

Name of School:	Willow Dene School
Headteacher/Principal:	Rachel Harrison
Hub:	London Special and AP Hub
School phase:	Special. 2-19 Years
MAT (if applicable):	The Compass Partnership of Schools

Overall Peer Evaluation Estimate at this QA Review:	Leading
Date of this Review:	15/05/2024
Overall Estimate at last QA Review:	Leading
Date of last QA Review:	08/03/2023
Grade at last Ofsted inspection:	Outstanding
Date of last Ofsted inspection:	02/11/2022

1. Context and character of the school

Willow Dene School stands serene, surrounded by the pell-mell residential streets of south-east London. Built in the green space at the centre of its community, ring-necked parakeets dive, soar, and cry, welcoming you as you come into the school.

The story of Willow Dene is one of growth. An amalgamation of two specialist schools. The original primary school had two distinct types of pupils with complex special educational needs and/or disabilities. One cohort had severe and profound complex needs, while the other cohort was made up of pupils with complex autism. In 2016, the local authority supported the school's decision to open a separate secondary site. With that successfully in place, this academic year a newly built sixth-form site opened. All of Willow Dene's estate is of exceptional quality, and designed to utilise all available space to support pupils' progress.

The school has 292 pupils in the 2–19 age range, supported by a highly specialised team of almost 300 staff. All pupils have an education, health and care plan (EHCP), and half are in receipt of pupil premium. The cohort reflects the multicultural borough of Greenwich, with almost a third of the pupils having English as an additional language.

2.1 Leadership at all levels - What went well

- Leaders at Willow Dene have evolved and refined the school improvement cycle. The school improvement plan is reviewed termly, linking to the school's self-evaluation and continuing professional learning and development. All staff have a termly professional development meeting. This mobilisation of the school's talent pool into action, means the leaders' vision is enacted at pace.
- The leadership team has developed a dynamic plan for growth and expansion, through both the new free school bid and the growing sixth-form provision. The extended leadership structure has been devised to ensure Willow Dene can match this growth successfully. The leadership team is working collaboratively with the local authority and stakeholders, to ensure all provisions maintain the standards that Willow Dene currently achieves.
- Leaders at Willow Dene have created a curricula model across two pathways that link to detailed assessment of learning via the school's chosen package, *Evidence for Learning*. For example, the earliest readers in the 'Early Development' strand, have opportunities to develop eye tracking and engagement with stimulating toys, starting the journey to developing the skills for using AAC like *Eyegaze*. With this detailed and professionally thought-out methodology, pupils at the very earliest levels have their progression recognised and celebrated.
- Leaders want pupils to attend school as often as they can. To achieve this, the school works with local multi-agency teams to have their clinics on the

school site. For example, there are wheelchair clinics, continence clinics, sleep clinics, dietician clinics, optician clinics, audiology clinics, dental clinics and visiting paediatricians. Pupils access these during their school day, and do not use up their precious time travelling to hospital appointments.

- For very isolated and vulnerable families, leaders have brought into place phone calls home during the school holidays, for a supportive welfare check. There is also an emergency helpline advertised, for support when needed outside of term time. For example, a pupil with autism who was highly distressed with toothache, had an appointment facilitated by the school, with the King's College Dentistry Team, enabling the pupil and their family to remove the ache, and get some well-needed rest. Families get the caring support they need, even in the most challenging times.
- Leaders at Willow Dene have a passion for working with their providers to adapt content so that it matches pupils' needs. For example, they have worked with their chosen assessment tool designers, to improve their product, and make it more meaningful for the Willow Dene cohort. In the same way, they have adapted, and taken phonological development and understanding, to a new granular level, writing revised content for the Department for Education's approved synthetic phonics strategy. Leaders set the same high standards for their partners in business, as they do for themselves and, in doing so, drive their equality and inclusion agenda.

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

...leaders created even more opportunities to celebrate the enormous range of the school's wider work.

