

Francis Combe Academy

Horseshoe Lane, Garston, Watford WD25 7HW

Inspection dates 3–4 November 2015

Overall effectiveness **Good**

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| Effectiveness of leadership and management | Good |
| Quality of teaching, learning and assessment | Good |
| Personal development, behaviour and welfare | Good |
| Outcomes for pupils | Good |
| 16 to 19 study programmes | Good |
| Overall effectiveness at previous inspection | Requires improvement |

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- The vast majority of current pupils make rapid progress across a wide range of subjects, and achievement overall is rising over time. This is the result of the improvements made to the quality of teaching by leaders across the academy in all year groups and subjects.
- Governors and trust members have considerable teaching and learning expertise, and use it well to hold leaders to account.
- Teachers have responded well to academy policies which have improved the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. They have adapted the best ideas from other schools in order to accelerate the progress of their pupils.
- Academy staff have used the resources of the wider community well to raise achievement. Local volunteers give significant support to individual pupils in the development of their reading skills.
- The overall effectiveness of the sixth form is good. Good information, advice and guidance is leading to higher recruitment and retention of pupils in the sixth form, and strong and improving achievement.
- Pupils are safe in this academy. Attendance is rising, and exclusions are falling. Behaviour in lessons and around the academy is good, with little disruption to learning.
- The spiritual, moral, social, and cultural provision for pupils is broad. Pupils have many opportunities for personal development and reflection, both within the curriculum and through a wide range of extra-curricular activities. Their attitudes to learning in terms of respect and courtesy to others have improved as a result.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Teachers' expectations of less-able disadvantaged pupils, disabled pupils, and those with special educational needs are not as high in a small number of teaching groups, resulting in slower progress.
- The written and oral communication skills of less-able pupils sometimes limits their ability to participate confidently in their learning in a minority of classes.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that the current progress of disadvantaged pupils, disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs matches the rapid progress of others, by:
 - insisting on a level of challenge and expectation in less-able classes that is as high as it is in other teaching groups
 - further developing the written and oral communication skills of pupils across the curriculum, including the use of technical language and opportunities for contributions in class
 - making sure that teachers adopt the academy's best practice in the teaching, learning and assessment of these pupils.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is good

- The Principal and her senior leaders have included the best practice and advice from a wide range of institutions and organisations to improve achievement and the quality of teaching across the curriculum. As a result, pupils who start their secondary education with attainment that is well below average have caught up with their peers nationally by the end of Key Stage 4.
- Middle leaders have embraced the academy's plan for improvement with enthusiasm. They are now more highly skilled in analysis, intervention and in implementing professional development that meets the needs of individual teachers within their areas of responsibility than they were at the time of the previous inspection. They ensure that the academy's policies for improvement are having a sustained impact across the curriculum.
- The academy's provision for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils is good. Pupils have the opportunity to take part in activities with the wider community, working with adults who are much older, and with much younger primary school pupils. Different faiths are explored in religious education lessons, and different faith groups visit the academy to deepen pupils' learning. Cultural diversity is celebrated through the curriculum, and particularly in the arts, and is supported by other aspects of the academy's work, such as the range of food on offer in the academy's restaurant.
- The curriculum prepares pupils well for the next stage in their education. Academy leaders review the design of the curriculum on a regular basis, and modify it in order to meet the needs of individual pupils. As a result, the curriculum is well matched to the needs of pupils, and helps them enjoy their learning. The curriculum is enriched by in excess of 40 extra-curricular activities and visits that take place through the academic year, and by a significant number of community volunteers who work with individual pupils and small groups.
- Pupils have a wide range of opportunities to explore British values, within the curriculum and through a carefully devised programme of assemblies which include visiting speakers. As a result, they are well prepared for life in modern Britain. For example, democracy is explored effectively both within lessons, such as in a Year 8 history lesson about the English Civil War, and in academy activities such as the election of class representatives, and the involvement of local politicians. Discussions in a Year 11 English lesson on the symbolism of the poppy in the exploration of poetry from the First World War allowed pupils to consider British history, and the role of Britain in Europe. Such opportunities have helped reduce the number of incidents in the academy which relate to racism and homophobia, and increased the enthusiasm of pupils to explore these issues further.
- The academy's safeguarding provision meets statutory requirements. Records are maintained well, and appropriate training means that staff know how to identify and raise safeguarding concerns. The academy collaborates well with parents, carers and external agencies in order to keep pupils safe, and follows individual concerns through to a conclusion.
- The provision for pupils supported by the pupil premium is having an increasingly positive impact on their achievement. The funding provides support for individual pupils, resources and materials in subjects like design technology, small group teaching by teachers and teaching assistants, and extra classes in literacy and numeracy. The impact of this provision can be seen in the improved progress of disadvantaged pupils currently on roll at the academy with middle and upper starting points; their progress matches and often exceeds that of other pupils.
- The local authority has a productive relationship with the academy. It has brokered effective support from local outstanding schools, and provided effective consultant support that has challenged academy leaders, introduced them to examples of best practice, and helped them to identify where the quality of teaching can be improved.
- The academy's trust has brought about major improvements, including academic attainment which has trebled over a period of four years, faster progress which now matches the national average, and the removal of a major financial deficit. The trust has used its educational expertise to re-design the curriculum and to develop more efficient systems and structures that allow support staff to be more effective in their work.
- **The governance of the school**
 - Governors are highly effective. They use their considerable educational expertise, particularly in teaching

