

# Francis Combe Academy

Horseshoe Lane, Garston, Watford, WD25 7HW

**Inspection dates** 26–27 November 2013

<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	Previous inspection:	Satisfactory	3
	This inspection:	<b>Requires improvement</b>	<b>3</b>
Achievement of pupils		Requires improvement	3
Quality of teaching		Requires improvement	3
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Requires improvement	3
Leadership and management		Requires improvement	3

## Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

### This is a school that requires improvement. It is not good because

- Progress made by students in English and mathematics has been rising over the past few years, as have GCSE results, but not enough students exceed nationally expected progress by the end of Key Stage 4.
- The most able students are not always challenged in lessons, so make less progress than they could.
- Until recently, behaviour was an issue for the academy, with a large number of fixed-term exclusions and poor attendance. Although much improved, students' attitudes to learning still sometimes require improvement, particularly where teaching does not fully engage them.
- Too much teaching requires improvement in English, mathematics and science.
- The sixth form requires improvement. Although achievement is improving and the programmes students follow cover everything they should, too few have stayed on into the sixth form and completed two years of study.
- Teachers' comments in marking do not always give students clear advice on how to improve their work, and they are not routinely expected to respond.
- Many of the teachers who lead subjects are only beginning to be held accountable for students' standards and the quality of teaching in their areas of responsibility.
- Students' progress is not tracked carefully enough, particularly in Key Stage 3 and the sixth form, and some targets set for students are too low.

### The school has the following strengths

- Behaviour has improved considerably this term, as noted by students, parents and staff.
- Attendance has also improved and is now above the national average.
- Governors and the sponsor provide a good level of challenge and support to academy leaders.
- Leaders and governors have started to bring about rapid improvements through better systems to raise the quality of teaching and learning. This has already raised staff morale.
- Disabled students and those who have special educational needs make good progress as a result of effective support by learning support assistants.

## Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 40 lessons or part lessons, small-group work, tutorial sessions (called 'smart time'), an assembly and parts of several lessons during 'learning walks'. Some lessons were observed alongside senior staff, who were also observed feeding back to teachers.
- Inspectors held discussions with students during lessons, around the school and in three organised meetings. They spoke with the acting principal, other members of the leadership team, the Chair of the Governing Body and another governor, teachers with subject and other responsibilities, the consultant headteacher who is supporting the academy, other teachers and support staff.
- The team looked at students' work in lessons and heard them read.
- Inspectors analysed the 41 responses to the staff questionnaire and the 67 responses to the online Parent View questionnaire.
- Inspectors looked at a range of documents provided by the school, including: examination and internal assessment data; records of meetings of the governing body; the school's evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses and the resulting improvement plan; examination analyses and annual reports for subjects; safeguarding documents and records; policies; records of the monitoring of lessons; and documents relating to the management of teachers' performance and training.

## Inspection team

Helena McVeigh, Lead inspector	Additional Inspector
Christopher Cheswright	Additional Inspector
John Greevy	Additional Inspector
David Bennett	Additional Inspector
Susan Cox	Additional Inspector

## Full report

### Information about this school

- Francis Combe Academy is an above-average-sized secondary school that became an academy in September 2009, sponsored by West Herts College. It moved into new buildings in September 2012. The relatively small sixth form has decreased in size in recent years.
- The proportion of students for whom the school receives the pupil premium (additional government funding for students known to be eligible for free school meals, looked after by the local authority or from families with a parent in the armed forces) is just above the national average.
- The proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is above average. The largest ethnic group is of White British heritage, with small numbers of students from a very wide range of other ethnic groups. The proportion of students who speak English as an additional language is above the national average. Very few students are at an early stage of learning English.
- The proportion of disabled students and those who have special educational needs supported at school action is well above average. The proportion supported through school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is below average.
- The school has specially resourced provision for students with special educational needs in a unit for students with specific learning difficulties (SPLD) that is funded by the local authority. The five students currently in the unit are all from the school.
- A small number of students in Years 10 and 11 study on work-related courses at the West Herts College for one day each week.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for students' attainment and progress.
- There has been a high turnover of staff since the last inspection, with nearly a third leaving in the last academic year.

