

Merlin Top Primary Academy

Braithwaite Avenue, Keighley, West Yorkshire, BD22 6HZ

Inspection dates 12–13 March 2015

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected as an academy
	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
Early years provision		Requires improvement 3

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

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

- Leaders, managers and governors have not secured consistently good teaching in order to raise pupils' achievement across the school. This means that not all pupils make good enough progress nor reach the levels of which they are capable.
- Until recently, teachers' assessments were not always accurate, due to a lack of training. Consequently, work has not always been set at the right level for pupils and is not demanding enough for some, especially the most able.
- Recently appointed middle leaders check pupils' work is accurately assessed, but do not hold teachers to account in their given areas of responsibility.
- Some teachers and assistants do not always work closely enough together to ensure the additional support provided for some pupils helps them to make as much progress as they might.
- The new marking policy, which involves giving pupils clear advice about how to improve their work, is not applied consistently by all teachers.
- Teachers do not always encourage pupils to present their work neatly or to correct spelling mistakes.
- Until recently, governors have not ensured the pupil premium funding has been used effectively enough to help disadvantaged pupils.
- The learning activities planned for children in the early years do not always keep them interested in their learning, particularly the boys. Consequently, not all boys achieve as well as girls.
- Academy plans are accurately focused on priority areas for improvement. However, success criteria are not as clear as they could be and leaders do not always check quickly enough whether actions are leading to improvements.
- Pupils' behaviour requires improvement. Their concentration wanes when they are not sufficiently challenged.

The school has the following strengths

- The new executive headteacher has quickly grasped the most important areas to be tackled. She has introduced changes which are starting to have a marked impact, for example in teaching and assessment. As a result, pupils' achievement is improving.
- Staff morale is high. Leaders have taken action to improve teaching through rigorous performance management and staff training. Staff welcome the support they have received.
- The academy's work to keep children safe is good. Pupils enjoy school and feel very safe. Parents have confidence that their children are cared for well.
- Leaders and governors recognise that expectations were not high enough in the past. Leaders and the governing body are setting more ambitious targets for staff. They have clear expectations for good teaching and pupils' learning. As a result, the school is improving.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed teaching and learning in all classes. They saw 19 part lessons, two of which were jointly observed with the executive headteacher.
- Discussions were held with groups of pupils, senior and middle leaders, a representative of the Northern Education Trust and members of the governing body.
- Inspectors took account of 12 responses to the on-line questionnaire (Parent View). They also spoke informally with parents as they brought their children to the academy, considered the views expressed in telephone calls from parents and considered parents' responses to the academy's own questionnaires.
- Responses to the inspection questionnaire from 36 staff were received and their views taken into account.
- The inspection team listened to pupils read, talked with them about their learning and reviewed the work in their books.
- The inspectors reviewed a number of documents, including the academy's checks on how well it is doing, the academy's improvement plan, data on pupils' current progress, leaders' records of the monitoring of teaching and learning and records relating to pupils' behaviour, attendance and safeguarding.