and learning, to challenge academy leaders on all aspects of the academy's performance. They have an accurate understanding of the academy's strengths and areas for development. They check the accuracy of their evaluation through frequent visits to the academy, regular discussions with staff, pupils and parents, and through external advice and support.

- A committee of governors check that arrangements for the management of teachers' performance are rigorous, and that salary progression adheres to the academy pay policy and is securely linked to pupil outcomes. They ensure that objectives for leaders and teachers directly reflect key areas of the academy's improvement plan.
- Governors perform their statutory duties well. They use the expertise of the trust to ensure that financial expenditure is monitored and challenged where necessary, and to effectively review key aspects of the academy's work, such as safeguarding and the progress of pupils.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Leaders and managers ensure that arrangements for safeguarding are implemented rigorously. Safeguarding training is frequent, and staff are vigilant as a result.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is good

- Leaders have created a comprehensive database of background and achievement information which teachers use effectively to inform their planning. Most teachers use this information well to plan activities that match pupils' needs and previous achievement, which subsequently has a positive impact on their rate of progress in lessons over time.
- Teachers consistently apply academy strategies which are designed to further improve the quality of teaching, such as the 'directed individual reflection time' which encourages pupils to respond in detail to teacher feedback. These strategies are increasing the rate of progress across the curriculum for all groups of pupils.
- Teachers use good questioning techniques to challenge pupils, and to encourage them to make a more considered response. For example, skilful questioning from the teacher in a Year 10 English lesson helped pupils to explore the reasons for and impact of reparations after the First World War.
- Teachers give substantial time to the assessment of pupils' work, and follow the academy's assessment policy well in most cases. There were many examples seen by inspectors where guidance was effective and precise, such as in a Year 10 translation exercise in Spanish where pupils responded well; they took the opportunity to act on the advice given and subsequently made rapid progress.
- The positive relationships between teachers and pupils are a consistent feature across subjects and year groups, and as a result attitudes to learning are positive in most classes. Most pupils take great pride in their work, and work is well presented.
- Teaching assistants are deployed appropriately, and give effective support and challenge to pupils. Inspectors observed teaching assistants using good questioning skills which encouraged pupils to think for themselves, thus increasing pupils' understanding.
- Homework is set regularly, using home study pamphlets. Senior leaders monitor the setting of homework, and have systems in place to challenge pupils who fail to complete the tasks they have been set. Examples were seen in pupils' work across a range of subjects where knowledge had been extended through the tasks in these pamphlets.
- The academy is increasingly effective in developing pupils' reading skills across the curriculum. Displays in every classroom are reinforced with a 'word of the week' breakfast club and inter-form competitions which promote reading. The impact is already apparent in the improvement in boys' attitudes to reading, and has enabled greater access to the curriculum for pupils who join Year 7 with lower attainment.
- Teachers' high expectations of pupils' work and behaviour are not always apparent in terms of the progress of smaller classes of pupils with lower prior attainment, which include some disadvantaged pupils and some who have special educational needs. There are examples of high expectations for such groups, such as in a Year 10 mathematics class where individual challenge and targeted questions helped such pupils progress well in their use of fractions. However, such high expectations are not seen in all classes, and the opportunities for rapid progress are lost.
- In a minority of classes, less-able disadvantaged pupils, disabled or who have special educational needs can lack the vocabulary and subject-specific terms which would increase their participation in some activities. The same group of pupils are sometimes reluctant to express themselves in written form, because their ability to write extended pieces of work and more sophisticated sentence structures is not yet sufficiently developed.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare is good

