

School inspection report

29 April to 1 May 2025

St Nicholas School

Hobbs Cross Road

Old Harlow

Essex

CM17 0NJ

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'.

Contents

SUMMARY OF INSPECTION FINDINGS	3
THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SCHOOL MEETS THE STANDARDS.....	4
RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS	4
SECTION 1: LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT, AND GOVERNANCE.....	5
THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SCHOOL MEETS STANDARDS RELATING TO LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT, AND GOVERNANCE	6
SECTION 2: QUALITY OF EDUCATION, TRAINING AND RECREATION	7
THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SCHOOL MEETS STANDARDS RELATING TO THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION, TRAINING AND RECREATION	8
SECTION 3: PUPILS’ PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING	9
THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SCHOOL MEETS STANDARDS RELATING TO PUPILS’ PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING	10
SECTION 4: PUPILS’ SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EDUCATION AND CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIETY.....	11
THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SCHOOL MEETS STANDARDS RELATING TO PUPILS’ SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EDUCATION AND CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIETY	12
SAFEGUARDING	13
THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SCHOOL MEETS STANDARDS RELATING TO SAFEGUARDING	13
SCHOOL DETAILS	14
INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL.....	15
INSPECTION DETAILS	16

Summary of inspection findings

1. Leaders promote pupils' wellbeing effectively. They maintain an environment in which pupils feel valued. The positive and constructive relationships formed between adults and pupils enable pupils to feel safe and confident in their school community.
2. Governors monitor the school effectively. They spend time at events, meet with pupils, staff and parents and attend regular board meetings to inform their effective oversight of the school and provide challenge and support to senior leaders to ensure that the Standards are met.
3. Risk assessments are typically effective in the way that they identify potential risks and put forward measures to mitigate these. However, risk assessments procedures are not consistently as thorough and effective as they could be across all areas of the school's provision.
4. Leaders promote a curriculum which provides continuity from early years through to Year 11. The curriculum informs effective teaching that ensures that pupils make good progress across the range of subjects. Teachers have good subject knowledge, understand their pupils' needs, deploy a suitable range of teaching methods and resources, and manage classroom behaviour effectively. However, teaching does not always provide appropriate levels of challenge for all pupils. Teachers' feedback to pupils typically informs them about how they can improve their work further, but is not consistently effective in this regard across all subjects.
5. Leaders use careful assessment and monitoring to understand the achievements of pupils and where these need to develop further. They utilise effective mechanisms to identify and support the needs of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) are monitored to ensure that additional help with their English is provided when required. As a result, these groups of pupils make good progress.
6. Pupils' behaviour in and out of lessons is consistently positive. Pupils demonstrate a clear sense of respect for others in an environment which encourages diversity and inclusion. Pupils are secure and relaxed in their school community.
7. A well-taught personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education programme establishes a firm set of principles in pupils' lives which reflects the school's aims and develops pupils understanding of British values such as the importance of mutual respect and the rule of law.
8. The curriculum further develops pupils' understanding of the world. Leaders and staff encourage pupils to extend their sense of mutual respect to the wider community. Pupils develop a range of skills which prepares them for future life in British society.
9. Leaders maintain a robust safeguarding culture. Safeguarding policies and procedures reflect the requirements of current statutory guidance.

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 all areas of the school's provision are subject to equally thorough and effective risk assessment procedures
- ensure that teaching consistently provides appropriate levels of challenge for all pupils
- ensure that teachers' feedback across all subjects informs pupils effectively about how they can improve their work further.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