### What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of teaching in order to raise standards further and improve students' attitudes to learning, by ensuring that:
  - teachers always match work closely to students' different needs and give the most able students work that challenges them to attain high standards, particularly in English, mathematics and science
  - the written feedback to students consistently includes clear guidance on how to improve their work, and they have opportunities to respond
  - all teachers assess students' understanding vigilantly during lessons, and adapt teaching when it is clear that some students have not grasped a concept or others could be moving on more quickly.
- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by ensuring that:
  - students' progress is tracked rigorously in Key Stage 3 and the sixth form, and all students are set challenging targets
  - subject leaders are held accountable for the quality of teaching and students' achievements in their subject areas in all key stages.

## Inspection judgements

### The achievement of pupils requires improvement

- Students enter Francis Combe Academy with attainment that is well below average. Whilst most students make adequate progress, not enough make more than the expected three levels of progress between the end of Key Stages 2 and 4 in English and mathematics. The proportion that did was below the national average in both subjects in 2012, particularly for the few more-able students who had attained Level 5 in primary school.
- Results in GCSE examinations have risen over the past four years, but are still below the national average in terms of the proportion of students gaining five A\* to C including English and mathematics. There was a dip in 2013, to 50% from 53% in 2012, for a year group that had particularly low attainment on entry and a high proportion of students with special educational needs. Predictions for 2014 and current work in books suggest that GCSE results will improve this year in English, mathematics and science, with higher proportions making and exceeding expected progress in English and mathematics.
- Students have been entered for a range of science examinations in the past, with the proportion gaining two A\* to C passes at GCSE or equivalent being well below average. Many more students were entered for three sciences in 2012/13 and results were better than in previous years. The newly appointed science coordinator has sensibly rationalised the science curriculum in Key Stage 4 to reduce the number of courses that students can follow.
- The academy has been appropriately selective in its use of early entry for GCSE examinations. For example, all the students who sat the mathematics examination in November attained grades A or B.
- Achievement in the sixth form requires improvement because retention rates are low and not all students make as much progress as they could by the time they sit examinations. The academy explains that the entry requirements for many subjects have been too low and they have been made more demanding for the current students. Results in AS and A level examinations improved in 2013, with a significant rise in the proportion of students gaining A\* to C grades. The current students generally made good progress in lessons seen during the inspection as a result of effective teaching.
- Disabled students and those who have special educational needs, including those in the unit for specific learning difficulties, make good progress due to the effective well-chosen help and guidance they receive. Students who are learning English as an additional language are similarly well catered for. They often exceed expected progress and achieve well.
- Students' literacy skills are often weak when they start in Year 7 and their reading ages are well below average. The academy has used its 'catch-up' funds effectively for these students, who are given an extra literacy lesson each week as well as one-to-one support. Literacy activities are also included as part of weekly form tutor sessions.
- The gap between the achievement of students eligible for the pupil premium funds and their non-eligible peers is narrowing in terms of their progress over the two key stages, particularly in mathematics. In terms of attainment in English and mathematics, the gap increased slightly in 2013 to on average around one-third of a GCSE grade. However, these particular students had started with significantly lower attainment and a high proportion had special educational needs.
- Around 26 students attend work-related courses at West Herts College for one day per week,

where they achieve well. Their attendance and progress are monitored closely by academy staff. Students are very positive about the sports leadership course, and say that it has improved their motivation, confidence and attendance.

