

School inspection report

1 to 3 July 2025

Duncombe School

4 Warren Park Road
Bengeo
Hertford
SG14 3JA

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 use their collective knowledge and expertise to ensure that the school is well led and consistently meets the Standards.
2. Leaders place pupils' wellbeing at the centre of the school's culture and spend time listening to pupils' opinions. Staff show attention to detail in their pastoral care to ensure that pupils feel safe and valued at school. Pupils benefit from the warm relationships they have with staff. This ensures that they are confident to raise any potential concerns.
3. Leaders have developed an overarching risk management plan to promote safety and security. They implement detailed risk assessments which are monitored regularly. However, the risk assessment for parents collecting their children at the end of the school day does not ensure that parents cannot enter the school buildings at this time.
4. Leaders and teachers ensure that pupils develop their knowledge and skills through stimulating and active lessons. As a result, pupils typically arrive at school with a sense of excitement about the day ahead and the many interesting lessons and activities they will experience.
5. Teachers are very effective at supporting individual pupils to make good progress. They ensure that pupils of all ages and aptitudes learn through suitable activities that meet their needs and challenge their thinking. Pupils benefit from high-quality and personalised feedback that enables them to make further progress, while developing their independence in the learning process.
6. Provision is effective across the early years, with a well-planned and sequenced curriculum providing learning experiences which support each child's needs and aptitudes. As a result, children make good progress from their starting points and are ready for the transition to Year 1.
7. Staff have high expectations for behaviour and apply the behaviour policy consistently across the school. As a result, behaviour in lessons and around the school is consistently good, and the learning environment is calm and purposeful.
8. Pupils are respectful, inclusive and have a well-developed appreciation for diversity both within the school and beyond. They show maturity in the way that they take responsibility for their actions and display empathy towards others.
9. Leaders prioritise safeguarding so that staff understand that safeguarding is a collective responsibility. Leaders provide ongoing training and updates to give staff the required knowledge and skills to safeguard pupils. Staff are confident in implementing safeguarding procedures, including how to report concerns about pupils or staff.

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:

- strengthen the risk assessment relating to parents collecting their children at the end of the school day to ensure that parents cannot enter any of the school buildings at this time.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

10. Leaders ensure that the school prioritises promoting pupils' wellbeing. Leaders and teachers take time to get to know pupils well and listen to them so that they feel recognised and heard. Leaders ensure that they seek the views of all pupils by conducting regular surveys to consider pupils' perspectives on their own wellbeing. They use this data effectively to respond to pupils' views, such as by reinforcing the importance of speaking to an adult if they have any concerns.
11. Proprietors maintain effective oversight of the school. This is informed by their effective working relationships with school leaders and use of experienced advisors to support oversight of the school's policies and procedures. The proprietor's monitoring ensures that leaders have appropriate knowledge and skills which they use to fulfil their responsibilities to enable the school to consistently meet the Standards. Together, leaders and proprietors take a strategic approach to ensuring that the school's practice is reviewed and monitored. They are ambitious in their ongoing plans for school improvement and take effective actions designed to bring this about.
12. Leaders communicate the school's aims and ethos effectively to all stakeholders. They provide clear expectations about the content of the curriculum to ensure that teaching enables pupils to make good progress in a suitable range of subjects. Leaders in the early years are knowledgeable about child development and the ways in which young children learn. They support staff through regular meetings about their professional development and practice, resulting in teaching that is inclusive and ambitious for the children.
13. Leaders carefully consider risks across the school site and how these can be reduced so far as is possible. Leaders ensure that all off-site visits, including residential and day trips, are planned with meticulous attention to detail, supported by comprehensive risk assessments and clear delegation of responsibilities. Similarly, the majority of risk assessments for the school site are thorough and well implemented. However, the risk assessment relating to parents collecting their children at the end of the school day does not always ensure that parents cannot enter any of the school buildings at this time.
14. Leaders regularly review policies and ensure that staff understand and implement these consistently. All required policies and information are available on the school's website. This means that parents can readily access key information about the school. Parents receive written reports twice a year that outline their child's progress and the next steps they could take to improve their learning further.
15. Leaders liaise effectively with external agencies to ensure that pupils' needs are supported effectively. They work with the local attendance officer and safeguarding partners when required. Leaders communicate with the local authority about reviewing the progress of pupils who have an education, health and care (EHC) plan, including in relation to the use of funds.
16. Leaders ensure that the school meets the requirements of the Equality Act 2010, including through implementation of a detailed accessibility plan. This plan identifies the school's actions to make the premises and curriculum accessible and to make further reasonable adjustments where required.
17. Leaders have a suitable complaints policy which is available to parents so that they know how to raise any concerns informally or formally. Leaders implement this policy effectively and follow

suitable stages and timescales to respond to any concerns. The policy includes a suitable process for parents to escalate their concerns to a formal panel hearing should the need arise.

