

The St Christopher School Academy Trust

Mountdale Gardens, Leigh-on-Sea, Essex, SS9 4AW

Inspection dates 5–6 March 2014

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Good	2
	This inspection:	Outstanding	1
Achievement of pupils		Outstanding	1
Quality of teaching		Outstanding	1
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Outstanding	1
Leadership and management		Outstanding	1

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school.

- This is an exceptional school. It is special in every sense of the word.
- The headteacher is uncompromising in her drive for improvement. Her ambitious plans are fully supported by the dedicated and skilled staff.
- She knows the individual needs of pupils very well and goes to extraordinary lengths to make sure that these needs are met.
- Staff have high aspirations for themselves and their pupils. This match of expectations enables pupils to make progress in leaps and bounds.
- The quality of teaching is going from strength to strength so that it is always good and a lot of it is outstanding.
- Parents are overwhelmingly positive about the school and have nothing negative at all to say about it. Several parents told inspectors the school was 'amazing'.
- The school keeps its pupils very safe because of the well-thought-out and rigorously checked systems that are in place.
- Pupils agree they feel safe and that staff are very good at helping them with any problems they may experience.
- Staff deal very effectively with any difficult behaviour so that it does not interrupt lessons.
- The sixth form is good and gives pupils ample opportunities to prepare for life after school.
- Governors are very knowledgeable about the school. They use this knowledge to make sure that the headteacher and staff are doing the best they can for every pupil.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 20 lessons, many of which were seen together with senior leaders. They also visited parts of lessons, registration, snack and break times, and joined pupils at lunchtime. Inspectors watched pupils arrive at school and go home, and listened to pupils reading.
- Meetings were held with the headteacher and other senior leaders as well as a representative from the local authority, a selection of governors, one of the school’s counsellors, teachers responsible for different subjects and age groups, as well as a group of pupils. Inspectors also spoke to pupils as they went around the school.
- The small sixth form was out of school on a residential trip during the inspection, so inspectors spoke to the sixth form leader and some parents of sixth formers on the telephone. They looked carefully at pupils’ work and how it is checked and talked to senior leaders about pupils’ progress.
- Inspectors looked at a variety of documents and records including those to do with pupils’ attendance, progress and behaviour.
- The inspection took into consideration the 14 responses to the online questionnaire, Parent View, as well as the school’s own questionnaires to parents, pupils and staff. Several letters, cards and emails from parents were also received by the inspection team.

Inspection team

Debra McCarthy, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Jackie Jackson-Smith

Additional Inspector

Andrew Lyons

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The St Christopher School Academy Trust is a large, over-subscribed special school that became an academy in April 2012. It is an SEN (special educational needs) specialist school for communication and interaction.
- Pupils attend from Southend-on-Sea and other local authorities. Most are White British and speak English as their first language. An above average number of pupils are eligible for the pupil premium (extra government funding for pupils known to be eligible for free school meals, those looked after by the local authority or those from a family with a parent in the armed forces).
- All pupils have statements of special educational needs. About 70% of pupils have autism spectrum disorder. In the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stages 1 and 2, pupils' needs include communication, interaction cognitive and learning difficulties as well as autism spectrum disorders and social and emotional difficulties. At Key Stages 3 and 4, pupils' needs are mainly autism spectrum disorders and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.
- The very small sixth form caters mainly for pupils from other special schools, most of whom have autism spectrum disorders or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.
- Some older pupils attend a local secondary school, St Thomas More, for GCSE courses as well as 'Action Learning' for practical, work-related training.
- The school provides an outreach support service to other local special and mainstream schools.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise achievement further by:
 - teachers sharing with each other some of the excellent ways they have found of marking pupils' books and helping pupils know what they need to do to improve their work
 - fully implementing existing plans to extend and improve provision for the growing number of sixth form pupils.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils is outstanding

