



## QUALITY ASSURANCE REVIEW

### REVIEW REPORT FOR WILLOW DENE SCHOOL

<b>Name of School:</b>	Willow Dene School
<b>Headteacher/Principal:</b>	Rachel Harrison
<b>Hub:</b>	London Special School and AP Hub
<b>School phase:</b>	Special 2-16 Years
<b>MAT (if applicable):</b>	The Compass Partnership of Schools

<b>Overall Peer Evaluation Estimate at this QA Review:</b>	Leading
<b>Date of this Review:</b>	08/03/2023
<b>Overall Estimate at last QA Review:</b>	Leading
<b>Date of last QA Review:</b>	11/05/2022
<b>Grade at last Ofsted inspection:</b>	Outstanding
<b>Date of last Ofsted inspection:</b>	02/11/2022



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#### Quality Assurance Review

The review team, comprising host school leaders and visiting reviewers agree that evidence indicates these areas are evaluated as follows:

**Leadership at all levels**                      Leading

**Quality of provision and outcomes**      Leading

**AND**

**Quality of provision and  
outcomes for disadvantaged  
pupils and pupils with additional  
needs**

**Area of excellence**                      Not applicable

**Previously accredited valid areas  
of excellence**                      Not applicable

**Overall peer evaluation estimate**      Leading

***The Quality Assurance Review estimates are not equivalent to Ofsted grades.  
The QA Review uses a different framework to Ofsted and the review is  
developmental not judgmental.***

## **1. Context and character of the school**

Approaching the main site of Willow Dene School, one of the first things that strikes any visitors is how well its new building (built in 2015) nestles into the rolling residential hills of the Royal Borough of Greenwich. Coming into the reception, the large airy space has displays that reflect the school's core mantras of 'imagine', 'dream' and 'inspire', with a large tropical fish tank requested through pupil voice.

Along corridors, motivational displays include the Eyegaze Art Gallery inspired by the work of the Eye Gaze artist Sarah Ezekiel. Others show the school ethos of 'seeing possibilities' and 'realising dreams'.

Willow Dene is a large special school with more than 270 pupils. Two thirds of pupils have autism as their primary diagnosis, while one third have complex medical needs (CMN). The school has double the national average of disadvantaged pupils. There are 34 classes, a wide range of specialist rooms, and more than 200 staff.

Many of the pupils travel a long way by taxi to school. All pupils benefit from an individualised welcome which could include quiet time in class, sensory circuits, personal care, or a 'splash and dash' start in the school pool to stretch out and prepare for their school day.

### **2.1 Leadership at all levels - What went well**

- Willow Dene has an extended leadership team (ELT). This has developed as the school has widened the age of pupils attending from 3-11 to 2-16. Leaders have just finished a post-16 consultation and are working with the trust and the local authority to open a post-16 provision, for a maximum of 24 pupils, in September 2023.
- As the school has grown into a two-site provision, the ELT has the opportunity to work across both sites. This valuable experience of evolving the provision offered, while maintaining the highest standards, is incredibly important as further expansion beckons.
- The expansion of the leadership team has meant that opportunities have followed for highly experienced staff, deeply invested in the school community, to have

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further career progression. In this carefully planned way, each leader is a specialist who can knowledgeably explain their distinct areas of leadership and areas for development. These leaders articulate the story of Willow Dene exceptionally well.

- Each of the class teams develop their own 'team development plan'. This class priority links to the school development plan. For example, one class made activity boxes to send home, for siblings to share fun and interesting activities with their brothers or sisters. Another class had each child's family as a 'family of the week', to share the family's likes and interests.
- Since the last Challenge Partner review, leaders have further developed Willow Dene's family support offer. This has meant appointing an additional family support worker working across the school and a family health advisor, to support the families of children with CMN.
- Leaders continually demonstrate the knowledge and commitment that they have to their community. For example, in the current financial squeeze, a food and clothing bank for families under financial strain, and a hardship fund for those in desperate need have been set up.
- Leaders have bought in half termly 'Power Days'. On these specialist days the curriculum showcases targeted areas. Recent examples include space and the moon landings, while another has been organised to expose pupils to more career opportunities.
- During the Covid-19 pandemic, leaders used recorded online messaging to deliver briefings with staff and share news with parents and carers. This continues, with half-termly briefings for families, and weekly briefings to staff, that support flexible working patterns.
- Leaders invested heavily in the well-being of their community throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and on into the cost of living crisis. As one colleague explained, 'This school is a safe space, always a place where there is someone to talk to'. And with this, leaders are consistently seeking the best ways to support their staff. For example, staff and their families can use the swimming pool for free, outside of the school day.

## **2.2 Leadership at all levels - Even better if...**

...leaders had better links with other specialist provisions, with outstanding Sixth Form outcomes, to share practice as their own provision developed.

