

Alec Hunter Academy

Stubbs Lane, Braintree, CM7 3NR

Inspection dates 18–19 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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

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

- In 2014 the proportion of students achieving five or more A* to C GCSE grades including English and mathematics was well below average.
- The proportion of students making good progress in English by the end of Year 11 in 2014 was well below average.
- Despite recent improvements the standard of teaching across the school is not yet consistently good in all subjects. Not all teachers are moving students on to the next stage in their learning quickly enough.
- The standard of marking varies across subjects. Not all teachers provide students with detailed guidance on how to improve their work.
- Not all teachers provide work that is sufficiently interesting to motivate students in their learning. As a result a small minority of students lose focus on their learning which can lead to off-task behaviour.
- Not all leaders are consistent in their approach to monitoring and evaluating the effect of teaching on learning to ensure standards are improving rapidly.

The school has the following strengths

- Senior leaders have an accurate understanding of what the academy needs to do in order to improve. As a result there have been a number of improvements since converting to academy status.
- The Academy Trust provides strong and effective support to the academy. As a result of this the leaders within the academy have been able to recruit more effective teachers and to provide training that is focused on staff needs thus bringing about the recent improvements in teaching.
- Governance is strong. The governors know the strengths and weakness of the academy and monitoring procedures are robust.
- The academy provides a safe and caring environment for the students.
- Teaching in mathematics has improved and is consistently strong. As a result achievement in the subject is improving.
- The behaviour of students around the academy is good.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed learning in 40 lessons in a wide range of subjects across the academy. The Headteacher joined inspectors for two of these observations.
- Inspectors also looked at students' written work across a range of subjects and year groups whilst in lessons. They also carried out two separate work scrutinies focusing on English, where they were joined by senior leaders.
- Inspectors held meetings with the headteacher, the chief executive of the trust, the chair of the trust, seven members of the local governing body, subject leaders, senior leaders, four groups of students and a representative from the local authority.
- Inspectors scrutinised a wide range of documents including: self-evaluation and development plans; data relating to students' attainment and progress; documents relating to safeguarding; records of the monitoring of teaching and learning and the performance management of staff; records relating to student behaviour, attendance and punctuality and minutes of the education and performance committee and local governing body.
- Inspectors observed student behaviour in lessons, around the academy and at break and lunchtime. They also held informal conversations with students at these times.
- In planning and carrying out the inspection inspectors took into account 150 responses to the online questionnaire, Parent View, 65 staff questionnaire responses and one letter from a parent.
- This inspection was undertaken at no notice.

Inspection team

Caroline Parry, Lead inspector	Additional Inspector
Alan Brewerton	Additional Inspector
Kay Leach	Additional Inspector
Colin Lower	Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- Alec Hunter Academy opened in April 2013 as part of the Saffron Academy Trust. When its predecessor school Alec Hunter Humanities College was last inspected by Ofsted, it was judged to be inadequate overall.
- Alec Hunter Academy is larger than the average-sized secondary school.
- The proportion of disadvantaged students eligible for support through the pupil premium is below average. The pupil premium is additional funding for those students who are known to be eligible for free school meals and those who are looked after by the local authority.
- Most students are White British.
- The proportion of disabled students and those who have special educational needs is 11%. This is below the national average.
- At the time of the inspection, the academy offered alternative educational provision for four students in Year 11. They attend the Essex County Council alternative education provision at Chapel Hill.
- In 2013–14 the academy did not meet the government’s current floor standards which are the minimum expectations for students’ attainment and progress.
- The academy enters some students early for mathematics in the autumn term of Year 11.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve teaching so that it is consistently good and results in all students making rapid progress in all subjects, particularly in English by:
 - teachers planning activities that stimulate students’ interest, motivate and challenge them so that they sustain their involvement and maintain focus in their learning
 - teachers moving students on in their learning as soon as they are ready
 - ensuring that all teachers adopt and consistently apply the best practices in marking already in place within the academy
 - teachers asking questions that will deepen students’ understanding, especially in English.
- To improve the impact of leadership in raising achievement by ensuring that all leaders consistently monitor and evaluate the impact of teaching on student progress.