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

18. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

19. Leaders implement a suitable curriculum that is planned effectively to meet the needs of pupils of different ages and aptitudes. Firm foundations are developed through a focus on English and mathematics, while a suitable range of other subjects, such as science, humanities, French and Spanish, enables pupils to broaden their knowledge, skills and understanding. Pupils have well-developed creative skills as a result of subjects such as art and music. They gain proficiency in technology through lessons in computing. The 'Duncombe diploma' is designed effectively to enable pupils to develop a variety of life skills, such as creativity, enquiry and communication.
20. Teachers use their secure subject knowledge and high-quality resources to plan stimulating activities to ensure that pupils are engaged and motivated in lessons. Teachers use carefully sequenced tasks and expertly posed questions to enable pupils to deepen their thinking and conceptual understanding. Teachers enable pupils to make meaningful links between subjects, such as when applying their mathematical knowledge of different angles to how their bodies move in athletics, and through other practical applications, such as using everyday kitchen ingredients in science to mimic the components of human blood. Teaching is enriched for pupils when they reach Year 4 by having subject specialists for all their lessons.
21. Pupils make good progress as a result of effective teaching and high expectations. Teachers are adept at supporting pupils with different levels of prior attainment, including through provision of a bespoke programme to extend pupils who need to be challenged further and systematic processes to help individual pupils who need extra support. Individualised feedback is a key component of ensuring pupils' progress. Teachers provide relevant and constructive feedback about the next steps pupils can take to improve their learning further. Pupils are actively engaged in responding to teachers' feedback, such as by using purple pens to 'polish' their work as a result of the guidance that they have received.
22. Leaders implement a comprehensive system for the assessment of pupils' progress. They track pupils' progress and analyse assessment data robustly, sharing their findings in regular pupil progress meetings with staff. Teachers use assessment data to identify gaps in pupils' emerging knowledge and devise tailored learning plans to successfully address any areas for development. This ensures that pupils are supported, extended and challenged as necessary.
23. The learning support team are responsive to individual pupils' needs. They use their expertise to identify any pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and implement Individual support plans that they regularly review to ensure their continued effectiveness. This process enables leaders to ensure that pupils who have SEND make good progress and that their individual targets are effective in helping them to improve further. The learning support team provides detailed information and effective training so that teachers know how to support pupils who have SEND. If required, pupils receive additional support sessions, individually or in small groups, to help with areas such as working memory or spelling.
24. Leaders ascertain the level of fluency of any pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL). If required, they then provide appropriate support for the development of these pupils' English skills. This includes ensuring that teachers adapt their planning to provide additional activities and support in lessons, with withdrawal from lessons when required to help pupils' individual needs.

25. Teachers in the early years provide a calm, inclusive and stimulating learning environment where children are motivated to learn. Children engage in purposeful, child-initiated play across a variety of areas, including construction, water, the mud kitchen, painting and physical challenge. They acquire and apply new skills when accessing these activities, such as developing their mathematical understanding when matching numbers with objects and when sorting objects according to size and colour. The development of communication is prioritised so that children develop their oral language, as well as a deep enjoyment of stories, mark-making and early reading. Teachers provide a rich and engaging environment which enables children to have continual access to writing and drawing tools, encouraging independence in mark-making using varied implements. Adult interaction supports sustained interest in well-known stories, with children confidently recalling repeated refrains and rhymes, developing their vocabulary and understanding of sentence structure as they do so.

26. Recreational clubs are well attended. Pupils participate with enthusiasm in a variety of activities to learn and develop new skills, such as photography and ballet, and hone existing skills, such as football and drama. Leaders review the content of clubs regularly so that they continue to meet the interests of the pupils.