Personal development and welfare

- The academy's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good. Pupils are safe in the academy, and see the care of their teachers and support staff as a major reason for their happiness and safety. Inspection evidence confirms the views of the vast majority of parents that their children are well looked after.
- The academy has improved the quality of its provision for personal development with a series of initiatives such as the 'expert pupil' scheme, which encourages pupil leadership and a greater academic focus. Membership of the scheme is much sought-after by pupils, and gives a sense of pride to those pupils who participate. The impact of this scheme and other strategies is clear to older pupils, who can describe articulately the positive change that they have made to the culture of the academy.
- The academy monitors the personal development, behaviour and welfare of those in alternative provision on a regular basis, with regular monitoring visits to check on academic progress and personal wellbeing.
- Pupils understand how to stay safe when they are not in the academy, as a result of a comprehensive programme of assemblies. They know how to avoid potentially harmful situations, and to report online issues that pose a threat to their safety.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good. Pupils are attentive in lessons and show respect and courtesy to adults and to each other. Disruption to learning is rare; it is effectively dealt with by staff when it happens. This is an improvement since the previous inspection, and has allowed teachers to focus on academic progress and to introduce a greater range of learning activities.
- Behaviour outside of lessons is also good. Pupils enter the dining room in an orderly manner and socialise well. They are considerate to each other on the corridors, and are polite and helpful to visitors.
- Bullying is infrequent and is dealt with well by academy leaders when it does occur. Homophobic or other discriminatory behaviour is even more rare, and pupils have confidence that staff will respond effectively and decisively. Both victims and perpetrators can choose additional staff support, and this is valued by pupils.
- Punctuality and attendance shows sustained improvement over time, and is now close to the national average. The attendance of disadvantaged pupils, disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs is also improving over time. The number of pupils who are persistently absent is also on a sustained and falling trend.
- The number of pupils excluded is steadily declining, but remains higher than average for some groups because pupils who join the academy later than their peers take time to adapt their behaviour to the high standards expected by academy staff.

Outcomes for pupils are good

- Pupils join the academy with levels of attainment that are well below average. Progress across Key Stages 3 and 4 has strengthened over time, and as a result pupils complete Key Stage 4 with attainment that is in line with other schools nationally, which represents good progress.
- Current progress across the curriculum is rapid in the vast majority of subjects and in each year group. Leaders at all levels intervene to ensure that slower progress in a particular subject area and year group is not allowed to become a pattern. These substantial improvements in achievement build on the progress made in 2014, which was consolidated in 2015.
- The proportion of pupils who found sustained opportunities for training, education and employment in 2014 and 2015 was higher than average, and particularly so for disadvantaged pupils.
- The progress of current pupils in English and mathematics shows significant increases in the proportions of pupils making and exceeding expected progress. This is a further improvement on the gains made in 2015, when the proportion of pupils who made more than expected progress closed rapidly towards the national average in English, and was higher than average in mathematics.

- The current progress of the most-able pupils in the academy is stronger than seen in 2014 and 2015 in all year groups and across the curriculum. This is a result of improvements to the quality of teaching and closer monitoring by both senior and middle leaders.
- Pupils who attend alternative provision make good progress from their individual starting points in English, mathematics and science. Those who attend such provision also make good progress in a range of other qualifications, including construction, motor vehicle maintenance and hairdressing.
- The progress of disadvantaged pupils with low prior attainment is not as consistently good as the progress made by their peers in higher teaching sets. Such variation in progress can be found in a minority of individual classes across a number of curriculum subjects and year groups.
- Similarly, the progress of less-able disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs is not as consistently rapid from their individual starting points as it is for their more-able peers.

