The trust is run by the chief executive officer (CEO), Rachel Shaw, and overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by Peter Elliott.

What is it like to attend this school?

For many pupils, their educational experience at The Promise School has been hindered significantly by poor behaviour and weak attitudes to learning. The school's expectations of pupils' conduct and achievement are low. Pupils regularly opt out of learning and lessons are frequently disrupted. The approaches that staff use to help pupils manage their behaviour lack consistency. This has a negative impact on pupils' learning and their ability to make progress against the targets in their education, health and care (EHC) plans.

Some pupils do not trust or have confidence in the school's current provision for their education. Consequently, they say that, at times, they do not feel safe because of the conduct of their peers.

Pupils' academic learning is impeded because the school does not take account of their starting points or meet their special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The school is developing its curriculum to increase its ambition and effectiveness. It has started to raise its expectations of what pupils should know and be able to do. However, this work is in its infancy. Currently, pupils do not benefit from a well-designed curriculum that enables them to achieve well.

Pupils wider understanding of the world is increasing through the school's personal development offer. Pupils are starting to benefit from opportunities to develop beyond the academic curriculum. This includes experiences of the world of work, supported by independent careers advice, and a valued outdoor learning offer.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

Until very recently, the school's focus has had to be reactive to the day-to-day running of the school. There has been limited capacity for leaders at all levels to fulfil their roles of responsibility and gain a clear and accurate view of the school's provision. This has made leading and working at the school challenging.

The trust and the school recognise that their attempts to bring about improvements, since the school opened in September 2022, have not had the intended impact. They have not secured the oversight needed to identify and address weaknesses in the school's provision quickly enough. Furthermore, the lack of a shared vision and low expectations means that pupils continue to experience much change and uncertainty in their time at The Promise School. This further entrenches their often previously negative experience of education.

The current curriculum is not designed well enough. The school does not have an effective strategy to check pupils' knowledge or identify gaps in their learning. This is not checked when pupils start at the school or to inform staff about how well pupils progress through the curriculum. Consequently, the activities that pupils complete are not adapted well enough to enable them to learn successfully. The school identifies pupils' additional SEND needs and knows the barriers to learning that many pupils face. However, it has not

done enough to help pupils overcome these challenges. Staff have not had the necessary support and guidance that they need to support pupils with SEND.

The school has taken reactive steps to secure the academic success of some pupils. For example, those pupils in Year 6 and Year 11 who access end of key stage assessments and examinations. This is not sustainable long term. The school is developing a revised curriculum for the next academic year, but this is not having an impact on current pupils' learning.

Recently, the school has revamped its approach to teaching reading. This includes support for pupils in the secondary phase, who find reading difficult. However, this is not effective enough to increase pupils' enjoyment of reading or secure their phonics knowledge and reading fluency.

The school has not equipped staff well enough to manage pupils' poor conduct and weak attitudes to learning. Some staff say that they feel disempowered as a result. Some staff model effective relationships, routines and responses. However, this is not sufficient to make enough of an impact across the school. Many pupils show a lack of respect towards each other and staff. This includes the use of derogatory and misogynistic language.

The programme to support pupils' personal development goes a little way to mitigate weaknesses in other areas of the school and to help prepare pupils for their next steps. For example, this programme is strengthening pupils' understanding of how to maintain their physical and mental health. That said, the personal development offer lacks clarity. The school has not assured itself of how successful it is. This results in gaps in knowledge, such as a secure awareness of diversity and why this is important in modern society.

Staff are dedicated to their work at the school. A number of parents and carers are positive about the support from the school and the difference that this has made to family life. However, much of the school community, including staff, pupils and families, feel let down by the school's current provision.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- The school's expectations for pupils' behaviour and their attitudes to learning are low. This is exacerbated further by the school's lack of a consistent approach in how to challenge and respond to pupils' poor behaviour. The result is a school culture where pupils demonstrate a lack of respect to others, learning is regularly disrupted and the use of derogatory language is commonplace. The school must increase its expectations so that pupils have clear boundaries to encourage positive behaviour and attitudes to

learning. Staff must be supported in their understanding of these increased expectations so that they have the confidence and skills to adhere to them.