10. Leaders ensure that the school's vision and values of resourcefulness, resilience and responsibility, are promoted through all aspects of school life. As a result, pupils develop a clear set of principles. Through careful and sensitive planning, leaders have created an environment in which pupils are valued as individuals, feel listened to and have their wellbeing supported and promoted effectively.
11. Governors maintain effective oversight of the school and have a clear and well-informed understanding of how the school operates. They undertake regular visits to the school and meetings with senior leaders, as well as scrutinising their reports about different aspects of the school's provision. Their role as critical friends provides appropriate support and challenge for senior leaders and ensures that leaders use good knowledge and skills to enable the school to meet the Standards.
12. Leaders develop and implement policies and procedures that meet the requirements of current statutory guidance. Leaders effectively track the performance of staff to ensure that they carry out their roles effectively in a supportive environment. For example, leaders review the results of assessments and other information about individual pupils' achievement and welfare to ensure that pupils' emotional wellbeing, as well as their academic attainment, is supported effectively.
13. Leaders reflect upon the performance of the school as part of their decision-making processes. They respond effectively to feedback and surveys about key areas of the school's work and determine which areas of the school's provision require development. Leaders then take action to bring about effective change.
14. Leaders maintain appropriate communication with external agencies, such as local safeguarding partners, the local police, and specialists who provide support for pupils who have SEND to actively promote and underpin the welfare of pupils.
15. Governors have collated a register of risks and leaders have created a comprehensive suite of risk assessments for a wide variety of areas, both in school and on educational visits. Leaders carefully consider actions to support pupils who may require elevated levels of care or support in particular circumstances. The management of risk is typically effective. For example, most risk assessments identify potential hazards and determine the appropriate action to mitigate the risk to pupils. However, not all areas of the school's provision are subject to equally thorough and effective risk assessment procedures.
16. The school provides parents with all required information, most of which is on the school's website. Parents receive regular written reports which provide useful information about their child's attainment and progress.
17. Leaders ensure that the school fully meets its obligations under the Equality Act (2010). An appropriate accessibility plan is in place that outlines how the school ensures that all pupils have access to the curriculum and school facilities. Leaders ensure that no pupils are discriminated against by any aspect of the school's provision.
18. A suitable three-stage complaints procedure is in place. Parental concerns and complaints are handled effectively by the most appropriate members of staff and formal complaints are elevated for the attention of senior leaders. These are handled in line with the written policy. Where

necessary, governors are appropriately involved. Leaders maintain securely detailed records of formal complaints and any actions taken as a result of these.

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

19. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

20. The curriculum contains a suitable range of subjects. Schemes of work are carefully planned to develop pupils' subject knowledge, skills and understanding methodically over time. Leaders base their curriculum planning around pupils' needs and the requirements of the GCSE specifications and ensuring continuity of provision across all subjects and ages. Leaders have carefully considered how pupils will prepare for GCSE examinations. They have organised the curriculum to enable pupils to choose their GCSE subjects at the end of Year 8, enabling them to study their chosen examination subjects over a three-year period. Leaders further enable pupils to make connections between different areas of the curriculum through a variety of trips and special focus days which encourage cross-curricular links, such as visits to Bletchley Park to consider mathematics and technology and senior trips to Barcelona to study languages and art together.
21. Specialist teaching enhances pupils' learning in particular subjects. For example, children in early years have physical education (PE) and music lessons taught by specialists as part of their weekly schedule, and specialist teaching in photography, business studies and astronomy extends pupils' learning in the senior school.
22. Leaders ensure that teaching promotes curiosity and engagement so that pupils have opportunities to develop a wide range of skills and knowledge. Teachers demonstrate good subject knowledge through providing clear explanations and clarifying misconceptions. They use an appropriate range of effective teaching methods and good quality resources to enhance pupils' learning. For example, pupils' skills and understanding in the lower school are extended through activities such as practical tasks in the woods and other outdoor learning experiences when appropriate. As a result, pupils' levels of engagement and curiosity are high, and pupils demonstrate enjoyment in the subjects they learn. However, teaching does not always ensure that tasks consistently challenge pupils appropriately. This is because consideration of pupils' prior attainment is not always used to plan their next steps as effectively as possible.
23. In the early years, teachers enable children to develop confidence when speaking and listening to peers and adults. Teachers enable children to understand the sounds that letters make and how numbers work. As a result, children develop their literacy and numeracy skills effectively. Children in the early years develop social and practical skills through engaging in appropriate activities and areas, such as the 'mud kitchen'.
24. Senior and middle leaders regularly monitor pupils' progress to plan actions and appropriate measures to support pupils' progress. Leaders ensure that a clear and robust process is in place to enable teachers to discuss their observations about the progress and requirements of pupils who have SEND. This leads to timely assessments, parental engagement, access to external advice and targeted support so that the needs of pupils who have SEND are met. Learning support assistants (LSAs) are effectively deployed to support individual pupils' needs.
25. Leaders monitor the needs of pupils who speak EAL and provide support for the development of their English skills where required. Technical vocabulary in each subject is provided for all pupils to support their understanding.
26. Leaders have developed an effective assessment framework which tracks pupils' performance in regular curriculum assessment tests. *Passports to Progress* are used by teachers and leaders to