Inspection team

Helen Gaunt, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

David Fann

Additional Inspector

Alastair Younger

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- Merlin Top converted to become an academy on 1 April 2013 and is a member of the Northern Education Trust group of academies. When its predecessor school, Merlin Top Primary School, was last inspected by Ofsted, its overall effectiveness was judged to require improvement.
- The academy is larger than the average-sized primary school.
- The early years provision comprises Nursery and Reception classes. Children attend these classes for half of the week, either on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday morning or Wednesday afternoon, Thursday and Friday.
- The proportion of pupils who are of White British heritage is below the national average. The proportion who speak English as their first language is above average.
- The proportion of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs is above average.
- The proportion of disadvantaged pupils, those who are supported by the pupil premium, is well above average. The pupil premium is funding provided for pupils known to be eligible for free school meals and those looked after by the local authority.
- In 2014, the academy did not meet the government's current floor standards, which are the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress in reading, writing and mathematics by the end of Year 6.
- Since Merlin Top became an academy there have been significant staff changes. In November 2014, Northern Education Trust recruited a new executive headteacher and an assistant headteacher to lead the academy. The executive headteacher is a national leader of education (NLE). There have also been other staff changes and changes in the membership of the governing body.
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What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve teaching so that all is good or better in order to raise the achievement of all pupils, close the gaps in attainment between disadvantaged pupils in the academy and non-disadvantaged pupils nationally, and ensure that boys make as much progress as girls in the early years by:
 - ensuring all teachers plan work that matches pupils' needs and interests and builds on their previous learning
 - ensuring that pupils are given challenging work that holds their concentration and interest
 - further developing teachers' subject knowledge so they plan tasks and pose questions which are sufficiently challenging for the most able pupils to attain the highest levels of which they are capable
 - making sure all teachers implement the school's marking policy, by providing clear guidance for pupils so that they understand how to improve their work and have opportunities to respond to this advice to move on in their learning
 - ensuring that teachers always highlight pupils' spelling mistakes and check pupils do their corrections
 - providing further training for teachers and classroom assistants so that pupils receiving additional support make good progress.
- Improve the effectiveness of leaders and managers, including governors, by:
 - further developing the roles of the newly-appointed middle leaders so they hold teachers to account for improving pupils' achievement in their respective areas of responsibility
 - ensuring improvement plans incorporate specific success criteria and that they are reviewed regularly using pupils' progress information to check on that progress
 - ensuring that governors measure the impact of the use of the pupil premium funding in terms of pupils' progress and attainment.

An external review of the academy's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Inspection judgements

The leadership and management requires improvement

- New leaders have placed a relentless focus on improving the standard of education and raising the aspirations of the entire academy community. Decisive action has been taken to tackle underperformance. Poor behaviour is not tolerated and expectations have been raised. Although it is too early to see the full impact of some of the recent changes, there is tangible evidence to demonstrate these actions are already having a positive impact on pupils' achievement, behaviour and enjoyment of learning. While the work of middle leaders is not fully developed, senior leaders have demonstrated they have the capacity to make further improvements.
- Senior leaders have a clear understanding of the academy's strengths and weaknesses and have taken immediate action to improve teaching, through the teachers' performance management system, and improved assessment of pupils' work and progress. Teaching is improving in all year groups. There are now more rigorous procedures in place to monitor the quality of teaching through lesson visits, checking the standard of work in pupils' books and undertaking joint lesson observations with external consultants. Professional development for staff has improved but there is more to do to ensure that the training of new and less-experienced staff is given a high priority.
- Plans are appropriately focused on making the necessary improvements. However, success criteria are not always clear and it is not always evident when the actions taken by leaders have been reviewed or plans amended, in order to take into account the progress, or lack of it, towards the desired objectives.
- There has been a high turnover of staff, which has been well managed over the last seven months and staff morale is high. They are extremely positive about the journey upon which the academy has embarked under the leadership of the new executive headteacher. Staff are appreciative of the challenge and support with which they are provided and also of the increased clarity of their roles and responsibilities.
- Senior leaders quickly identified that assessment information was unreliable, and they took immediate action to address this. They are now able to use reliable data to pinpoint any underachievement, thereby identifying where additional support and intervention are required, to improve the quality of teaching and to raise teachers' and pupils' expectations of what can be achieved.
- Middle leaders check effectively that assessments are accurate and use data to identify where pupils may be underachieving. However, the role of middle leaders requires further development because these staff are not held fully accountable for improving teaching and raising pupils' achievement. This is because a number of middle leaders are newly appointed and are not fully trained in all aspects of their role.
- While leaders strive to ensure equality of opportunity, not all pupils have the same opportunities to achieve as well as their better-performing peers in the academy or nationally, because of inconsistencies in the quality of teaching.
- In the past, insufficient focus has been placed on decreasing the gaps in attainment between disadvantaged pupils in the academy and non-disadvantaged pupils nationally. New leaders and governors appreciate the pupil premium funding should be used to best effect for eligible pupils and are beginning to check the progress of these pupils more carefully.
- The primary school sport funding is used well to provide pupils with specialist teaching and coaching in physical education. More opportunities for pupils to take part in a range of sporting activities have had a positive impact on pupils' achievement in physical education and sport. Pupils are now more enthusiastic about participating in a wider range of sport, thus further promoting their health and well-being.
- In the past, the curriculum was failing to meet the needs of many pupils and this contributed to their low achievement rates. To better meet the needs of all pupils, and to ensure that more emphasis is placed on developing pupils' numeracy and literacy skills across the full range of subjects, a new creative curriculum has been implemented. Every half-term a new topic is introduced to pupils in a lively and interesting way, through trips, visits and project-type activities and the topic is taught across all subjects. Parents are kept informed about activities, accompanying homework and pupils' progress meetings, through the academy's colourful website and regular newsletters. Ongoing changes have led to improvement in all subjects. Opportunities to promote numeracy and literacy across the full range of subjects are being developed