Inspection judgements

The leadership and management requires improvement

- Leadership and management currently require improvement because, until very recently, not all senior leaders have been sufficiently focused on making sure that all students achieve good or better progress. As a result teaching and achievement have failed to improve rapidly enough. Inconsistencies in the quality of teaching need to be removed and good progress secured across a range of subjects before leadership and management can be judged good.
- The academy has tight procedures in place for monitoring the work in subject departments. Where these are carried out consistently the quality of learning and student achievement have risen rapidly. However, not all middle leaders are consistent in their monitoring and evaluation. As a result the progress of students varies across subjects.
- The headteacher has successfully shared his aspirations for the students with staff. An overwhelming majority of staff who responded to the staff questionnaire said they know what the school is trying to achieve. Steps taken to improve behaviour around the academy, to celebrate student success and to set students challenging learning targets have all contributed to a positive learning culture. However, leaders are aware that there is still further work to be done to raise students' expectations. Parents expressed confidence in the leadership of the academy.
- Senior leaders have taken positive action to address the various issues that caused inadequate achievement in English. The department now has a stable teaching force and the quality of teaching is monitored closely. Teachers benefit from the expertise and support provided by a member of staff from the trust. Inspectors noticed that standards in English are rapidly improving.
- In the past, judgements relating to the quality of teaching have not sufficiently taken into account the impact of teaching on students' progress. However, during the last year this has changed and leaders now use a range of information to judge teaching. This information is used to support teachers to develop their teaching through training and working with other teachers both within the academy and with their partner school, Saffron Waldon County High School. Several staff commented on how this support has helped them to develop their teaching. However, teaching is not yet consistently good.
- The management of staff performance is strong. It is linked to evidence of students' progress and improvements in teaching. Only teachers who meet their targets are considered for a pay rise.
- The academy's evaluation of its performance is accurate and senior leaders know the strengths and weaknesses. Improvement plans are focused on the right priorities and there is evidence that they are starting to have an impact; for example, the improvement in the teaching of English observed by inspectors. The academy is well placed to continue to improve quickly.
- The pupil premium funding is successfully used to support students with their learning. The academy employs additional staff to provide one to one support to help students along with extra breakfast club and school holiday activities. The funding ensures that disadvantaged students have full access to residential and curriculum trips and activities and to provide resources such as revision guides. Emotional and social barriers of learners are also addressed through mentors and the academy counsellor. Disadvantaged students have equality of opportunity and as a result their achievement is improving.
- The Saffron Academy Trust has provided very effective support to the academy. The chief executive of the trust and a deputy headteacher, both from Saffron Waldon County High School, work in the academy one day a week. They have worked with a variety of senior and middle leaders on improving the quality of teaching, developing the staff training programme, monitoring staff performance and improving teaching and leadership in English. Governors have benefitted from the training opportunities provided by the trust.
- The local authority works closely with the academy trust. The standards and excellence commissioner from the authority is part of the academy's education and performance committee which reviews the work of the school and supports senior leaders in the validation of their judgements about the work of the

academy.

- Academy leaders are committed to equality of opportunity for all students. They do not tolerate discrimination. Understanding the differences between cultures and life-style choices of others underpins the work in the curriculum and of pastoral staff.
- The academy provides a broad and balanced curriculum that is tailored to meet the needs of all students. Students have the opportunity to follow a wide range of GCSE subjects. Those students for whom a fully academic curriculum is not suitable have access to vocational subjects. The range of subjects on offer along with the high quality, impartial careers advice which covers the many post 16 options available to students ensures that they are prepared for the next stage in their learning.
- The curriculum also makes good provision for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of students. In religious education they study a variety of religions and inspectors observed opportunities for students to consider the cultures of others in other lessons. In a Year 8 religious education lesson students discussed the reasons why Sikhs keep their holy book in a special room. The students took a real interest in and showed respect for those who practice the religion. The learning for life lessons also ensure that students have the opportunity to consider factors that affect their lives. For example, Year 7 students were exploring the effects of anti-social behaviour on others. This learning, together with the opportunities students have to apply for leadership posts such as prefect and head boy and girl, makes sure students are well prepared for life in modern Britain.
- The academy also provides a wide range of after school activities. Several subject areas run curriculum trips to enhance students learning for example, in humanities visits have taken place to the houses of Parliament, Berlin, first World War battle fields in Belgium, drama visits to theatres and foreign language trips to Northern France. Students have the opportunity to take part in International visits including taking part as World Challenge Team members visiting countries such as Ethiopia.
- At the time of the inspection there were a small number of Year 11 students attending the Essex alternative education centre. The academy makes good provision for these students who were at risk of not completing their education. Alongside their work experience and college placement the school has ensured that they already have GCSE passes in English literature and science. They monitor the progress of students and ensure that they will gain GCSE English and mathematics. Teachers from the academy teach them one day a week in their placement.
- The academy meets the statutory requirements for safeguarding. Staff and governors receive suitable safeguarding training.
- The Academy Trust provides strong and effective support to the academy and has been instrumental in bringing about the recent improvements in teaching.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - Governors have a clear understanding of the academy's strengths and weaknesses. They effectively challenge and support academy leaders. They are aware of the effectiveness of teaching across the academy and its impact on student achievement. They ensure that pay awards and teachers' performance are linked.
 - Governors understand the school data and what it tells them about student performance, including that of disadvantaged students. They ask challenging questions of the leadership team regarding student achievement, especially in relation to English.
 - Members of the governing body are attached to subject areas. They visit the various departments each term to look at learning in lessons and in student books. They meet with teaching staff and students. They are well informed about the daily work within the school.
 - Governors ensure that safeguarding procedures meet the statutory requirements. They ensure that the academy is a safe and secure environment for both students and staff.