support academic monitoring of pupils studying for GCSE examinations. These help to identify any additional learning needs and areas for further development to help teachers adapt their teaching to maximise pupils' readiness for examinations. Teachers typically provide pupils with feedback that contains clear and consistent advice about their next steps for improvement, which impacts positively on their progress. However, teachers' feedback to pupils is not consistently effective in this regard across all subjects.

27. Teachers form highly effective relationships with pupils. As a result, pupils feel well supported and are comfortable to ask for support and clarification when required. Classrooms are calm and focused as a result of effective behaviour management strategies deployed by teachers to ensure that pupils consistently engage with the tasks and learning at hand.
28. Leaders provide extra-curricular activities beyond the academic timetable. This enhances pupils' experiences and allows them to develop additional skills and knowledge across a range of areas. This programme includes additional support for pupils in a range of subjects, for example, clinics in science, geography, mathematics, art and photography. Pupils develop their skills in areas such as sports beyond those timetabled including basketball, tennis and boxing.

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

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

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

30. Through communication of high expectations and clear implementation of the behaviour policy, leaders ensure that pupils demonstrate consistently good behaviour in and out of lessons. Well-defined routines, visible staff presence and structured access to outdoor spaces, lead to pupils feeling secure throughout the school day. Teachers create a calm and nurturing environment in form rooms, which aids them in providing effective emotional support and care for pupils' wellbeing. Pupils approach adults, confident that their worries or concerns will be taken seriously. Leaders and staff make fair and effective use of rewards and sanctions, when required, to promote good behaviour.
31. Leaders foster a culture of kindness and mutual respect, where values, such as ambition and resilience, are shared openly. Leaders and staff treat pupils with respect and provide them with consistent encouragement. As a result, pupils exhibit high levels of self-confidence and self-esteem.
32. The personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education programme encourages pupils to engage in topics through a range of appropriate and effective teaching methods, supplemented by the use of external speakers for some areas of the scheme of work. Topics are continually adapted to meet the emerging pastoral needs of the pupils, such as the importance of sleep in relation to pupils' emotional wellbeing and specific health issues relating to male and female pupils.
33. Leaders respond promptly and constructively to any pastoral or attitudinal issues which may arise in the school. They use external programmes such as *Show racism the red card* to educate pupils about the damage that can be caused by prejudice and discrimination and reinforce the community's commitment to inclusion and respect.
34. Leaders consult parents when they make major changes to the relationships and sex education (RSE) curriculum. From the early years, children learn what contributes to positive relationships and as they develop through the school, themes of tolerance and understanding of others are further developed. As pupils develop through the school, they learn about privacy, consent and how toxic behaviours can affect relationships. As a result, leaders have created a homogeneous community where respect for those with differences is effectively embedded throughout the school. For example, pupils learn that it is acceptable to disagree with people's views as long as the disagreement demonstrates respect.
35. Pupils learn about diverse faiths and beliefs and discuss different views on spiritual ideas such as the possible nature of creation. Pupils are encouraged to appreciate non-material aspects of life through a range of activities. Leaders encourage pupils to value the environment around them and have introduced *walk and talk* sessions for older and younger pupils to share their thoughts and reflections whilst walking the grounds.
36. Leaders enable pupils' physical development through the physical education (PE) and games curriculum. This is characterised by a sense of healthy competition without undue pressure. The PSHE curriculum supports pupils' understanding of the positive impact that physical exercise and team sports can have on their positive mental health as well as benefiting their physical development.