through a 'key skills' focus in every lesson. Pupils told inspectors they are much more keen to learn than previously.

- Pupils' move up to secondary school education is well managed. Staff from these schools visit Merlin Top to talk with Year 6 pupils. There are opportunities for pupils to attend a 'transition' day in their allocated secondary school in order to familiarise themselves with the school, prior to starting in the following September.
- The academy's work to promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is effective. A high priority is placed on the importance of good relationships, promoting tolerance and tackling discrimination. This is apparent in the way pupils of different social backgrounds and ethnic groups work together and get on with each other. Key themes are taught in appropriate subjects and reinforced in assemblies. The curriculum and other activities provide ample opportunities to prepare pupils for life in modern Britain.
- The executive headteacher is supported by the Northern Education Trust, which has provided a range of support for the academy, including support for governors, coaching for leaders and opportunities for teachers to visit outstanding schools and to witness outstanding teaching. This has contributed to the improvements that have been made in the quality and impact of teaching.
- Parents are very happy with the academy and the majority would recommend the academy to others.
- Safeguarding procedures meet requirements.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - Governance has recently improved and is increasingly effective. Governors undertake appropriate training and make frequent visits to the academy. They understand the regular and comprehensive information and reports, including data, that are presented by the executive headteacher and increasingly ask searching questions to confirm the accuracy of the information.
 - Governors are informed about the quality of teaching and how action taken by the executive headteacher is tackling weaknesses. They set appropriate targets for the executive headteacher. Governors have recently implemented systems to ensure that pay increases for teachers are related to pupils' progress.
 - Governors keep a close eye on finances; they know how the pupil premium and primary school sport funding are spent but, until recently, they have not ensured that the pupil premium funding has been used effectively enough to narrow the attainment gaps between the academy's disadvantaged students and non-disadvantaged pupils nationally.
 - Governors fulfil their statutory duties effectively, including safeguarding pupils.

The behaviour and safety of pupils

requires improvement

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils requires improvement.
- Pupils are usually strongly involved in their learning and eager to succeed. In classes, pupils' concentration wanes when they are not sufficiently challenged and, on rare occasions, low-level disruption can occur. Teachers ensure that this is quickly addressed and the academy's behaviour policy is consistently applied by all staff.
- Pupils have a clear understanding of how they are expected to behave and say behaviour has improved in the past few months.
- There is a calm and welcoming atmosphere in the academy. Visitors are warmly welcomed, by pupils and staff, and there are positive relationships between staff and pupils.
- Pupils value the support, encouragement and care they receive from adults. They say learning is fun and they appreciate the support they get from the all adults. Pupils in Years 5 and 6 were very complimentary about the recently appointed learning mentors, saying that they could tell them, 'just about anything.'
- Pupils enjoy coming to the academy and cannot think of anything they would do to improve it.
- Pupils play and work together well. There is no litter or graffiti. The academy makes good use of outdoor spaces at breaks and lunchtimes to help pupils develop cooperation and other social skills.
- Pupils understand their collective responsibility for one another and are seen supporting each other in classes and during breaks and lunchtimes. They are very actively involved in fund-raising activities and keen to be involved as academy councillors, for which they have to be elected.
- There are rigorous procedures to monitor and improve pupils' attendance, which is average and

improving.

- Children in the early years behave well.

