

School inspection report

29 April to 1 May 2025

The Purcell School

Aldenham Road

Bushey

Hertfordshire

WD23 2TS

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'.

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Summary of inspection findings

1. Governors monitor the work of leaders, providing both challenge and support. Leaders understand and appreciate the nature of a music specialist school, ensuring that it meets all regulatory requirements, whilst also supporting the musical and academic ambitions of all pupils. Governors and leaders have a clear understanding of risk management and contextual safeguarding. They meet regularly with day pupils and boarders to understand their experiences of school and this feeds into the school's self-evaluation process.
2. Leaders provide a supportive school and boarding environment in which pupils can pursue musical excellence, whilst experiencing a range of high-profile and developmental performance opportunities combined with service to the wider community. Pupils are admitted to the school based on their potential to develop their musicianship to a high standard. Within the context of being a specialist school, leaders have developed a broad curriculum which promotes pupils' intellectual independence and plans their academic progression effectively.
3. The designated safeguarding lead (DSL) and deputies are appropriately trained and work effectively with relevant local agencies as required. They have a thorough understanding of the school's context and work closely with staff to ensure their understanding of safeguarding issues and procedures. The safeguarding team have developed programmes of induction and training which ensure that staff know how to respond to disclosures, low-level concerns and how to escalate allegations. They work closely with staff from boarding, the health centre, the counsellor and teaching staff to ensure that pupils in school and boarding receive appropriate support and pastoral care.
4. Leaders promote positive relationships between staff, tutors, boarding staff, non-teaching staff and pupils. These enable pupils to feel supported and help support their engagement with music and academic studies. Academic lessons are well planned and enable pupils to make good progress. The needs of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are identified and effective adaptations to teaching are used throughout the school. Teachers know pupils well and understand their needs, underpinned by additional training offered to all departments. However, not all teaching across the school is equally effective. This is because the sharing of best teaching practice within the school is not as developed as possible.
5. The school helps pupils develop self-confidence, adaptability and maturity to sustain their professional development and personal fulfilment. The school and boarding staff are quick to respond if pupils experience any difficulties or challenges. Outside of formal lessons pupils feel that they can turn to experts within their own specialism and receive appropriate guidance.
6. The personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education programme includes relationships and sex education (RSE) that meets current statutory requirements. This programme is typically well planned and delivered throughout the school. However, some RSE lessons are not presented in a manner which promotes pupils' engagement and understanding as effectively as possible.
7. The school and boarding houses are maintained to a high standard. All appropriate risk assessments are in place to support the safety of pupils, staff and visitors. Pupils are supervised effectively in school and during boarding time, and know how to seek help when needed.

8. Pupils contribute to the school and the wellbeing of other pupils. They attend meetings with governors and leaders and report on different aspects of school life and boarding, including the provision of teaching relating to music. This student leadership ensures that the day pupils and boarders are effectively represented throughout the school. This has a strong impact on pupils' development of knowledge, skills, and understanding of music. It is a significant strength of the school. Pupils also contribute to the community beyond the school, such as by supporting the teaching of music in primary schools and performing in local retirement homes.

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 sharing of best practice in teaching and learning to ensure that academic teaching is consistently as effective as possible
- ensure that RSE lessons are consistently presented in a manner which promotes pupils' engagement and understanding as effectively as possible.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