16 to 19 study programmes

are good

- Leadership in the sixth form is good because leaders effectively and enthusiastically convey the academy's high expectations to both teachers and pupils. They monitor progress and the quality of teaching carefully and systematically, and their rigorous implementation of the academy's strategies has resulted in teaching that is consistently good or better.
- The recruitment and retention of effective teachers has ensured good quality of teaching is underpinned by strong subject knowledge, and highly organised approaches to planning and lesson activities which meet the needs of learners well. For example, in a Year 12 biology lesson, the most-able pupils were given additional tasks of increasing complexity which led to faster progress.
- Sixth form achievement continues to strengthen over time. The average point score per pupil and per entry is on an improving trend and closing on the national average. The progress of current Year 13 pupils is much more rapid than that seen nationally and builds on the improvements seen in 2014 and 2015.
- Sixth form pupils are proud to be members of this academy. They talk articulately about the strong support from teachers and their aspirations for higher education. The vast majority of those pupils who left the academy in 2015 now attend higher education courses. This increase in participation in higher education includes a greater number of disadvantaged pupils as a consequence of the academy's work to raise the aspirations of families as well as those of individual learners. The academy recognises that some pupils will wish to explore other options and provides an effective programme of work-related activities for all Year 12 pupils, which has now been augmented by a week of work experience with local employers.
- High quality guidance ensures that pupils make the right choices for further study at the end of Key Stage 4. Individual support is given to pupils and their parents where families feel uncertain about their next steps. This guidance, together with the upward trend in achievement, is attracting more pupils into the sixth form, where improvements in the quality of teaching are ensuring that significantly more are retained into Year 13.
- Pupils who join the academy from other institutions are given highly effective support to help them feel part of the sixth form community. They settle in well and participate fully in the curriculum and the extra-curricular opportunities on offer.
- The current sixth form curriculum is well-planned, with pathways for individual study that ensure the needs of individual pupils are met. Pupils who join the sixth form without a C grade or higher in English and mathematics receive effective support and make good progress towards achieving these grades. Teachers adjust their planning and their resources to give extra support to these pupils, such as in a graphics lesson where additional individual support was given to these pupils, resulting in improved progress in their design work.
- While the sixth form curriculum meets the needs of current pupils well, it is not yet sufficiently broad to accommodate the choices of some pupils who leave the academy at the end of Key Stage 4 to pursue courses elsewhere, but who would prefer to remain part of this community.

School details

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| Unique reference number | 135876 |
| Local authority | Hertfordshire |
| Inspection number | 10001914 |

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

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| Type of school | Secondary comprehensive |
| School category | Academy sponsor-led |
| Age range of pupils | 11–18 |
| Gender of pupils | Mixed |
| Gender of pupils in 16 to 19 study programmes | Mixed |
| Number of pupils on the school roll | 1200 |
| Of which, number on roll in 16 to 19 study programmes | 112 |
| Appropriate authority | The governing body |
| Chair | Gill Worgan |
| Principal | Deborah Warwick |
| Telephone number | 01923 672964 |
| Website | www.franciscombeacademy.org.uk |
| Email address | admin@franciscombeacademy.org.uk |
| Date of previous inspection | 26–27 November 2013 |

Information about this school

- This academy is larger than the average-sized secondary school.
- The proportion of pupils who are disabled or who have special educational needs is above average.
- The proportion of pupils for whom the school receives the pupil premium is average. This is additional government funding for pupils who are known to be eligible for free school meals and those in local authority care.
- The majority of pupils are of White British heritage. The number of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds is above average, as is the proportion who speak English as an additional language.
- A very small number of pupils attend alternative provision on a part-time basis at West Herts College and at Chessbrook Education Support Centre.
- The academy meets the current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for the attainment and progress of pupils in English and mathematics.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors made short visits and more extended observations of pupils' learning in 66 lessons, including two joint observations with senior staff.
- Inspectors met with governors, staff, and pupils from different year groups.
- Members of the inspection team observed the pupils at work in class, in tutor groups and at informal times, such as on arrival at school and during break and lunchtime.
- The inspection team considered 86 parent responses to Parent View, the online survey for parents provided by Ofsted, together with free text responses from parents.
- Inspectors scrutinised documentation including leaders' evaluation of the academy's performance, the academy improvement plan, information relating to the quality of teaching, data on pupils' attainment and progress, academy policies and procedures, governing body minutes and the academy's arrangements for safeguarding.
- Inspectors analysed 81 questionnaires completed by members of staff.

Inspection team

| | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Anthony Sharpe, lead inspector | Her Majesty's Inspector |
| Bruce Chamberlain-Clark | Ofsted Inspector |
| Elizabeth Cornish | Ofsted Inspector |
| David Davies | Ofsted Inspector |
| Ceri Evans | Ofsted Inspector |

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