Safety

- The academy's work to keep pupils safe and secure is good.
- Pupils say they feel safe. They have a good understanding of the different forms of bullying, including racial and cyber-bullying and are very clear that people should be treated equally despite their individual differences or the varied choices they make.
- Pupils say bullying is rare and any incidents are quickly dealt with by the staff. This is confirmed by the academy's record-keeping procedures and parents and staff agree with the pupils' positive views.
- Pupils are well prepared for keeping themselves safe in later life. For example, they learn how to keep themselves safe when using the internet or when coming to and going from the academy at each end of the day. Pupils in Years 3 to 6 are often reminded of safety issues during the last five minutes of the day, just before they are going home. They appreciate these constant reminders.

The quality of teaching

requires improvement

- Teaching requires improvement because it has not secured consistently good progress in all subjects and for all pupils, as a result of some low expectations in the past.
- Teaching is now improving quickly as a result of more focused leadership, decisive performance management and effective support for staff. However, teaching is still not consistently good across all year groups and subjects because teachers do not always use their knowledge about pupils' prior learning to plan work that is suitably challenging, especially for the most able.
- Classrooms are bright and there is plenty of space to support a range of learning activities and movement around the room. Teachers take advantage of this, planning plenty of different ways for pupils to learn. In some rooms, and on corridors, high-quality displays promote pupils' learning and their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. However, the displays in some classrooms are limited and do not reinforce pupils' learning of key facts and key words as well as they could.
- Marking is regular and accurate. Many teachers make helpful comments on pupils' work. However, comments by teachers about what pupils should do next to improve their learning are not always as helpful as they might be; teachers do not always give pupils time to act on the advice in order to improve their learning.
- Teachers are beginning to set higher expectations for pupils in their extended writing in a range of lessons. This is in response to the new curriculum, which is aimed at developing pupils' literacy skills in all subjects. Inspectors noted, in lesson observations and in pupils' work, that this sometimes results in pupils spending long periods of time writing out the key skill they are working on, in the form of a title, at the expense of putting their own ideas down on paper. As a result, progress is variable. For example, in Year 2 pupils' books the title covered four lines and a number of pupils had only written three lines of their own. When leaders check pupils' work, they are now focusing more closely on how well teachers use pupils' literacy targets across different subjects.
- Activities in mathematics are designed to challenge pupils' thinking and to stimulate discussion about how to solve problems. Pupils currently make good progress in mathematics lessons because expectations are usually high and activities are often pitched at the right level for different groups of pupils. For example, in a Year 6 activity on fractions, the teacher's well-planned activities enabled pupils of similar levels of ability to share their ideas and to explain their findings to the rest of the class. On occasions, not all teaching is effective in developing pupils' learning for all groups within the class.
- Some pupils who find the work difficult benefit from skilful support from teachers and other adults and this helps them to understand what they are learning. Some classroom assistants are very skilled in helping pupils move their learning on at a pace that is appropriate for them. This is not always the case. Where activities have not been planned jointly by teachers and classroom assistants, and where the progress made by pupils in small-group support sessions is not checked regularly, the pace of learning can be too slow.
- Leaders are encouraging good reading habits across all year groups. There is an attractive library and leaders are increasing the range of books available for pupils. Teachers help pupils select books for reading sessions in the academy and at home. The frequency with which pupils read at home is now being checked

by teachers and pupils' reading logs are starting to be used by teachers. Pupils are now challenged to read different books to enliven their work in other curriculum areas and to improve their own story writing. There is sometimes a mismatch between the books pupils read and their understanding of the vocabulary. This detracts from their enjoyment because they do not fully understand the meaning of the text.