### The quality of teaching

### requires improvement

- The quality of teaching is inconsistent. Although some good teaching was seen, particularly in the sixth form, too much requires improvement in English, mathematics and science.
- Teachers too often fail to match tasks to the different needs of students, giving them all the same work. The most able students are not challenged enough in these lessons and work at a slower pace than they are capable of. They do not progress as rapidly as they otherwise could.
- The quality of written feedback to students is not consistent even within subjects. Teachers use different approaches to written feedback and not all are giving clear guidance about what students need to do to improve or attain the next level. Only in the best cases are students given time to respond to teachers' comments or additional challenges. Practice is consistently good in art and design technology.
- In some lessons, teachers are not checking regularly enough how well students are learning and whether they are understanding concepts. It was evident in some mathematics lessons, for example, that a few students had failed to grasp what was being taught and were left floundering whilst others were moving ahead.
- Learning support assistants provide valuable and effective support for disabled students and those who have special educational needs in lessons and in the base for students with specific learning difficulties. They question these students skilfully, as well as supporting others that they recognise need help in lessons.
- Teachers show that they have secure subject knowledge and are enthusiastic about what they are teaching. In the best lessons they enthuse and inspire students and set very clear expectations about the quality of work. In an outstanding history lesson, the teacher's enthusiasm, lively and dramatic approach resulted in a high level of engagement and interest by students and a willingness to ask and answer questions to a good standard.
- Relationships are positive between staff and students. Teachers mainly manage students' behaviour well and consistently apply the school's system for awarding merits and demerits. Students say that most teachers are approachable and help them to make progress. They nearly all know the level or grade at which they are working and what their target is for GCSE or the end of Key Stage 3.

### The behaviour and safety of pupils

### requires improvement

- Behaviour has been an issue until the recent past. There a large number of fixed-term exclusions and attendance was poor. The behaviour observed during the inspection was typically good, but students' attitudes to learning still sometimes require improvement, particularly where teaching does not fully engage them.
- Students, staff and governors have commented on the recent significant improvements in behaviour in lessons and around the school. Students assign this to the new behaviour policy introduced by the acting principal at the end of last term, which they say is motivating because it is more about rewards (merits) than sanctions. An improvement in behaviour is also reflected in

the decrease in exclusions and incidents of behaviour, which are now meticulously logged.

- During the inspection, students were polite and respectful towards staff and visitors in lessons and around the school. They were smartly dressed and most took care over the presentation of work in their books. There were very few examples of low-level disruption, and these were mainly associated with weaknesses in teaching. Students' attitudes to learning were usually positive in most of the lessons observed.
- The majority of parents who responded to Parent View indicate that students are well behaved and that the academy deals appropriately with bullying.
- Students enjoy taking on extra responsibility, such as reading with Year 7 students or acting as sports leaders to coach Year 7 students and primary school pupils. They are proud of being chosen as class representatives.
- Attendance has also improved and this term has risen to 94.5% from 93% in the 2011/12 school year. The academy has introduced several measures to improve attendance including rewards, meetings with parents and prosecuting them in some cases. An assistant principal has been assigned responsibility for regularly monitoring attendance, which helps staff to take more prompt action when a student's attendance starts to decrease.
- Students say that they feel safe and enjoy coming to school. They know about the different forms of bullying and say that it is rare and dealt with appropriately when staff are made aware of it. They appreciate being able to inform staff online, which helps them to do so more confidentially. Students explain that the academy's response to any homophobic and racist language is immediate and results in 20 demerits and an automatic detention.

### **The leadership and management**

### **requires improvement**

- The academy has been through a period of instability over the past four years with three different principals. The current acting principal has held that position since May 2013 and, supported by other senior leaders and governors, has introduced a number of measures to improve behaviour, teaching and standards. There are signs that these are having a positive impact, but it is too early to judge that the improvements, for example in behaviour, are sustained and there is still much to do to ensure that teaching is consistently good.
- The academy's tracking of students' attainment and progress is not rigorous enough, particularly in Key Stage 3 and the sixth form. Senior leaders have introduced a new system to capture data at four points in the year, which is a positive step forward, but the targets are not always challenging enough.
- The effectiveness of subject leaders varies and some are new in post. They are beginning to take more responsibility, but are only just being held to account for standards and the quality of teaching in their subjects. Senior staff are supporting them and some subject leaders are being mentored by other more experienced and effective colleagues. The annual reports prepared by each subject leader, which include a thorough analysis of the 2013 results and progress in each key stage, are a useful initiative.
- The leadership of provision for students, who are disabled or have special educational needs, including those in the base, is good. The new coordinator has already undertaken a thorough audit of needs and a review of the number of students identified as needing school action support. The systems for tracking students' progress and the impact of support have improved.