- The vast majority of pupils do exceptionally well from their starting points, across all subjects, whatever their special educational need. All groups of pupils, including boys and girls, do equally well.
- Many pupils with autism spectrum disorder learn alongside their classmates in the main school, but those who find this difficult have their needs met in a number of autism resource bases where they receive very specific help. Some spend a part or eventually all of their school day in the main school as a result of the effective help they receive there.
- Pupils with attention deficit disorder or behavioural, emotional and social difficulties benefit from a highly personalised approach from skilled, experienced staff who help them overcome some of their difficulties in order to do the best they can.
- Children in the Early Years Foundation Stage often learn alongside other younger pupils in Key Stages 1 and 2. The excellent progress they make in improving their social and communication skills stands them in very good stead for making the most of their time at school.
- Teachers regularly and meticulously check how well pupils are doing in each subject so that they quickly notice if someone is falling behind and do something about it. For example, senior leaders noticed that, although pupils were doing well in mathematics, their progress was not quite as rapid as it was in English and put strategies in place to rectify this.
- The school makes sure that the way it checks pupils' progress is rigorous and accurate by regularly comparing what it does with other local special and mainstream schools. This means they can be sure that the information teachers collect about how well pupils have done is useful for planning what they need to learn next.
- The excellent interactive computer programme used by the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 staff involves parents in a unique way by showing them what their children do at school and enabling parents to participate and respond. As one parent said, 'It's amazing!'
- The school works hard at helping pupils learn to read so that they can use sounds and letters (phonics) to improve their reading skills. This means pupils make good and sometimes better progress in reading.
- The school makes sure that pupils can take qualifications that are right for them. In Key Stage 4 they are able to take GCSEs and other qualifications, such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme. Last year, a number of pupils were successful in gaining pass grades in physical education, art and design, English and mathematics. Pupils are also able to undertake GCSE courses with partner schools in information and communication technology (ICT) and science.
- The small number of pupils in sixth form benefit from very individual programmes of study designed to prepare them for life after school. During their residential trip they achieved a useful 'stand-alone' qualification, while making strides in their social and emotional skills. One usually shy student described the experience of driving an electric boat as 'awesome'.
- The school's very effective use of its pupil premium funding has made sure that eligible pupils often make even better progress than their peers. Year 7 catch-up funding also helps eligible

pupils do their best.

- The primary school sport funding has been used to make sure that every pupil is taught by a specialist physical education teacher. Pupils report greater enjoyment in physical education as a result of even better teaching.

The quality of teaching is outstanding

- Teaching has gone from strength to strength in recent years. Senior leaders are very skilled in looking for ways for teachers to improve and regularly check to make sure that the quality of teaching is always high. As a result, teaching is typically good and often outstanding.
- The strength of the teaching at The St Christopher School is in the way that time is so well used. In the lessons where pupils made the most progress, not a second was lost. Teachers listened carefully to pupils' responses and used their answers to skilfully move onto the next stage, changing their plans appropriately if need be.
- Questioning is used effectively to check how well pupils have understood what they have been taught, from the youngest pupils in the Early Years Foundation Stage right through the school. Teachers are very good at making sure that their questions are at the right level to get the best out of each pupil. For example, in one exemplary lesson, the teacher helped pupils use their mathematical thinking skills to work out a practical problem about surface area.
- Teachers' very good knowledge of their subjects, combined with expertly planned lessons, means that pupils are able to practise what they have learnt previously, as well as acquire new skills. This was seen in one Key Stage 3 class where pupils learnt to produce a spreadsheet. Pupils also have the opportunity to reflect on what they have done before, for example in a Key Stage 4 class where they evaluated a three-course meal they had prepared for several guests the week before.
- Staff have very high expectations of pupils, and teachers and learning support staff work very well together. As one parent said, 'The school is very fair, but they also expect pupils to do their best.'
- Learning is also fun; for example, in one Key Stage 2 lesson pupils enjoyed playing a number card game with their teacher. In an art lesson in one of the autistic resource bases, one pupil experimented with a computer program on the interactive whiteboard while others used different tools to paint with enthusiasm and gusto.
- Teachers make sure that pupils know what is expected of them, and explain clearly what they want them to do and how much time they have to do it. They use a variety of methods to enable pupils to know what they are aiming for, such as taping marking cards to the desks so that pupils can check how well they are doing.
- Information and communication technology is used exceptionally well to help pupils learn, from emails from the 'Why Bird' to tell pupils how well they have done to exploring how to take photographs and 'selfies' with computer tablets.
- Marking in books is positive and encouraging but comments are not always followed up, so that on occasions it is not clear if pupils know exactly what they need to do to improve their work.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are outstanding