## **3.1 Quality of provision and outcomes - What went well...**

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- The quality of provision at Willow Dene is exemplary. The new building has developed over the past decade with the community in mind. Walking along corridors, the vast array of equipment needed for pupils with CMN, including walking frames, work chairs, home chairs, standing frames, Try-Cycles and P-Pod chairs stand waiting to play their role in each school day.
- The relationships between school staff, pupils and their families are fantastic. When pupils come into school in the morning, trusting relationships between staff and pupils are evident. For example, in the pouring winter rain, each taxi van takes its place outside reception and a stream of staff quickly help the pupils unload and welcome them into school with bright and welcoming voices to start the school day.
- Pupils benefit from a huge range of specialist provision on site. This includes two halls, two pools (every class swims each week), soft play rooms, a sensory circuit hall, ball pit rooms, Magic Carpet and Eye Gaze rooms, a library, a whole range of outdoor play areas, covered walkways, breakout spaces and a sensory garden. The school has recently acquired a section of forest from the borough, and now pupils in this greater London school benefit from forest schools outdoor learning, backing onto a local city farm.
- All of the classes have distinct learning environments and pedagogy that reflects the pupil cohort. For example, pupils with autism benefit from a classroom setup that includes workstations using the TEACCH methodology, developed by Professor Gary Mesibov. The classrooms are uncluttered, with augmentative and assistive technology to hand, as needed by each pupil. WIGGIT timetables show the progression of the day, and the interactive white board wall is left clear, to reduce arousal.
- In the CMN classes, space and staff support is incredibly important. These pupils need a whole range of specific support for their daily needs, including H-frame hoisting, Acheever Beds, work chairs and P-Pod chairs to ensure pupils are comfortable and ready to learn.
- Every class has access to outdoor spaces, including balconies, a personal care area, a reading corner and a space to support pupils' emotional regulation when the pupils stress increases.
- Across the school there are two curriculum offers, the early development curriculum and the concept curriculum that reflect pupils' cognitive abilities.
- The early development curriculum has its own subjects with a few strands from the national curriculum. This is delivered across the timetable, to embed key learning opportunities. For example, while there is art and design as a subject, there is also play and leisure, where pupils develop and learn play skills.
- The concept curriculum also has subjects and strands with more links to national curriculum subjects, but have written units broken down into component parts to further develop subject knowledge. This is delivered over a three year cycle for

primary pupils, and a two year cycle for secondary pupils.

- Willow Dene uses an approved synthetic phonic package. As a 'Champion School' for this area, one of the things that stands out is how complex pupils are developing their phonic skills. For example, one pupil with cerebral palsy who struggles to speak, uses eye pointing with pictures prompts to represent sounds she struggles to verbalise.
- Extra effort is being put into developing sibling relationships, within the home and across the community. For example, Willow Dene has developed an understanding of 'glass child' research, the experience of growing up as a sibling of a child with special educational needs and/or disabilities, and the unique pressures it adds to these families. The school is investing in sibling events, such as hair and beauty, fitness, and cooking sessions. This provides opportunities to build relationships between young people in similar circumstances who are part of the same community. Willow Dene also provides a chance to learn about their siblings' complex needs from specialist staff, who can help these children to understand their siblings' conditions.

### **3.2 Quality of provision and outcomes - Even better if...**

...when developing the new Key Stage 5 provision, support was planned to quickly develop the staff skills needed, to assure the best outcomes for the most complex pupils.

### **4.1 Quality of provision and outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and pupils with additional needs - What went well...**

- The complexity of the cohort has rapidly changed over time. As one leader explained, 'Feeding plans really show that. Just five years ago we had 11 feeding plans, now it's more like 50'. To illustrate this, when visiting the CMN classes, specialist trained staff are feeding pupils in a variety of ways, while the learning continues around them. This includes, gravity feeds, bolas feeds and JEJ feeds.
- In Toucan class, children can join the school after their second birthday. A parent fayre helps them link up with important services their families may well need. For example, this can include therapy colleagues, transport services, and accessible dentists. Once these children have joined Toucan class, parents and carers can receive further specialist support, such as developing education, health and care plans, and wider support from multi-agency partners.

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- The school has gone beyond the surface level actions that all great special schools achieve. Local community committees share the purpose of the school more widely with local residents. They provide tours of the school and invite the community to school events. This then develops links into local businesses developing the careers offer further.
- The school provides adult learning opportunities for parents and carers through external agencies delivered in the safe space of the school. This includes City Lit to help parents and carers develop their into-employment skills.
- The wider community takes an important role in well-being too. Willow Dene has provided a well-being week for parents and carers with yoga and cooking sessions. Parents and carers have also benefited from training on behaviour management skills when dealing with confrontation in the home.

#### **4.2 Quality of Provision and Outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and pupils with additional needs - Even better if...**

...none identified.

#### **5. Area of Excellence**

Not applicable on this visit.

#### **6. What additional support would the school like from the Challenge Partners network, either locally or nationally?**

To use the knowledge from other outstanding Challenge Partner special schools, to further promote students' success, within the new Post-16 provision.

For Challenge Partners to develop a specialist group for schools with medically complex cohorts, to share the exemplary practice, and support the wider medically complex school community.

**This review will support the school's continuing improvement. The main findings will be shared within the school's hub in order that it can inform future activities.**



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**Schools can access the School Support Directory; the Challenge Partners online tool that enables schools to connect with other schools in your hub and across the national network of schools.**

**Schools can also attend Sharing Leading Practice events where schools showcase excellent and/or innovative practice. Sharing Leading Practice events allow school leaders with specific improvement needs to visit a school or attend an online webinar hosted by a school, with outstanding provision in that area.**

**Both the School Support Directory and the Shared Leading Practice events can be accessed via the Challenge Partners website.**