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

27. All the relevant Standards are met.

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

28. Pupils learn about a variety of world religions and their festivals, often through presentations from parents and their children. As well as visiting a local church, pupils visit a Hindu temple and a Sikh temple so that they can learn how different religions express their spirituality. Leaders encourage pupils' spiritual reflection through prayer time at the end of assemblies.
29. Staff model positive relationships and communicate high expectations to promote respectful behaviour. As a result, pupils are kind, friendly and polite. The school's 'golden rules' enable pupils to develop their moral understanding and acceptance that one's behavioural choices have an impact on others. The 'positivity pyramid', a structured programme of rewards, is effective at motivating pupils to behave well and develops their confidence when their good deeds are recognised. When required, leaders and staff make effective use of sanctions to enable pupils to reflect further on how to interact positively with others.
30. Leaders are proactive in educating pupils about different forms of bullying so that they have a well-developed understanding of what constitutes bullying and why it is unacceptable. Leaders respond swiftly and fairly on the rare occasion that bullying does arise. They keep appropriate behavioural records, which they monitor to identify any trends, and respond to these as required.
31. Pupils benefit from a well-taught personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education programme to support their emotional wellbeing. Children in the early years and older pupils in the school learn how to identify and express their feelings. They learn how to regulate their emotions, for example by going for a quick run or taking deep breaths. Staff teach pupils about the importance of talking about concerns. Pupils become aware of the term 'trusted adults' and who fulfils this role for them at school and at home.
32. Leaders and staff implement an age-appropriate relationships and sex education (RSE) programme. Through sensitively planned lessons, pupils learn how to form effective relationships with others. Teachers ensure that pupils have a well-developed understanding for their age of the concept of consent and how respecting personal space is relevant in their interactions with each other. Older pupils are well prepared for the changes that puberty and adolescence bring.
33. The school develops pupils' understanding of the importance of a healthy lifestyle. In PSHE lessons, pupils learn how to promote their physical health through focusing on balanced diets and personal hygiene. This knowledge is enhanced through initiatives such as 'global be well day', during which pupils join with other schools to consider issues such as sustainable diets. Pupils also learn about the difference between medicine and illegal drug use. Physical health is supported through physical education (PE) lessons, which include swimming. Pupils experience a variety of team sports during which they develop their techniques and skills through structured practice and effective feedback from experienced coaches. These activities also develop pupils' co-operation and leadership as they learn how to work as effective team players.
34. Children in the early years develop their gross- and fine-motor skills through well-planned activities that they access regularly. For example, they participate in yoga to increase their flexibility and use climbing apparatus to develop their physical strength. They use small tools as part of their play so that they can increase their finger control in preparation for writing and pencil grip.

35. Leaders maintain effective health and safety arrangements, including regular checks and servicing of equipment, so that the premises are well maintained. Suitable fire safety measures are in place, including regular fire risk assessments and drills so that pupils know what to do in the case of a fire or lockdown emergency. Staff receive training in fire safety, including at induction. Proprietors carry out effective oversight of all health and safety procedures.
36. Effective deployment of staff ensures that pupils are well supervised during the school day, including at break and lunchtimes, and when going out of school for trips. Staff in the early years maintain suitable adult-to-child ratios at all times.
37. The school provides appropriate medical accommodation for the provision of effective care, delivered by trained staff, in the case of an accident or illness. All early years staff hold paediatric first aid training.
38. Leaders follow current statutory guidance relating to admission and attendance. They maintain suitable admission and attendance registers and inform the local authority whenever pupils leave or join the school at non-standard times of transition. Leaders are proactive in creating a positive culture of attendance and their 'strive for 5' initiative is successful in helping families to understand the importance of maintaining their children's high attendance. Leaders monitor pupils' attendance and act effectively to promote high attendance.

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

39. All the relevant Standards are met.

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

40. In the early years, children's social development is supported effectively through opportunities to work as a team, take turns and listen to one another. Adults proactively model these behaviours so that children can see how to collaborate with each other and learn how to recognise and consider the feelings of others. Leaders encourage older pupils to collaborate within lessons and reflect on taking responsibility for their actions. The theme of fairness is promoted across the school so that pupils learn how to interact kindly and respectfully with each other. Their positive interactions show that they understand the importance of mutual respect.
41. Pupils learn about British values such as democracy and individual liberty in their PSHE lessons. They learn about democracy and the principle of democratic representation, and the concept of everyone's opinion being heard. Pupils vote for members of school council and consider how this process links to the democratic work of the Government. Pupils' understanding of the school rules links to discussions about the rule of law in general. This helps them to develop their understanding of the difference between right and wrong and how to take responsibility for their own actions. Older pupils extend their knowledge by learning about themes such as exploitation and how such improper treatment of people undermines British values.
42. The school's inclusive ethos helps pupils to be well prepared for life in British society. Pupils develop a mature understanding of the unique qualities that constitute their identity and to appreciate and respect the differences in the identities of others. Teachers ensure that they use diverse representation in lessons, such as resources that reflect different genders and cultures, so that pupils increase their understanding of diversity. The school has a resident children's author who runs inclusive workshops and is an advocate for diversity. This is enhanced through activities such as Black History Month and 'world languages day', which enable pupils to deepen their knowledge of the rich cultural diversity that is part of their lives at school and the world beyond.
43. Pupils in Year 6 are given meaningful opportunities to take on roles of responsibility, such as house captains and reading ambassadors, which develop their leadership skills and confidence. There is an effective 'buddy' programme in which pupils in Years 5 and 6 are paired with a pupil in Reception or Year 1. This is beneficial for all pupils involved, as older pupils learn how to be role models and younger pupils develop aspirations for their journey through school.
44. Leaders make effective use of the local area in order to enhance pupils' sense of responsibility and contribution to society. Pupils visit a local care home to sing for the residents and to give personally written cards and letters. They collect food for local foodbanks and work with the school caterers to make food for a local homeless charity. Such activities are considered within the citizenship and leadership section of the 'Duncombe diploma' so that pupils can see how contributing to society has an impact on others.
45. The school prepares pupils well for the next stage of their education so that they are ready for their next year at school or to transfer to their next school. They take part in transition mornings at school where they meet their new teacher and become familiar with their new class surroundings. Children in the early years develop skills that enable them to make a successful transition to Year 1. Pupils in Year 6 receive thorough preparation for senior school, which typically enables them to achieve

