

NCEA Duke's Secondary School

Address: Academy Road, Ashington, Northumberland, NE63 9FZ

Unique reference number (URN): 135886

Inspection report: 28 April 2026

Exceptional	
Strong standard	
Expected standard	
Needs attention	
Urgent improvement	

Safeguarding standards met

The safeguarding standards are met. This means that leaders and/or those responsible for governance and oversight fulfil their specific responsibilities and have established an open culture in which safeguarding is everyone's responsibility and concerns are actively identified, acted upon and managed. As a result, pupils are made safer and feel safe.

How we evaluate safeguarding

When we inspect schools for safeguarding, they can have the following outcomes:

- **Met:** The school has an open and positive culture of safeguarding. All legal requirements are met.
- **Not met:** The school has not created an open and positive culture of safeguarding. Not all legal requirements are met.

Expected standard

Inclusion

Expected standard

Leaders have fostered a welcoming and inclusive culture. They have a willingness and resolve to help all who need it. Leaders work well with external agencies to support pupils in a variety of ways. Leaders have risen to the challenge of supporting an increasing number of disadvantaged pupils who have a wide range of needs and barriers to learning.

Staff know how to help pupils who need extra support in lessons. For example, leaders have ensured information for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) is clearly focused on positive action to engage them in learning. Leaders have put in place other strategic provision to support pupils in a variety of ways. Reasonable adjustments through actions, such as establishing the 'ARC' and 'Lighthouse'. These provisions support pupils to engage or re-engage with education effectively. Leaders also ensure that alternative provision is used in pupils' best interests.

Pupils are well-known by staff and leaders alike. Leaders ensure that additional funding available to support disadvantaged pupils is used well. For example, leaders take proactive approaches to support pupils known to, or previously known to, children's social care. This enables staff to champion their personal development and academic support.

Leadership and governance

Expected standard

Leaders have a clear vision for the school. They model the school values well for pupils and staff. Leaders have used their precise understanding of pupils' needs to develop an aspirational, inclusive and caring culture. This is well established. It is evident in the positive, constructive atmosphere throughout the school. Leaders have rightly prioritised key areas such as attendance and achievement. While these have not improved as swiftly as leaders would like, leaders have undertaken appropriate actions to improve these over time. They have made timely and effective changes to provision to reflect the increasing number of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities at the school. Leaders engage effectively with other professionals to drive improvements. Staff benefit from a well considered career development programme which is driven by leaders' priorities, informed by research and responsive to emerging trends. As a result, staff are united in their desire to see pupils succeed and are supportive of leaders' priorities.

Those responsible for governance meet their statutory duties effectively. For example, they carefully oversee the school's safeguarding systems and use a variety of information to support and challenge leaders. The trust has increased the school's leadership team to help drive positive change, for example in relation to behaviour.

Leaders ensure their decisions are consistently made in pupils' best interests. They maintain a clear oversight of the use of alternative provision and support pupils despite previous poor experiences in education. Leaders work closely with parents and the wider community.

Leaders have ensured that the school's personal development programme is well designed. They actively promote the wellbeing of pupils, taking into consideration their various needs. The personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) curriculum provides pupils with knowledge across a wide range of relevant topics. Staff support the work done in PSHE with carefully selected assembly topics, thoughtful activities in tutor time and individual pastoral support. Leaders have recently increased the capacity of pastoral support for pupils. This allows staff to give pupils the support they need.

Pupils know how to keep themselves safe, including when online and can talk confidently about this. Staff work closely to ensure the curriculum is both proactive and reactive to what is going on in the lives of pupils. Pupils demonstrate a secure understanding across a range of important topics. These include healthy relationships, consent and the fundamental British values.

Pupils benefit from an array of trips that support their learning, both academically and culturally. For example, visits related to key stage 4 subjects and residential in key stage 3 enrich and broaden pupils' experience of the wider world. Pupils also enjoy after school clubs, particularly the significant number of sporting opportunities.

Leaders have constructed an effective careers programme that supports pupils throughout the school. Leaders have rightly prioritised raising pupils' aspirations and older pupils appreciate the support they have received, such as visits to local colleges and providers. Pupils have a wide range of opportunities to encounter the workplace and raise their awareness of what they could do in the future. Pupils receive independent, impartial advice to support informed choices. They also have opportunities to explore other post 16 pathways, including T levels and plentiful information about apprenticeships. These prepare them well for the next stage in their lives, with many disadvantaged pupils securing positive next steps in education, employment or training.