The achievement of pupils requires improvement

- Overall, pupils' achievement across the academy requires improvement although standards are now rising.
- Children join the Nursery class with skills and knowledge well below those typical for their age. Currently they make good progress and are well prepared to enter Key Stage 1.
- In 2014, the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in phonics (letters and the sounds they make) by the end of Year 1 was well below average. The academy has improved the teaching of phonics and this is having a positive impact on pupils' reading skills. The proportion of pupils currently reaching the expected level is close to the national average.
- In 2014, at the end of Year 6, pupils' achievement in reading, writing and mathematics was not good. Weak teaching led to pupils making slow progress and attaining standards that were too low. Attainment by the end of Year 2 was also significantly below average. Newly recruited senior leaders have raised staff expectations across the whole academy and have introduced new policies to assist school improvement. However, it is too early to see whether these recent changes have made a consistent impact on pupils' achievement in all year groups.
- The academy's own records show that rates of progress in Key Stage 1 are higher than those seen last year and more pupils are already reaching higher standards. Pupils are now making faster progress and reaching higher standards in all subjects in Year 6, and in mathematics and writing in Year 3. As a result of improvements in teaching, pupils in the current Years 4 and 5 are now making better progress in all subjects, but they have much lost ground to make up.
- The achievement of the most able pupils is not good. The most able pupils in the current Year 6 are beginning to make better progress, given their starting points, towards the highest attainment levels. However, in other year groups, too few of the most able pupils make rapid progress. There is not yet enough emphasis on extending pupils' learning in a range of ways to help the most able pupils attain the highest levels.
- Pupils' achievement in reading is beginning to improve, as a result of improvements to the way phonics is taught. Greater emphasis is placed on reading at home, the use of reading logs and providing pupils with opportunities to read in all subjects.
- Pupils have more opportunities to write about a wide range of topics linked to trips and visits. These are intended to increase their understanding and knowledge of the topic. During the inspection, some good extended writing was seen in pupils' ACE, All Curriculum Evidence, books, and pupils spoke positively about their writing. For example, in Year 5, pupils were writing enthusiastically a biography about a famous person, whom they had selected themselves. When marking books, teachers do not check pupils' spelling mistakes carefully enough in all subjects, so pupils continue to make the same errors.
- Increasingly, in mathematics, pupils have a range of different opportunities to enable them to find things out for themselves and to discuss their learning. However, not enough reach the highest levels because there is sometimes a lack of challenge for the most able pupils, and pupils sometimes find their work too easy.
- Academy records show that disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs receive better quality support in all year groups than was previously the case. However, like other pupils in the academy, their achievement requires improvement.
- Pupils from different minority ethnic groups make similar progress to their classmates, as do those for whom English is an additional language.
- The pupil premium funding is used to purchase additional resources, to reduce class sizes and to provide one-to-one support, so that disadvantaged pupils receive better support in reading, writing and mathematics. In 2014, disadvantaged pupils' attainment was in line with others in the academy but were about a year behind non-disadvantaged pupils nationally in reading, writing and mathematics. Academy records show that the picture is improving in some year groups, where disadvantaged pupils are beginning to do as well as others nationally.

The early years provision**requires improvement**

- Children join the academy in the early years usually have skills and levels of understanding well below those typical for their age. Inaccurate assessments and weak teaching in the past have led to children not making enough progress to prepare them adequately for their start in Year 1. Newly-appointed leaders are aware of this. They have introduced more ambitious targets for staff and children, and worked hard to improve teaching and ensure that assessments are accurate.
- The newly-appointed leader for the early years has a clear understanding of the strengths of the provision and areas for development and is working hard to ensure that strong planning underpins well-organised activities. Leaders have demonstrated the capacity to make further improvements in the early years.
- As a result of improvements in teaching and the quality of assessment information, current groups of children have started to make better progress through the early years and by the end of the Reception Year are now reaching standards closer to where they should be for their age.
- Leaders are aware of the need for further training for staff, to ensure they intervene quickly when children lose interest or go 'off task'. They also understand the need to develop further the range of activities for children so that they maintain an interest in their learning and their progress is sustained. During the inspection, there were occasions when some boys were not fully engaged in their learning because the nature of the tasks did not appeal to them. Some adults were slow to notice this and, as a result, the pace of children's learning slowed.
- Both the indoor and the outdoor Reception areas provide a secure and safe learning environment. Children respond by behaving well and enjoy the learning activities.
- Relationships are good and children's personal development is a strength. Role play, for example, is well supported by adults so children join in enthusiastically and sustain their involvement in activities.
- Staff plan carefully to offer children a range of stimulating activities to promote their personal, artistic and creative development. Children are proud of their books. Each child writes every day and their progress can be seen in their books.

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	139229
Local authority	Bradford
Inspection number	449822

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

Type of school	Primary
School category	Academy sponsor led
Age range of pupils	3–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	324
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Karen Foulger
Headteacher	Shirley Davison (Executive Headteacher)
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected as an academy
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