9. Leaders work together effectively to create an atmosphere in which pupils can feel safe, happy and healthy. They provide a rich musical and academic education, supported with extensive performance opportunities and co-curricular provision, which supports pupils' development as musicians and equips them to be successful in their chosen career.
10. Governors ensure that leaders have appropriate knowledge and skills. They work closely with leaders to provide both scrutiny and support. They maintain close and effective oversight of the school and boarding through regular visits, reports and meetings to assure themselves that the Standards are met. They review policies and ensure that they match the practice of the school.
11. Leaders ensure that the school and boarding houses are inclusive, promote tolerance and have high standards of behaviour. Pupils' wellbeing is at the centre of their decision-making. For example, the recently revised pastoral strategy brings together PSHE, assemblies, tutorials and cross-curricular activities to ensure that they meet the pastoral needs of the pupils. Leaders have established clear links with both local and national agencies and discuss matters with them when needed. Leaders maintain thorough and careful evaluation of the most effective aspects of the specialist music provision and boarding, whilst also proactively engaging with areas which need further development. Leaders encourage pupils to contribute to this process of self-evaluation by attending regular meetings with governors and senior leaders.
12. Leaders understand the importance of recognising and minimising potential risk and have developed a robust culture to identify and manage risk to support the safety of pupils. Records of risk assessments, checks and documentation are well ordered and easily navigated, enabling leaders to maintain a comprehensive overview of potential risks and hazards to pupils at the school and how these are addressed. Leaders train staff how to carry out and record risk assessments that include clear identification of potential risks and suitable control measures to mitigate these.
13. The school has a suitable accessibility plan which is reviewed by leaders and minimises potential barriers to learning and participation across the school's premises. The school meets its obligations under the Equality Act (2010).
14. Leaders implement a suitable complaints procedure. They respond promptly to any parental concerns raised, including any related to boarding. Complaints are dealt with in a timely manner and in line with the complaints policy. Leaders maintain suitable records of all complaints and any actions taken in response to these. They review these records regularly to identify any trends.
15. Leaders make all required information available to parents. The school website includes an extensive range of policies, such as details about the school and boarding procedures. Parents receive regular updates and reports on their child's musical and academic performance. The school provides the local authority with all required information relating to any funded pupils who have an education, health and care (EHC) plan.

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

16. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

17. Leaders have developed a well-planned, balanced and broad curriculum which supports its aims as a music specialist school and is effectively designed to promote the academic and professional development of its pupils. The curriculum is planned to introduce pupils to age-appropriate subject content and develop their musical and academic knowledge, skills and understanding methodically. Leaders have taken steps to ensure that the academic curriculum engages fully with the music curriculum so that pupils make links across their subjects. Pupils are provided with expert guidance about pursuing a career in music.
18. Teaching staff across the school demonstrate good subject knowledge. Teachers use a variety of teaching methods to motivate and engage pupils which enables them to make progress across the curriculum and develop a positive attitude to learning. Pupils attend academic music lessons, ensemble sessions which include orchestras, choirs, chamber groups and improvisation groups, all supported by individual lessons. Teachers know their pupils well and use this to inform their planning and assessment of individual needs. Teaching does not undermine British values, such as that of mutual respect, in any way. However, with regard to the academic curriculum, the sharing of best teaching practice within the school is not as developed as possible, with the result that not all teaching is equally effective.
19. Leaders and staff closely monitor pupils' progress through regular assessments. Assessment weeks take place termly, followed by a reporting session involving a baseline grade, attainment, effort and target. Where the effort grade is a cause for concern a written comment is added. This tracking of progress informs the provision of appropriate additional support when required. Pupils achieve well academically as well as musically. Results in music are of a very high standard. Results at GCSE and A level across the academic curriculum are consistently above the national averages for the respective subjects. Leavers typically attend either their first choice of destination, such as conservatoires or university, in the UK or overseas.
20. The curriculum encourages the development of pupils' skills across many creative and expressive areas. Pupils are articulate and thoughtful when communicating and performing. They demonstrate a wide range of aesthetic and creative skills as evidenced by the sophisticated displays around the school and boarding houses. Pupils demonstrate pride in their work and can articulate what motivates them in their studies. Pupils feel confident about their learning and regular feedback from staff is highly effective in developing their musical and academic progress.
21. In the sixth form, all pupils are required to study music, alongside two additional subjects. Pupils make good progress and are well supported by their teachers. Teaching enables these pupils to have a clear understanding of the quality of their performance and motivates them to achieve musical and academic success. Immediate and detailed feedback is given to pupils that helps them identify how to develop their musical and academic skills and understanding further.
22. A comprehensive musicianship programme and an extensive range of musical activities equips pupils with a detailed understanding of music and are suitably tailored to pupils' needs to allow them to develop their skills well in composition, aural, theory, performance, music history and choral music. The school ensures that pupils are encouraged to perform at the highest level and are given access to perform at high profile concert venues.