3.1 Quality of provision and outcomes - What went well

- The strength of relationships between the staff and pupils at Willow Dene is fabulous. For example, when visiting the two-year-old provision, one pupil's day had been adapted, where staff could see a change in mark-making from a whole-hand approach, to using a single finger, while colouring a kite template. With this change, staff jumped on the opportunity to transfer this to a different medium, creating tracks in coloured cornflower on a work tray. Staff are trusted to decide when pupils will benefit from adapted curricula content that matches their pupils best proximal learning opportunities. As one leader explained, 'we trust our teachers to ski off piste'.
- As the cohort changes and becomes more complex, the approach to communication has had to be refined further. As the limitations of some communication systems have become apparent, the use of multi-cell 'core boards' is a more dynamic and free-flowing way of working, that can be used in every aspect of the school day, and at home. 'Fringe Boards' provide more

specialist options for any activity. Pupils have the opportunity to develop meaningful and adaptable communication. Their stress at not being able to communicate diminishes, and they are able to regulate, have their mental health needs met, and concentrate on learning their carefully chosen curricula content.

- Professional development sessions often have a focus on cognitive science and pedagogy. Sessions on the hierarchy of needs have informed teachers' approach to prioritising and meeting pupils' basic needs, before focusing on new learning. 'Theory of Mind' training, informs class teams on the best way to deliver social interaction sessions, and supports pupils' friendships with their classmates. Teachers are planning and delivering high-quality lessons based on pedagogical research and have a secure knowledge base for 'why this content?' and 'why now?'.
- Willow Dene has created context and communities for families, who may not come to the school gate. By developing and adapting a family app, staff have capitalised on the best of what technology has to offer. For example, in one class, teachers shared pupils finding minibeasts on the school grounds with parents. This was then transferred to a minibeast hunt back at home. On other occasions, work is done in school, and shared with family across the world so that they can comment on, and share in, the progress being made. The use of digital media both within school, and out into the home and community, provides concrete contexts for deepening learning and communication.
- At Willow Dene, teaching is a highly respected profession. Teachers are trusted to be the lead professional in each class, with leaders developing highly specialised planning and assessment that is both a 'safety net and a springboard'. These professionals achieve self-actualisation. The attrition rate at Willow Dene, of teachers leaving the profession, bucks national trends.
- Willow Dene is heavily invested in ensuring that the school is at the heart of the community. Siblings have the opportunity to visit the school in groups, and see their brothers' or sisters' classrooms, termly open events are organised with appropriate and safe activities for the school's families, and leaders have had the audacity to go out into the community, knocking on the doors of local residents to introduce themselves and their school, and get the local community involved. As one leader explained, 'it used to be like 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory'. No one knew what happened behind the gates'. This could not be further from the lived experience now. As one 14-year-old sibling put it, 'I love spending time with different teenagers, and they understand what it is like to have an autistic sibling. Very cool'.

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

...a range of infographics was created and shared with the wider community to

show the huge range of '360-degree wraparound' work the school does.

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

- Pupils' attendance is tracked, and different groups have different patterns. For example, pupils in the most physically complex cohort often have time out during the winter, where they become susceptible to chest infections. However, if there is a change in attendance that is unexpected, the school has the means to activate an 'internal team around the child'. This team will focus on what the key issues might be, and what the school can do to support this. Pupils and their families get exceptional multi-agency support, and can stay on track, learning beside their classmates, rather than becoming isolated.
- Willow Dene has an incredibly small cohort of pupils, who are not able to be in school, due to their complex medical needs. For these, a bespoke educational pathway is needed. For example, for one pupil, this means virtual daily lessons by their Willow Dene teacher, alongside a weekly visit from the school's music therapist. Pupils and their families in the most challenging situations still have a meaningful relationship with their school, that they can access on terms that make sense to their needs.
- When pupils first arrive at the school, their EHCP can be a document that lists all of the things they cannot do. To counter this, the annual review at Willow Dene has been refined. As well as giving an accurate reflection of the progress being made, the meeting provides the opportunity to celebrate these achievements, through learning journeys and with video evidence. Feedback from stakeholders, particularly parents and carers, has been wholly positive. As a result, with meaningful review meetings that celebrate the wide range of progress the pupils are making, families are more engaged in the process.

4.2 Quality of provision and outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and pupils with additional needs - Even better if...

...none identified.

Following the QA Review

The review report is primarily for the school's internal use to support the school's continuing improvement. However, we encourage you to share the main findings with your hub/hub manager so that they can support your hub's activity planning. Challenge Partners will also collate and analyse report content to create an aggregate picture of what is going on across the sector each year.

For further support following your QA Review, 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 (SLP) 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. (<https://www.challengepartners.org/>)

Finally, following the QA Review, schools may find it useful to refer to research such as the EEF toolkit to help inform their approach to tackling the EBIs identified in the report (<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit>)