37. The school premises are well maintained and contain suitable facilities. Health and safety checks and maintenance are carried out regularly by appropriate staff. Records of these checks are well maintained. Fire safety arrangements are effective. Regular fire evacuation drills ensure that pupils know what to do in an emergency.
38. Leaders ensure that staff receive appropriate first aid training, including paediatric first aid training in the early years. Leaders ensure that robust systems are in place to support pupils with pre-existing medical conditions, including through the effective use of individual care plans, as well as those who become unwell or get injured whilst at school. Appropriate protocols are in place for storing, administering and recording medicines.
39. The effective deployment of staff ensures that appropriate supervision of pupils is in place, including at break times and on school trips. Appropriate staff to child ratios are maintained in the early years at all times.
40. Registers for admissions and attendance are suitably maintained as required by current statutory guidance. Staff monitor attendance patterns and communicate with the local authority and parents to offer support for pupils when attendance is problematic. Leaders notify the local authority about pupils who start or leave the school outside of standard times of transition.

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

41. All the relevant Standards are met.

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

42. The school fosters in pupils a clear sense of social responsibility and respect for diversity, inclusion and equity through activities related to events such as International Women's Day, men's health week and inter-faith trips and charitable fundraising. These activities further support pupils' understanding of their responsibilities towards the wider community and reflect the school's aim for pupils to make a positive difference as young leaders.
43. The curriculum develops pupils' understanding and respect for people who are different from themselves. Leaders plan a series of visits to religious and cultural sites, for example, a synagogue, a mosque and a church, to further develop pupils' understanding of world religions and diverse cultures. Teaching promotes a sense of global awareness through the exploration of multi-culturalism and the impact of historical events such as invasions and settlements. As a result, pupils demonstrate tolerance of others' faiths and beliefs and are highly respectful of the views of others.
44. Pupils' moral understanding extends beyond their awareness of the school's rules. Pupils learn about the rule of law and local and national judicial systems and institutions. Pupils develop a firm understanding of democratic principles which underpin British society through topics explored in PSHE, tutor time, subject teaching and assemblies. Pupils further develop their experience of real-life democracy by activities such as writing to their local MP and visits to the Houses of Parliament.
45. Leaders ensure that pupils' voices are heard through their contribution of ideas to the school council. The school council then discusses issues, such as bullying, suggested improvements to facilities and catering, and ideas to develop the curriculum. Such activity fosters pupils' leadership and citizenship skills and develops their sense of agency through seeing actions taken by senior leaders in response to their ideas.
46. Children in the early years are supported in developing key social skills through purposeful play and collaborative activities, which lay firm foundations for mutual respect and personal responsibility. They learn to share, take turns and treat each other with consideration and courtesy.
47. Children in the early years learn about roles that help people in society, and pupils in the lower school learn about different types of work, including by listening to visiting parents talk about a range of careers. The formal careers education programme, which begins in Year 6, explores the application of academic subjects to different careers and pathways, while also challenging stereotypes. For example, pupils learn about how women can form successful careers in the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Pupils receive talks and practical workshops, about a range of possible careers. They learn about career and educational options beyond Year 11 at an onsite careers fair and through an online platform, where quizzes and access to open events at local colleges help support their choices.
48. Leaders carefully consider transition arrangements between year groups and phases to enable pupils to move to their next stage of education smoothly, including when leaving the early years for Year 1, getting ready to enter sixth-form settings and preparing for the world of work.
49. The PSHE programme ensures pupils develop economic and financial understanding. The role of finance in business is explored in activities such as focused trips, and pupils managing the financial

aspects of regular fundraising events. The PSHE curriculum supports pupils' economic understanding through learning about mortgages, savings, fairtrade and the stock exchange.