23. The music curriculum adapts as pupils move through the school allowing them to progress according to their ability. Leaders use assessment data to monitor pupils' progress and to inform pupils' individual programmes. Feedback from teachers supports pupils to demonstrate very high levels of musical ability in composition work, allowing them to develop their work and understanding of composition techniques.
24. Pupils who have SEND are identified and supported with an individual pupil profile, identifying strategies and methods to meet their needs and help them progress. They achieve well and are provided with appropriate resources to help them access the curriculum when required. All departments receive training in this area and schemes of work identify how pupils who have SEND will be supported.
25. Pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) are, when assessment suggests the need, supported with specialised lessons and resources which help them to access the curriculum and make good progress in their learning.
26. The extra-curricular programme enables pupils to have recreational time and enjoy a variety of different activities, which includes clubs, sport, ensembles and visits. Boarders have sufficient free time which gives them the opportunity to develop supportive relationships with other boarders, as well as developing their emotional and creative skills, including through a range of trips and activities. Levels of participation are monitored closely to ensure that pupils take effective advantage of the activities provided alongside their schedule of rehearsals and performances.

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. Leaders foster positive relationships based on trust and respect throughout the school, enabling pupils to develop confidence in their participation and engagement. Collaboration is fostered with musical performances across year groups. Masterclasses demonstrate how pupils support each other receiving feedback in a climate of complete mutual respect. Interactions around the school are highly positive. Staff demonstrate positive relationships with the pupils and provide them with support for their emotional wellbeing and mental health.
29. Through PSHE, assemblies, academic subjects and visits to places of worship, pupils develop their knowledge and understanding of the practices and spiritual ideas of different religions. Assemblies explore current affairs, philosophical issues, spiritual matters and liturgical seasons.
30. Pupils have regular opportunities for physical exercise as part of the planned curriculum, which enhances pupils' physical and emotional wellbeing. The inclusive teaching of physical education (PE) enables pupils to develop their skills in sports such as netball, cricket, rounders, dance, tennis, dodgeball, fitness, outdoor adventures, badminton and beach volleyball. Physical training supports pupils' overall development as musicians.
31. Pupils receive an appropriate PSHE programme. This programme is comprehensive in content and is adapted to the needs and experiences of the pupils. It equips pupils with appropriate knowledge and understanding of the importance of maintaining positive physical, mental and emotional health and strategies to do so. Pupils learn about personal hygiene, sleep, bullying, conflict resolution, human rights, diversity and sustainability. Sessions focus on strategies to build self-confidence, resilience and communication skills. The PSHE programme is supported by the tutorial programme which gives pupils the opportunity to explore topical issues and ethical questions.
32. The RSE programme meets current statutory requirements. It develops pupils' understanding of healthy relationships and of important issues such as consent and respecting people's identity and privacy. However, RSE lessons are not always presented in a manner which promotes pupils' engagement and understanding as effectively as possible.
33. Leaders and staff communicate high behavioural expectations and apply suitable rewards and sanctions fairly and proportionately. As a result, behaviour is good. Bullying is rare, but when it does arise the school addresses it promptly. Leaders maintain detailed behavioural records and scrutinise these to identify and respond to any patterns or trends, these are discussed in meetings with house parents in boarding, tutors and health centre staff.
34. The premises, including the boarding accommodation, are suitable and maintained methodically, including through regular checks and servicing of equipment. The boarding accommodation and facilities are warm, comfortable and suitable. The school's fire safety arrangements are effective. Leaders act upon regular fire risk assessments and ensure that staff are suitably trained in fire safety. Staff carry out regular fire evacuation drills, including at least termly during boarding hours.
35. The medical centre is well equipped and includes suitable facilities run by appropriately trained medical staff. Pupils have access to a school counsellor and physiotherapist. Staff with designated first aid responsibilities receive frequent training and updates with regards to the administration of

first aid and medication. First aid kits, including those for use during trips and physical education, are maintained effectively. Boarders have access to local medical services.