highly in their examinations for entry to selective secondary and senior schools and understand the challenges and expectations that senior school is likely to bring.

46. Pupils develop their economic knowledge and understanding through PSHE lessons. They learn about budgeting and consider how different careers relate to typical salaries. Pupils' economic awareness is enhanced through practical and engaging experiences, such as business projects during 'financial capability week' and pupil-led charity initiatives. Such activities enable pupils to develop an understanding of the difference between 'wants' and 'needs' when considering how to spend money and to think about how their spending choices can be used to benefit others.

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

47. All the relevant Standards are met.

Safeguarding

48. There is a robust safeguarding culture in the school. The safeguarding team works well together to ensure that effective procedures are in place to safeguard pupils. They carefully follow statutory guidance when implementing their safeguarding policy, with effective consideration of any contextual risks. Proprietors monitor safeguarding effectively by auditing school procedures and analysing termly updates from the safeguarding team.
49. The safeguarding team provides suitable training, including at induction, and regular updates for all staff. This enables them to successfully embed their 'safeguarding comes first' mantra so that staff know how to act if there are any concerns about pupils. The safeguarding team are effective in responding to any concerns. To facilitate this process, they have established close links with the local authority. This enhances their knowledge of local thresholds and how best to liaise with external agencies to support pupils. The safeguarding team refers concerns on to the relevant safeguarding partners when required.
50. There are suitable processes in place for responding to and recording any concerns about adults working with children. Staff have a thorough understanding of whistleblowing procedures and how to record and report any low-level concerns or allegations against staff that might arise.
51. Leaders ensure that all required suitability checks are undertaken on adults before they commence working with pupils at the school. Leaders maintain an accurate single central record of appointments (SCR), which is overseen by the proprietors.
52. Leaders employ robust systems for filtering and monitoring internet use in order to protect pupils when online at school. These systems are tested regularly. The safeguarding team responds to any alerts to ensure that pupils do not access inappropriate material. Leaders promote pupils' and parents' understanding of the importance of online safety. In PSHE and computing, pupils learn about issues such as age limits for social media and being wary of making contact with people online. Leaders invite parents to workshops, so that they can work in collaboration with the school to enhance online safety for their children.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

53. All the relevant Standards are met.

School details

School	Duncombe School
Department for Education number	919/6098
Address	Duncombe School 4 Warren Park Road Bengeo Hertford Hertfordshire SG14 3JA
Phone number	01992 414100
Email address	office@duncombe-school.co.uk
Website	www.duncombe-school.co.uk
Proprietor	Cognita Schools Ltd
Chair	Mr Michael Drake
Headteacher	Mr Jeremy Phelan
Age range	2 to 11
Number of pupils	286
Date of previous inspection	14 to 17 June 2022

Information about the school

54. Duncombe School is an independent co-educational day preparatory school located in a residential area on the edge of Hertford. Founded in 1939, the school remained in private ownership until 2005 when it became a part of Cognita Schools Ltd, which is responsible for its governance. The school comprises three departments: the early years for children aged 2 to 5 years, lower school for pupils aged 5 to 8 years, and upper school for pupils aged 8 to 11 years.
55. There are 89 children in the early years comprising four Nursery and two Reception classes.
56. The school has identified 19 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.
57. The school has identified English as an additional language (EAL) for 16 pupils.
58. The school states its aims are to develop well-rounded individuals with keen minds, personal skills, social understanding and personal confidence through a wide variety of curricular and co-curricular activities and well-developed surroundings.

Inspection details

Inspection dates	1 to 3 July 2025
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59. A team of three inspectors visited the school for two and a half days.

60. 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 proprietors
- 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.

61. 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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