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

- The behaviour of pupils requires improvement. They are generally well behaved as they move around the school and during break and lunchtime. In lessons where the work stimulates their interest and makes high demands on them, students show an interest and enthusiasm for learning. However, where lesson activities fail to challenge and interest students they go off task, and in some of the sessions observed students did not pay full attention to their work.
- Students told the inspectors that there are times when inappropriate behaviour interrupts their learning although no significant example was seen during the inspection. The academy records show that the number of lessons interrupted by low level disruption has greatly reduced.
- The academy is a harmonious community and students support one another well. They are polite and courteous towards one another and to adults. Prefects are proud of their role and carry it out efficiently and support younger students in the academy.
- Attendance remains at the national average and academy staff have successfully worked with families in order to reduce the percentage of students who are persistently absent. Students are punctual to lessons and punctuality to school has greatly improved but the academy realises that they still have more work to do to ensure these numbers remain low.

Safety

- The academy's work to keep pupils safe and secure is good. Students told inspectors that they feel very safe and secure in the school. Inspection evidence supports this. A very large majority of parents also agree that the academy keeps their child safe and that they are well looked after.
- The identity of all visitors is checked and all are provided with information on the academy's expectations relating to their interaction with students and what to do if they have a concern about the safety of students.
- Students spoke confidently that bullying rarely happens in the school, including racism and homophobic bullying. If it should occur students are confident that adults will deal with it, a view shared by most parents. Students told inspectors that all groups of students are accepted as part of the Alec Hunter community.
- Students have a very good understanding of how to keep themselves safe in a variety of situations. They learn about the potential risks they may be exposed to, including extremist behaviour, through the learning for life curriculum. They are made aware of the dangers that could arise from using technology and all are provided with an acceptable user policy. This clearly outlines how to use the internet safely.
- Vulnerable students and those who are finding life stressful are very well supported by the team of professionals who work in the therapeutic centre called 'Andrew's Shed'. The academy works successfully with the families of students who have a history of persistent absence. As a result the proportion of students persistently absent from school has dropped.
- The academy ensures that all students receiving alternative education are safe. They check on students' attendance and staff from the academy visit the centre weekly to talk to students and staff. They ensure that the appropriate risk assessments are undertaken.

The quality of teaching requires improvement

- Teaching and learning require improvement because although it is getting better, it has not been sufficiently challenging over time for students to make consistently good progress.
- Students are eager to learn when activities are interesting and offer an appropriate level of challenge. In

such lessons teachers know their students well and carefully match the learning activities to their needs. They use questions that are probing and stretch students' knowledge and understanding. The teachers have high expectations of what students can achieve and these are clearly communicated to them. In these lessons students approach their work with enthusiasm and are keen to ask the teachers questions and answer them. They take pride in their work and make the necessary improvements in order to make good progress.