36. Pupils are supervised effectively throughout the day and know how to seek help when needed. Boarders are supervised by well-trained staff with appropriate knowledge and skills. Boarding staff are checked and vetted to ensure their suitability. Staffing ratios in boarding houses are sufficient to ensure appropriate care for boarders.
37. Pupils, including boarders, undertake leadership roles and positions of responsibility. Pupil leaders report to governors and senior leadership meetings. They chair the pupil senior leadership team and pupil council, each of which has their own areas of responsibilities such as sports, activities, and charities.
38. The admissions and attendance registers are appropriately maintained in line with current statutory guidance. Leaders monitor attendance data to inform them of trends and proactively look for any areas of concern. The school reports appropriately to the local authority when pupils join or leave the school at non-standard times of transition.

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. Leaders provide opportunities for pupils to explore social issues and develop their understanding of the importance of social and economic wellbeing. For example, in drama lessons younger pupils explore situations in which they consider the difference between wants and needs. In Year 8 pupils explore the impact of personal financial choices and also social and ethical considerations about the use of money. In the sixth form, pupils consider the complexities of budgeting when living independently within the rental sector. They also discuss being self-employed as a musician and the practical consequences of taxation and national insurance. Opportunities for pupils to apply their economic understanding in practical situations are also facilitated. For example, pupils in Year 12 are given the responsibility to plan in full and budget for an annual outreach programme which supports the understanding of music for children beyond the school.
41. The school promotes respect for people's protected characteristics, such as their sex, race, religion and sexual orientation and for diversity through assemblies, PSHE, tutor time and the academic curriculum. Pupils are encouraged to reflect on ethical matters. They lead school and house assemblies on social issues and debate current issues. Pupils also develop mutual respect as a result of working closely with pupils from other year groups in rehearsals and in preparing for concerts. They demonstrate high levels of mutual respect in rehearsals and classes when discussing and working on musical activities.
42. Pupils learn about democracy and the rule of law through assemblies, the tutorial programme, PSHE and the broader curriculum. Pupils use democratic processes to make decisions within the school community, such as the nomination and election of pupils to the school council, the pupil leadership team and the positions of head of houses and day pupils. The school utilises visiting speakers with particular areas of expertise, such as the police and religious leaders, to help develop pupils' understanding of the rule of law in the community. Leaders ensure that teachers and any visiting speakers present a balanced view of any political issues. Pupils develop their knowledge and experience of British institutions through the curriculum and also their performances at nationally significant places of worship and music venues.
43. Leaders take pupils' views into account to influence developments within the school, such as the recent changes to the food provided and the PE programme. The suggestions boxes throughout the school and boarding provide opportunities for pupils to give feedback.
44. Day pupils and boarders receive appropriate and impartial careers guidance from suitably trained staff, including about both musical and non-musical potential future pathways. The careers provision takes into account nationally available principles of careers guidance to ensure pupils receive suitable careers guidance in all year groups. Pupils explore the transferability of their musical skills to those likely to be required by future employers. Staff use their musical expertise and connections to support pupils in exploring musical pathways, including non-performance options. Pupils applying to non-musical destinations receive appropriate support in preparing for and applying to destinations such as university courses and apprenticeships. Pupils considering a gap year are given guidance to plan their time away from education or employment.
45. The *Life After Purcell* Programme supports older pupils as they look ahead when they have to manage their own lives, without the support of school. This includes advice on health and wellbeing,

consent, how to develop a balanced approach to nutrition and exercise, financial education, the management of risk and help to prepare them for life in British society.