Post 16 provision

Expected standard 

Despite the upcoming closure of the sixth form, leaders ensure a broad post-16 offer is in place that combines academic and vocational routes with appropriate enrichment. The curriculum has been appropriately sequenced to support student progress through different subjects and qualification types. Teachers typically teach effective lessons. Students focus well and engage positively with staff, producing the appropriate quality of work. Where they may need extra support and adaptations, these are provided appropriately. Students broadly achieve in line with national figures in external examinations.

Students demonstrate highly positive behaviour and attitudes. They feel safe, act maturely and build appropriate relationships with staff. Staff deliver an engaging, age-appropriate personal development programme. Students are able to engage in meaningful debate, through regular discussions with staff and assemblies. Students take part in a wide range of activities, such as participating in sport. They are proud to take up leadership opportunities. Staff have ensured that a consistent careers programme is in place. It is well connected to employers and includes planned work experience. This prepares students well for their next steps. When they leave, students go on to a range of appropriate destinations, such as

apprenticeships or further study. Students with additional needs are well prepared for life after school.

Needs attention

Achievement

Needs attention 

Pupils do not attain and progress as well as they should over time. Current published data show that overall pupils' attainment and progress are below national averages at the end of key stage 4. In lessons, teachers sometimes move on to the next part of the curriculum before ensuring pupils' knowledge is secure. This means pupils develop gaps or misconceptions in their knowledge.

Leaders have rightly focused on improving pupils' achievement across the whole curriculum. This work is assisting pupils to make better progress in some areas, such as English and key stage 4 option subjects. Support to strengthen pupils' core skills, for example in reading and mathematics, is showing signs of improvement, including for disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Destination data indicates an improvement in how many pupils are making positive next steps, with the active support of leaders and staff. Consequently, pupils are now better prepared for their next stage of education, employment and training.

Attendance and behaviour

Needs attention 

Pupils' attendance has been too low for too long. Leaders are taking appropriate action to improve attendance. They have focused on understanding reasons pupils may not attend more. As a result, leaders have introduced robust systems for monitoring and responding to pupils' absence. These have led to recent improvements in the attendance of pupils, particularly for disadvantaged pupils. Persistent and severe absence is also declining. However, leaders recognise that attendance still needs to be higher.

Leaders have carefully crafted a culture of positive behaviour in the school. Leaders have high expectations of how pupils should conduct themselves. Lessons are calm and pupils are increasingly demonstrating positive attitudes towards their learning. Pupils feel supported and are becoming more aspirational about what they can do and achieve.

Leaders carefully track all types of behaviour incidents. Pupils are confident that staff will deal with issues swiftly and effectively, such as bullying. Leaders ensure there is a consistent response to dealing with incidents when they occur. This is helping pupils who need additional guidance to feel supported. This increased consistency of approach is also resulting in the number of suspensions decreasing over time.

Curriculum and teaching

Needs attention 

There is variability in how well the curriculum is delivered. In the main, teachers use a clear structure to start lessons effectively and help pupils to reflect back what they know.

However, teachers do not always check pupils' understanding in lessons well enough. As a result, teachers sometimes do not adjust their teaching or provide effective feedback. This means pupils do not always secure the knowledge that they need.

Leaders have ensured a broad, sequenced and ambitious curriculum exists within all subjects. For example, they have ensured content covered in Year 7 is carefully aligned with key stage 2. Leaders increasingly evaluate the curriculum and teaching accurately. From this they identify priorities for improvement. They ensure this feeds into staff's professional learning, which is starting to address the inconsistencies in teaching that exist.

Teachers have secure subject knowledge. They typically adapt learning to support pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities well. Generally, teachers use information about disadvantaged pupils to help reduce their barriers to learning effectively. Leaders ensure that pupils in need of extra help with their reading, mathematics and writing skills receive additional support appropriate to their need.

What it's like to be a pupil at this school

Pupils enter an inclusive environment at Duke's where they can have their aspirations raised, grow personally and experience ambitious and calm lessons. Overall, pupils are keen to do well. They engage with staff positively and respectfully. Pupils understand the behaviour system and find it fair and consistent. They appreciate the support they receive from staff who know them well. Pupils learn how to stay safe and build very positive relationships. They feel confident that bullying is dealt with if it happens. Pupils know who to go to if they have concerns.