- Observations of learning in lessons by inspectors and evidence from students' books over time, shows that teaching requires improvement because of one or more of the following features:
 - activities are not interesting and are either too hard or too easy
 - students spend too long on an activity and lose interest in their learning
 - students' work is not always completed to a high enough standard
 - students show little pride in their work and are unproductive.
- Exercise books are marked regularly by the vast majority of teachers and inspectors saw many excellent examples of marking where students were given very clear guidance on what they needed to do in order to improve their work. In such instances the students responded positively and as a result progress was clearly evident. However, this is not consistent practice across all teachers within the academy and not all teachers provide students with detailed guidance on how to improve their work or make sure students act upon their guidance.
- Relationships between staff and students are good in lessons creating a positive climate for learning. Looking at students' books inspectors noticed that most of them took pride in their work as books are well kept.
- In the past there has not been sufficient emphasis on students practising their literacy skills in other subjects. This year high priority has been placed on the teaching of writing and communication skills across the curriculum. Inspectors saw examples of staff supporting students' literacy by providing them with 'literacy mats' which help them with their punctuation and grammar. Students are given the opportunity to discuss ideas in class, especially in subjects such as history, geography, religious education and English. The academy's reading programme is having an impact on improving the reading ages of students in Years 7 to 9.
- Mathematics is taught effectively and as a result progress in all key stages is improving.

The achievement of pupils requires improvement

- The current achievement of students requires improvement because, although rapidly improving, not all students are performing consistently well across all subjects.
- Students enter the academy with average levels of attainment. However, in 2014 the proportion of students leaving Year 11 with five GCSE grades A* to C including English and mathematics was well below the national average. Mathematics results continue to improve and were in line with the national average. GCSE English results were well below the national average.
- The proportion of students making expected progress in English was well below that nationally and in mathematics it was broadly average. Progress data for the current Year 11 indicates that progress in English has improved rapidly this year and the proportion of students on track to make expected progress has almost doubled compared to 2014. Work in students' books and examples of examination work confirm this rapid improvement. Data for progress in mathematics also confirms that the proportion of students making expected progress is rising.
- Inspectors' observation of the quality of learning in lessons and of the work seen in students' books, along with the academy's data on students' progress, indicate that students' achievement is improving more rapidly across the academy. In Year 10 students are making better progress in both English and mathematics as well as in a range of other subjects. In Key Stage 3 students are making at least expected progress across subjects with an increasing proportion making better than expected progress in

mathematics and English.

- In 2014 the gap in the attainment of disadvantaged students in GCSE English was approximately one and a half grades below that of other students nationally and one grade below other students in the academy. For mathematics the gap was just over a grade when compared to both other students nationally and students in the school.
- As a result of targeted support, current school data shows that in Year 11 the gap between disadvantaged students and others in the academy has reduced to approximately a quarter of a grade in English and one-third of a grade in mathematics. Academy data shows that the gaps in attainment of disadvantaged students and their peers is closing more rapidly in other year groups. They are mostly making broadly similar progress to other students nationally.
- The progress of disabled students and those with special educational needs in 2014 was below their peers and students nationally. The newly appointed special educational needs coordinator is monitoring the progress of students carefully and ensuring that support is well matched to their needs. As a result a larger proportion of these students are now making progress that is similar to other students within the academy.
- The academy has reviewed the policy of entering all students for GCSE mathematics in the autumn term of Year 11. The academy considers carefully who will be entered early to make sure that it does not limit the progress of the most able students. Students who achieve above their target grade go on to study further mathematics. Those that do not re-sit their GCSE examination in the summer term.
- The progress of most-able students has been below average in mathematics and well below in English. The academy is setting more challenging targets for the students in order to raise their attainment. Inspectors saw work from most-able students that showed that more students are now attaining higher grades in Key Stage 4. The school data shows that a larger proportion of more able students are now making good progress, especially in Key Stage 3.
- Students who fall behind in their reading receive targeted support. As a result their reading has improved significantly.
- All Year 11 leavers in 2014 went on to further education or training. Students who attend the alternative education programme also take GCSE subjects in English, English literature, mathematics and science alongside their vocational qualifications. They, too, all progress to further training or education.

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	139402
Local authority	Essex
Inspection number	449855

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

Type of school	Comprehensive
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	991
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Peter Whent
Headteacher	Trevor Lawn
Date of previous school inspection	16 October 2012
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