

The Links Alternative Provision Academy

1 Hixberry Lane, St Albans, Hertfordshire AL4 0TZ

Inspection dates 16–17 October 2014

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Inadequate	4
	This inspection:	Requires improvement	3
Leadership and management		Requires improvement	3
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Requires improvement	3
Quality of teaching		Requires improvement	3
Achievement of pupils		Requires improvement	3

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

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

- Students make expected progress from their individual starting points.
- Last year, students made less progress in mathematics and science than in English because of previous weaknesses in the quality of teaching and the curriculum.
- Students do not read or spell as well as they should because the teaching of reading and spelling is not sufficiently well planned.
- Students are not always challenged sufficiently to produce enough work or work of a high standard.
- Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is not well developed because the curriculum for their personal development is not well planned.
- Although improving, students' attendance is low and fixed-term exclusions high.
- Subject leadership and the leadership of special educational needs are in early stages of development.
- Leaders do not pull together the information about students' attainment and behaviour sufficiently to provide a succinct picture of how well students achieve academically and in their personal development.

The school has the following strengths

- The academy is improving in all areas of its work because, since requiring special measures, the right priorities have been identified and acted upon with urgency.
- Students' behaviour has improved significantly because of higher expectations from staff, and improvements to teaching and the curriculum.
- The new headteacher makes sure that the staff focus on students' safety and academic achievement.
- The governing body plays a significant part in the strategic direction of the academy and is steadfast in taking the difficult decisions needed to address the underperformance of staff and students.

Information about this inspection

- The inspector looked at the quality of teaching and students' achievements by observing lessons, scrutinising data and students' work, talking to students and staff, and taking account of the academy's monitoring.
- The inspector met with the headteacher, the deputy headteacher, the assistant headteacher, the assessment leader, the special educational needs coordinator, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Chair of the Action Group, teachers, support staff, administrative staff and students.
- The inspector considered the responses to the academy's recent questionnaires from staff and parents. There were no responses to Parent View.

Inspection team

Heather Yaxley, Lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Full report

In accordance with section 13 (4) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that the school no longer requires special measures.

Information about this school

- All students have special educational needs in relation to social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. A few students have statements of special educational needs or education, health and care plans.
- Students are placed at the academy through the local authority admissions panel. Students in Key Stage 3 attend for a 12-week programme with the intention that they return to their home school. Students admitted to Key Stage 4 usually stay until they go on to post-16 provision.
- The academy gives outreach support to local schools.
- A larger proportion of students than average are known to be eligible for free school meals or are in the care of the local authority. The academy receives pupil premium funding for these students.
- An average proportion of students is from minority ethnic backgrounds.
- No students attend off-site provision.
- The academy has two sites. All students are based at the Hixbury site. Use of the Woolam site is under review.
- The academy was placed in special measures in May 2013. Monitoring inspections took place in September 2013, January 2014 and May 2014.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of teaching and students' learning by:
 - using students' individual plans and targets to inform lesson plans and learning activities
 - having high expectations of students' participation in lessons
 - giving students enough time and guidance to complete written tasks to a high standard
 - systematically teaching students to read and spell.
- Improve students' personal development by providing a well-planned personal, social and health education programme.
- Reduce absence and exclusions further so that attendance for individual students rapidly accelerates to national averages.
- Improve assessment of students' achievement and behaviour by pulling the information together to provide clear evaluations of the strengths and priorities for development.
- Make sure that all subject leaders and the special educational needs coordinator play a full part in the evaluation and development of the academy's work.