Most pupils enjoy school. Whilst their attendance remains a key challenge, this is showing signs of improvement. Irregular attendance leads to gaps in pupils' knowledge and affects their progress. Whilst the curriculum is ambitious, teaching is variable, particularly in how it helps pupils to address the gaps they have in their knowledge. Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) benefit from proactive help that enables them to access the full curriculum.

Pupils' achievement at the end of key stage 4 over time has not been as high as it needs to be. Leaders and staff are clear on the improvement priorities to help pupils to be increasingly ready for future success. Pupils, including those with SEND, build firm foundations to enable them to access the ambitious curriculum. Leaders keep a close eye on pupils who may be more vulnerable, act quickly and review this support regularly.

Pupils regularly demonstrate a secure understanding of the school's 'LIGHT' values. They are respectful of each other. Pupils speak knowledgeably about equality and British values. They appreciate the broad range of activities available. Pupils contribute meaningfully to school life and learn the importance of taking responsibility for themselves and the impact that their actions have on others.

Next steps

- Leaders should ensure that teachers use assessment information carefully to adapt teaching to address any gaps or misconceptions in knowledge and so enable pupils to achieve better outcomes, including in public examinations.
 - Leaders should continue to work with families and external agencies to prioritise improving pupils' attendance, so that more pupils attend school more often.
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About this inspection

This school is part of Northumberland Church of England Academy Trust which means other people in the trust also have responsibility for running the school. The trust is run by the chief executive officer (CEO), Alan Hardie, and overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by John Brearley.

Inspectors carried out this full inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Following our renewed inspection framework, all inspections are now led by His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) or by Ofsted Inspectors (OIs) who have previously served as HMIs.

Inspectors spoke with the principal of the academy, CEO, trust school improvement advisor, trustees including the vice-chair, the members of the local governing body, the diocese, the local authority, parents and pupils during the inspection.

The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 8 to 13 with information and engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.

The inspectors confirmed the following information about this school:

The school makes use of nine alternative provisions, of which six are unregistered.

The trust took the decision earlier this academic year to close the post-16 provision in the school at the end of August 2026.

Principal: Russ Atkinson

Lead inspector:

Richard Wakefield, His Majesty's Inspector

Team inspectors:

Bernard Clark, Ofsted Inspector

Dan Brinton, Ofsted Inspector

Katherine Snowden, Ofsted Inspector

Graham Findlay, Ofsted Inspector

Facts and figures used on inspection

The data was used by the inspector(s) during the inspection. More recent data may have been published since the inspection took place.

 This data is from 28 April 2026

School and pupil context**Total pupils**

1,045

Close to average

What does this mean?

The total number of pupils currently at this school and how this compares to other schools of this phase in England.

National average: 1,067

School capacity

1,150

Close to average

What does this mean?

The total number of pupils who can attend the school and how this compares to other schools of this phase in England.

National average: 1,154

Pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM)

49.79%

Well above average

What does this mean?

The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years.

National average: 28.9%

Pupils with an education, health and care (EHC) plan

5.84%

Well above average

What does this mean?

The proportion of pupils with an education, health and care plan. This covers pupils with more support than is available through special educational needs support.

National average: 3.09%

Pupils with special educational needs (SEN) support

18.37%

Above average

What does this mean?

The proportion of pupils with reported special educational support needs at the school.

National average: 13.4%

Location deprivation

Close to average

What does this mean?

Based on the English Indices of Deprivation (2019) and the school's location, we have calculated whether the school is located in a more or less deprived area.

Resourced Provision or SEND Unit (if applicable)

No resourced provision

What does this mean?

Whether school has Resourced Provision or SEND unit (if applicable).

All pupils' performance

English and maths GCSE

Percentage of pupils who achieved grade 5 or above in English and maths GCSE.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25 (final)	20.7%	45.4%	Below
2023/24 (final)	25.6%	45.9%	Below
2022/23 (final)	33.5%	45.3%	Below

Attainment 8

A measure of pupils' point scores across 8 subjects including maths (double weighted), English (double weighted if both language and literature are taken), 3 EBacc measures and 3 GCSE or technical measures.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25 (final)	32.0	46.1	Below
2023/24 (final)	34.0	45.9	Below
2022/23 (final)	39.7	46.3	Below

Progress 8

How much progress pupils made between the end of primary school (key stage 2) and the end of secondary school (key stage 4), compared to pupils across England who got similar results at the end of key stage 2.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2023/24 (final)	-1.05	-0.03	Below
2022/23 (final)	-0.97	-0.03	Below

Disadvantaged pupils' performance

Disadvantaged pupils are those who have been eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years and children looked after.