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding. This is because staff work together very well to manage pupils' difficult behaviour. Behaviour plans are drawn up that get to the root of why pupils behave in a certain way and help staff to deal with it effectively and consistently.
- Reward charts are used to encourage good behaviour and pupils can earn 'golden time' or other benefits. Sanctions are proportionate and may involve time away from the main class to reflect. Pupils are reminded about classroom rules at the beginning of lessons. Symbols or pictures are used to help those pupils who need visual clues to help them remember what they need to do.
- Incidents of difficult behaviour are recorded very carefully and checked on a regular basis to see if things are improving or not. Some pupils arrive at the school from mainstream schools and other special schools where their behaviour has not been managed successfully. They make significant progress because of the appropriate interventions that The St Christopher School puts in place.
- The school employs a team of staff specifically to look after pupils' well-being and also give families support to help their children with difficult issues, through parenting workshops and home visits where necessary.
- School counsellors help pupils with behavioural and emotional difficulties or attention deficit disorder to express themselves in a more appropriate way. One parent said the change was such that it was like having a different child.
- The school employs its own speech and language therapists who also have skills in helping pupils with autism spectrum disorders overcome their sensory difficulties. Staff help pupils to address any eating and drinking issues that stand in the way of them growing into happy, healthy young people.
- The school's work to keep pupils safe and secure is outstanding. There are a high proportion of well-trained adults who work closely together to make sure that any concerns are reported to the appropriate senior leaders and acted upon.
- Pupils say they feel safe and there is not really any bullying. One pupil said that there was sometimes banter, but that adults deal with it very well. New pupils say they were made to feel very welcome and were helped to settle in quickly. Pupils were seen playing happily together outside, on their own, with others shooting basketballs or playing football in teams supervised by staff and older pupils.
- Parents wholeheartedly agree that their children are kept happy and safe in school, and that they are very well looked after.
- The excellent personal, social and health education programme makes sure that pupils learn how to keep themselves safe physically and emotionally, as well as on the internet and when using social media sites.
- The school make sure that pupils are treated equally, for example, by setting up a girls' group to look specifically at issues to do with growing up and learning how to deal with situations that may arise.

The leadership and management are outstanding

- The headteacher is uncompromising in her drive to make the school as good as it can be and leaves no stone unturned in removing any obstacles in her way. Overcoming potential barriers to pupils' achievement is what the school does best.
- The headteacher has the complete support of skilled and experienced senior leaders and the school's questionnaire to staff showed an incredibly high level of support.
- Senior leaders have very clear ideas about what the school needs to do to improve still further, and ambitious plans to extend the accommodation and provision for sixth form are already under way.
- Parents are also overwhelmingly positive about the school, which is highly regarded within the local authority and by the other schools to whom it offers support. Senior leaders have worked very hard to involve all its parents in the life of the school and have earned the high esteem in which it is held.
- The subjects and other activities the school provides are well thought out and imaginatively delivered to make sure that pupils enjoy their time at the school. Older pupils have useful work experience opportunities both in and out of school.
- Additional clubs and activities both before and after school enhance pupils' experiences. Every opportunity is taken to use outside visitors from this country and abroad to add their expertise. The line of pupils' muddy boots outside one classroom where pupils were taking part in a short course led by the army was testament to this.
- The school provides excellent opportunities for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. They learn to look after their school by putting away equipment and to care for others by raising money for the homeless. They play competitive sport in teams and learn how to cope with losing as well as winning. Bollywood dancing and trying Indian food gives them a taste of other cultures in Britain today.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - Governors have a wide range of useful skills and combine this with first-hand knowledge of the school to make sure that the headteacher and staff are doing a good enough job. They are very thorough in checking that staff performance is directly related to their pay.
 - Governors have a lot of information about how well pupils are doing and ask the headteacher challenging questions about it. They know that pupil premium funding is being used appropriately to help those eligible to do their best.
 - Governors' work on keeping pupils safe is exceptional and ensures that all safeguarding requirements are met.

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

Unique reference number	138044
Local authority	Southend-on-Sea
Inspection number	430793

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

Type of school	Special
School category	Academy special converter
Age range of pupils	3–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	209
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	6
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Franklin Hartle
Headteacher	Jackie Mullan
Date of previous school inspection	23 November 2010
Telephone number	01702 524193
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