46. Pupils develop their sense of social responsibility by contributing to the local community. They are trained as outreach facilitators and this helps them to share their musical performance skills through, for example, visits to local residential homes, hospitals, care homes and outreach programmes working with local primary schools.

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. Governors and leaders give safeguarding a very high priority and ensure that the school's safeguarding procedures are robust and in line with current statutory guidance. They also ensure that staff understand the importance of contextual safeguarding with regard to the school's specialist character. Governors maintain a well-informed oversight of safeguarding, including through visits to the school and scrutiny of reports from leaders with designated safeguarding responsibilities. They receive regular safeguarding training.
49. The designated safeguarding lead (DSL) and safeguarding team work closely with all staff and pupils to ensure the efficient safeguarding of pupils. They are swift to respond to safeguarding concerns as they arise. The safeguarding team work effectively with relevant external agencies, seeking advice and, when necessary, referring concerns onwards. Safeguarding records are detailed and secure. The safeguarding team work closely with the director of boarding, house parents, residential house staff, health centre nurses, the learning support co-ordinator, the counsellor, the PSHE co-ordinator and mental health first aid champions to support the wellbeing of any pupils affected by safeguarding issues.
50. The school has rigorous systems in place to ensure that the recruitment of staff fulfils current statutory requirements. The school conducts all required pre-employment checks and records these accurately in a single central register of appointments (SCR). Leaders and governors check the SCR and staff files regularly to ensure all checks have been completed.
51. Staff receive suitable training, including at induction. This ensures that new staff understand the character of the school and potential safeguarding issues that relate to this and to boarding. Staff know how to receive a disclosure and how to communicate any safeguarding concerns that may arise, including any concerns about adults who work with the pupils. The safeguarding team are appropriately trained for their role.
52. Day pupils and boarders are informed how to seek help when needed. Pupils are informed about the identity of the safeguarding team and pastoral staff, with relevant posters displayed throughout the school and boarding. A suitable and regularly tested filtering and monitoring system helps to support pupils' safety when online.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

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

School details

School	The Purcell School
Department for Education number	919/6239
Registered charity number	312855
Address	The Purcell School Aldenham Road Bushey Hertfordshire WD23 2TS
Phone number	01923 331100
Email address	schooloffice@purcell-school.org
Website	www.purcell-school.org
Proprietor	The Governors of The Purcell School
Chair	Dr Bernard Trafford
Principal	Mr Paul Bambrough
Age range	11 to 19
Number of pupils	195
Number of boarding pupils	148
Date of previous inspection	10 to 13 May 2022

Information about the school

54. The Purcell School is an independent co-educational day and boarding school located in Bushey, Hertfordshire since 1997. It is a company limited by guarantee, governed by its directors who are its trustees. The school is one of four specialist music schools in England supported by the Department for Education (DfE) music and dance scheme.
55. There are three boarding houses situated on the school's campus. Two provide co-educational accommodation for pupils in Years 7 to 9 and Years 10 to 13 respectively, the third is a boarding house for female boarders in Years 10 to 13.
56. The school has identified 34 pupils who have SEND. Two pupils in the school have an education, health and care (EHC) plan.
57. The school has identified English as an additional language for 31 pupils.
58. The school states its aims are to provide young musicians who demonstrate the potential to become exceptional, irrespective of background, with outstanding teaching within a supportive school environment and to equip them with the self-confidence, adaptability, maturity and perspective to sustain their professional development and personal fulfilment throughout their lives.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

29 April to 1 May 2025

59. A team of four 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
- observation of a sample of extra-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection
- discussions with the chair and other governors
- discussions with the principal, school leaders, managers and other members of staff
- discussions with pupils
- visits to the learning support area and facilities for physical education
- visits to boarding houses accompanied by pupils and staff
- 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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