Disadvantaged pupils' English and maths GCSE grade 5 or above

Percentage of disadvantaged pupils achieving grade 5 or above in English and maths GCSE.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25 (final)	13.2%	25.8%	Below
2023/24 (final)	19.8%	25.8%	Close to average
2022/23 (final)	16.7%	25.2%	Close to average

Disadvantaged pupils' Attainment 8

A measure of disadvantaged pupils' point scores across 8 subjects including maths (double weighted), English (double weighted if both language and literature are taken), 3 EBacc measures and 3 GCSE or technical measures.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25 (final)	26.1	34.9	Below
2023/24 (final)	29.9	34.6	Close to average
2022/23 (final)	31.6	35.0	Close to average

Disadvantaged pupils' Progress 8

How much progress disadvantaged pupils made between the end of primary school (key stage 2) and the end of secondary school (key stage 4), compared to pupils across England who got similar results at the end of key stage 2.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2023/24 (final)	-1.14	-0.57	Below
2022/23 (final)	-1.27	-0.57	Below

Disadvantaged pupils' performance gap

Disadvantaged pupils are those who have been eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years and children looked after. The school disadvantage gap is the difference between the performance of the school's disadvantaged pupils compared to the performance of all non-disadvantaged pupils nationally.

Disadvantaged pupils' English and maths GCSE grade 5 or above

Percentage of disadvantaged pupils who achieved grade 5 or above in English and maths GCSE.

Year	This school	National non-disadvantaged score	School disadvantage gap
2024/25 (final)	13.2%	53.1%	-40.0 pp
2023/24 (final)	19.8%	53.1%	-33.4 pp
2022/23 (final)	16.7%	52.4%	-35.8 pp

Disadvantaged pupils' Attainment 8

A measure of disadvantaged pupils' point scores across 8 subjects including maths (double weighted), English (double weighted if both language and literature are taken), 3 EBacc measures and 3 GCSE or technical measures.

Year	This school	National non-disadvantaged score	School disadvantage gap
2024/25 (final)	26.1	50.4	-24.3
2023/24 (final)	29.9	50.0	-20.1
2022/23 (final)	31.6	50.3	-18.7

Disadvantaged pupils' Progress 8

How much progress disadvantaged pupils made between the end of primary school (key stage 2) and the end of secondary school (key stage 4), compared to pupils across England who got similar results at the end of key stage 2.

Year	This school	National non-disadvantaged score	School disadvantage gap
2023/24 (final)	-1.14	0.16	-1.30
2022/23 (final)	-1.27	0.17	-1.43

Destinations after 16

Destinations after 16

Percentage of pupils staying in education or employment for at least 2 terms after the end of secondary school (key stage 4).

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2023 leavers (revised)	89%	92%	Average
2022 leavers (revised)	86%	93%	Below
2021 leavers (revised)	91%	94%	Average

16 to 18 performance

A-level average point score

The average points that students achieved per A-level entry.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25 (final)	26.32	35.00	Below
2023/24 (final)	27.56	34.38	Below
2022/23 (final)	22.04	34.16	Below

A-level value added

A score showing students’ progress between the end of key stage 4 and the end of their academic qualification studies.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25 (final)	-0.3	0.0	Below
2023/24 (revised)	-0.1	0.0	Close to average

Absence

Overall absence

The percentage of all possible mornings and afternoons missed due to absence from school (for whatever reason, whether authorised or unauthorised) across all pupils.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25 (3 term)	13.6%	8.4%	Above
2023/24 (3 term)	13.0%	8.9%	Above
2022/23 (3 term)	11.7%	9.0%	Above

Persistent absence

The percentage of pupils missing 10% or more of their possible mornings and afternoons.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25 (3 term)	39.3%	23.4%	Above
2023/24 (3 term)	40.3%	25.6%	Above
2022/23 (3 term)	40.9%	26.5%	Above

Our grades explained

Exceptional 

Practice is exceptional: of the highest standard nationally. Other schools can learn from it.

Strong standard ●

The school reaches a strong standard. Leaders are working above the standard expected of them.

Expected standard ●

The school is fulfilling the expected standard of education and/or care. This means they are following the standard set out in statutory and non-statutory legislation and the professional standards expected of them.

Needs attention ●

The expected standards are not met but leaders are likely able to make the necessary improvements.

Urgent improvement ●

The school needs to make urgent improvements to provide the expected standard of education and/or care.

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