There are now weekly team meetings, and training for learning support assistants.

- Senior leaders have an accurate view of teaching in the school as a result of their regular monitoring. Teachers who are underperforming are given programmes of support, with positive results in most cases. The academy's self-evaluation report is an accurate and refreshingly honest document that reflects a comprehensive and thorough level of recent monitoring and analysis of data.
- The curriculum in Key Stages 3 and 4 promotes students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural education well. Students are taught about life in a democracy through, for example, humanities lessons and their own experience of class representative elections. There is a very wide range of lunch-time and after-school clubs and recently re-introduced trips, for example to France, enhance students' learning and cultural development. Students in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form receive a good level of independent careers advice, including from the Connexions service and talks from a range of different employers.
- The sixth form curriculum is in a state of transition as school leaders have planned changes for 2014 that include more appropriate pathways for the students and take account of the other specialist provision in the local area. The current options are limited and include a small number of academic and work-related subjects, reflecting the relatively small number of students who remain in the sixth form. Study programmes are well organised and appreciated by students, who are positive about the subjects they are studying and the support they receive.
- The way staff performance is managed has been revised this year, and staff speak very positively about it. They are given clear, relevant targets and appropriate training to enhance their roles as teachers and leaders.
- The acting principal has, in a short time and with good support from governors and the sponsor, skilfully improved the climate in the school. Staff and students commented on this and described the academy as a 'happy place' now. Staff morale has improved considerably, as evidenced by the change in their response to a recent school survey compared with February 2013, and to the Ofsted questionnaire. This was also apparent in the way staff related to each other and to students and visitors. There is now a renewed sense of optimism and shared vision for the academy, with greater clarity about what needs to be done to secure improvement.
- Links with the sponsor, West Herts College, have benefited the academy in a number of ways. College staff have shared their expertise. For example, they led provision for special educational needs during the time when there was no coordinator in the academy, and this resulted in sustained effective provision for these students. The sponsor has assigned a consultant headteacher to work with the academy for two days each week. This has proved very beneficial in helping to establish systems and structures to tackle some of the negative legacy of the past.
- **The governance of the school:**
  - Governance is a real strength. Several governors are also representatives of the sponsor, which has helped to forge a strong link between the institutions and ensured a good knowledge of education as well as management systems and practice.
  - It is evident from records of meetings that governors provide a high level of knowledgeable challenge to leaders on a wide range of issues, including standards, quality of teaching, curriculum changes and self-evaluation. They have taken difficult decisions about staff employment and acted promptly to bring about improvements in the leadership of the academy.
  - Governors are well aware of about the strengths and weaknesses in students' performance and of the quality of teaching. They make sure that any pay rises and promotion are fair and

reflect the quality of teaching and students' progress.

- Governors ensure that all statutory responsibilities are met, including for safeguarding, ensuring equality of opportunity and tackling discrimination. They receive detailed accounts of the performance of different groups of students including those eligible for the pupil premium and how these funds are spent, such as: one-to-one and small group tuition; providing students with stationery and revision guides; Easter and half-term revision workshops; providing an assigned mentor for each student; and taking them to events run by the University of Hertfordshire.



## What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>

## School details

<b>Unique reference number</b>	135876
<b>Local authority</b>	Hertfordshire
<b>Inspection number</b>	427178

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

<b>Type of school</b>	Secondary
<b>School category</b>	Academy sponsor-led
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	11–18
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Gender of pupils in the sixth form</b>	Mixed
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	1140
<b>Of which, number on roll in sixth form</b>	84
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	The governing body
<b>Chair</b>	Gill Worgan
<b>Principal</b>	Deborah Warwick (acting principal)
<b>Date of previous school inspection</b>	20 June 2012
<b>Telephone number</b>	01923 672964
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