Inspection judgements

The leadership and management requires improvement

- Following the judgement that the academy required special measures, the governing body took immediate action to address inadequacies in senior leadership and students' safety. Then, as now, there was a strong sense of urgency to put things right. The senior leadership team and most of the teachers and support staff are new since the previous inspection.
- Arrangements to safeguard students are well thought through, understood by all staff and appropriately implemented. The governing body and local authority keep an appropriately frequent watchful eye on the impact of the staff's work to keep students safe. There are occasions when the written records of concerns about students' welfare do not reflect the high-quality follow-up undertaken by staff.
- The behaviour team and administrative staff play significant roles in keeping track of students' welfare needs and behaviour. There is a wealth of information available but is not used strategically enough to analyse carefully how well students' academic skills and personal development are improving. This is true also of the use of the assessment of students' academic achievements.
- The pupil premium is used for a range of support based on students' individual needs and circumstances. A detailed evaluation of the difference that the funding makes to students' academic achievement is yet to be undertaken.
- There has been so much work to do to improve teaching and students' learning that some aspects of leadership are only now gaining momentum. Subject leaders have support from staff at local secondary schools but do not yet play a full part in academy improvement. The new coordinator for special educational needs, with support from a local secondary school, has done some good work to set up personal programmes for students but these are not used routinely by teachers when they plan lessons and learning activities. This means that students' work is not always carefully matched to their needs, interests and personal goals.
- The curriculum has evolved systematically over the past 17 months, although sometimes hampered by extensive staff absence. The improvement started immediately following the previous inspection. Within a week, timetables were increased to 25 hours a week and students were soon given increased opportunities to study GCSEs and a wider range of subjects. Most subjects are now taught by qualified teachers and subject specialists. The programme for students' personal development is not planned carefully enough to make sure that they are well informed about equal opportunities, how to keep themselves safe in a wide range of situations or about their responsibilities as citizens in modern Britain.
- Although not required to do so, senior staff and the governing body actively seek the support and partnership of the local authority. This works well and is welcomed as an external, critical view on the academy's performance, as well as professional support to resolve personnel issues.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - The governing body is highly competent, confident, pro-active and well informed about the quality of teaching and students' performance.
 - Governance is very effective in holding senior staff to account for the quality of teaching, students' learning and behaviour, and the implementation of agreed policies and procedures.
 - The governing body takes an appropriate role in addressing staff competency. It makes sure that staff perform the roles and responsibilities appropriate to their pay grades and the Department for Education's *Teachers' Standards*.

The behaviour and safety of pupils requires improvement**Behaviour**

- The behaviour of students requires improvement because they do not have a good enough understanding of how to be good citizens, and because fixed-term exclusions, although reducing, are high.
- There is mostly a calm atmosphere around the academy. Students and staff focus on learning and lessons proceed generally uninterrupted. Staff, governors and students acknowledge that this represents a significant improvement. Teachers, support staff and administrative staff are good role models.
- Most students pay attention to the rules for staying on-site, wearing uniform and using appropriate language.
- Punctuality to lessons is often good, although not as good for arrival first thing in the mornings.

Safety

- The academy's work to keep students safe requires improvement because students do not know, or understand, enough about how to keep themselves and others safe, and, although improving, their attendance is low.
- As a result of thorough monitoring and significant work with parents, students' attendance has increased and exclusions reduced.
- Staff at all levels of responsibility are extremely vigilant about students' well-being and work well as a team to support students and their families.
- Students report that they feel safe at the academy and parents agree with this view.
- Supervision in class and around the site is appropriate to encourage students to act responsibly and respectfully. Teachers are supported by additional staff in lessons only when needed for practical activities, such as in science or technology, or when individual students need a little extra help to get back on track.

The quality of teaching requires improvement

- Teaching requires improvement because activities and strategies are not informed sufficiently by students' individual learning needs, plans or targets. This limits the challenge for, and participation of, some students.
- The quality of teaching has improved significantly since the previous inspection because staff competency has been addressed. Staff understand fully their responsibilities to make sure that students succeed academically as well as socially and behaviourally.
- Staff are sometimes too hesitant about giving students sufficient time to respond and reflect on their learning orally or in writing because of concerns that behaviour will deteriorate. However, when behaviour does deteriorate or anxieties rise, students are well supported to return quickly and confidently to their work. Similarly, when given challenging work, students often rise to the challenge.
- Reading and spelling are not taught systematically, limiting students' literacy skills across the curriculum.

The achievement of pupils

requires improvement

- Students' achievement requires improvement to make sure that they make good progress from their individual starting points.
- All but two of the 23 students leaving Year 11 last July went on to appropriate college courses. Most students achieved the expected grades and range of qualifications in most subjects because of improvements teaching, the curriculum and behaviour management.
- Most students leaving at the end of their Key Stage 3 placement returned successfully to their home school.
- In general, students across the academy made expected progress over the past academic year. Achievement in science was not as good as it should be because of staff absence and limited coverage of the course.
- Poor attendance negatively impacts on students' progress.
- Students' work is often poorly presented and a poor reflection of the learning and enjoyment that has taken place. The work is not in enough detail to be a useful record of what they have learned or can do, for future reference.

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	139197
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	447389

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	Pupil referral unit
School category	Academy special converter
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	32
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Marie Lynch
Headteacher	David Allen
Date of previous school inspection	1 May 2013
Telephone number	01727 836150
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