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

50. All the relevant Standards are met.

Safeguarding

51. Leaders have developed a school culture in which the safeguarding of pupils is of high priority. The safeguarding policy and procedures are suitable and reflect current statutory guidance.
52. Governors maintain clear oversight of safeguarding arrangements through regular reports and annual review of safeguarding arrangements. A designated safeguarding governor meets regularly with leaders to ensure effective systems are in place to protect children from the risk of harm.
53. Leaders with designated safeguarding responsibilities are appropriately trained for their role. They make effective decisions whenever safeguarding concerns arise and take appropriate actions to support pupils who may be at risk of harm. Leaders maintain suitable records of safeguarding concerns, their decisions and actions in response to these, and the rationale for these.
54. Leaders maintain appropriate liaison with external agencies. They contact the appropriate agencies for advice on safeguarding issues and pass on concerns when necessary.
55. Staff receive regular training to ensure they are confident to identify, respond to and report any safeguarding concerns that may arise. Staff understand the school's whistleblowing procedures and know who to report concerns about adults to, if needed. Staff carefully consider pupils' wellbeing and are quick to report any concerns. Training ensures staff understand their responsibilities under the 'Prevent' duty with regard to dangers of radicalisation or extremism. Staff maintain an awareness of any contextual risks that may arise.
56. As a result of governors' and leaders' oversight, safer recruitment processes are robust. Leaders ensure that all required pre-employment checks are undertaken before adults start working with pupils. All appropriate checks are accurately recorded in a single central record of appointments.
57. Pupils learn how to stay safe through the PSHE programme and a sensitively planned assembly series. They learn about the potential risks when online and learn strategies to keep themselves safe. Leaders ensure that appropriate filtering and monitoring procedures are put in place and checked regularly to support pupils' safety when online.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

58. All the relevant Standards are met.

School details

School	St Nicholas School
Department for Education number	881/6023
Registered charity number	310876
Address	St Nicholas School Hobbs Cross Road Old Harlow Essex CM17 0NJ
Phone number	01279 429910
Email address	office@saintnicholasschool.net
Website	www.saintnicholasschool.net
Proprietor	St Nicholas School (Harlow) Limited
Chair	Mr Robert Ellice
Headteacher	Mr Terence Ayres
Age range	2 to 16
Number of pupils	470
Number of children in the early years registered setting	55
Date of previous inspection	26 to 28 January 2022

Information about the school

59. Saint Nicholas School is an independent co-educational day school. It is a registered charity, administered by a board of governors. The school was founded in 1939 and has occupied its present site on the edge of Harlow since 1977. The school comprises four sections: the early years, for children in pre-school and Reception; lower school for pupils from Years 1 to 5; middle school for pupils from Years 6 to 8; and upper school for pupils from Years 9 to 11. The current headteacher took up his position in April 2022.
60. The registered early years setting caters for children aged 0 to 2.5 years. The non-registered early years setting, for children aged 2.5 to 5 years, caters for 53 children in one Nursery and two Reception classes.
61. The school has identified 56 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). No pupils in the school have an education, health and care (EHC) plan.
62. The school has identified English as an additional language for 10 pupils.
63. The school states its aims are to provide a safe, happy and secure environment, where each individual excels and strives to reach their full potential. The school intends to challenge pupils to become active and curious learners. It seeks to encourage pupils to develop resilience, a strong sense of right and wrong and an understanding of their social responsibility in the school and the wider community.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

28 April to 1 May 2025

64. A team of five inspectors visited the school for two and a half days.

65. Inspection activities included:

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

66. The inspection team considered the views of pupils, members of staff and parents who responded to ISI's pre-inspection surveys.

67. The school's registered early years setting was not included in this inspection.

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**.

Independent Schools Inspectorate

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