- The school has not ensured that its staff have the necessary knowledge and skills to support pupils with SEND. As a result, pupils do not get the precise, targeted support that they need to learn and develop successfully. Too often, this lack of SEND expertise increases pupils' barriers to learning so that they show their frustrations in their behaviour and attitudes. The trust must work with the school to enable the SEND expertise that is in place to be shared and understood fully, so that pupils get the provision that they need and deserve.
- The school's curriculum is not sufficiently developed. Furthermore, the systems to check pupils' progress through the curriculum and identify gaps in learning are not effective. This hinders pupils from building new learning successfully. The school must develop a well-sequenced and coherent curriculum in all subjects so that pupils can build securely on their prior learning and be fully prepared for their next steps.
- The school has not secured the strategic oversight needed to identify and address weaknesses in its provision quickly enough. As a result, many pupils experience a poor quality of education. The trust must support the school to continue the very recent growth in its capacity, so that it can stem the current decline in its standards, develop staff's knowledge and expertise and provide pupils with a high-quality education that meets their academic, social and emotional needs fully.
- The school has not established a shared vision and agreed values to support and foster the development of a positive school culture, which is aspirational for its pupils in all that they can achieve socially, emotionally and academically. At present, the school's current practice is impacting negatively on too much of its community, including pupils, staff and families. The trust must work with the school to enable it to swiftly stem the current decline, so that it can transform and provide a high-quality education for its pupils and improve the experience of the school for all.

HMCI strongly recommends that the school does not seek to appoint early career teachers. The position regarding the appointment of early career teachers will be considered again during any monitoring inspection we carry out.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, '[disadvantaged pupils](#)' is used to mean pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND); pupils who meet the [definition of children in need of help and protection](#); pupils receiving statutory local authority support from a social worker; and pupils who otherwise meet the criteria used for deciding the school's [pupil premium funding](#) (this includes pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years, looked after children (children in local authority care) and/or children who left care through adoption or another formal route).

School details

Unique reference number	149041
Local authority	Devon
Inspection number	10378980
Type of school	Special
School category	Academy free special school
Age range of pupils	4 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	78
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Peter Elliott
CEO of the trust	Rachel Shaw
Principal	Gareth Howells
Website	https://www.thepromiseschool.org.uk/
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this school

- All pupils have an EHC plan. Most pupils' EHC plans are for social, emotional and mental health needs. Many pupils have additional needs, including autism and ADHD.
- The school moved into its current building in the summer term of 2023. It was in temporary accommodation on two different school sites until this point.
- The school was purpose built for pupils with SEND, specifically social, emotional and mental health needs.
- The school has experienced some changes in leadership since opening in September 2022. The current principal has been in post since September 2023.
- The trust has recently appointed a new CEO and chair of the board of trustees.
- The school currently has pupils from Year 3 to Year 11 on roll.
- The school uses seven unregistered alternative provisions.

Information about this inspection

The inspectors carried out this graded inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. During a graded inspection, we grade the school for each of our key judgements (quality of education; behaviour and attitudes; personal development; and leadership and management) and for any relevant provision judgement (early years and/or sixth form provision). Schools receiving a graded inspection from September 2024 will not be given an overall effectiveness grade.

In accordance with section 44(1) of the Education Act 2005, His Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires special measures because it is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the school are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school.

- Inspections are a point-in-time evaluation about the quality of a school's education provision.
- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. The inspector discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- The inspectors carried out deep dives into these subjects: English, mathematics, personal, social and health education and science. For each subject, the inspectors visited a sample of lessons, spoke with pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- The inspectors met with the principal, the vice principal, the assistant principals, leaders for safeguarding and wider staff.
- The inspectors spoke with members of the trust, including the CEO, the chair and the vice-chair of the board of trustees.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, the inspectors: reviewed the single central record; took account of the views of leaders, staff and pupils; and considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils' interests first.
- The inspectors spoke with staff about their workload and well-being. They also took account of the responses to Ofsted's online survey for staff.
- Inspectors met with leaders who are responsible for attendance, SEND, behaviour and pupils' personal development.
- Inspectors looked at a range of policies and documentation relating to pupils' welfare and education. They observed pupils' behaviour on their arrival to school, during lessons and around the school.
- An inspector spoke with a sample of the unregistered alternative provisions that the school uses.
- Inspectors took account of the responses to Ofsted Parent View, including the free-text comments.

- The inspectors spoke with pupils about their experiences at the school. For some of these discussions, a member of staff was present to support the pupils. Inspectors considered the responses to Ofsted's online pupil survey.

Inspection team

Leanne Thirlby, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Richard Vaughan

Ofsted Inspector

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