

St Mary's Special School and Sixth Form College

Wrestwood Road, Bexhill-on-Sea, East Sussex TN402LU

Inspection dates	20–21 January 2016
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Requires improvement
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Require improvement
16 to 19 study programmes	Requires improvement
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Inadequate

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement

- Teaching is improving securely from a very low base. A very few teaching support staff are still prone to offer pupils solutions rather than allow them to learn from their mistakes.
- Teachers and other adults have begun to share plans and pupils' targets. However, this approach is not yet yielding fully the intended learning outcomes for pupils.
- A legacy of underachievement has prevented some of the most-able learners from attaining the standards of which they are capable in the sixth form.
- Despite recent significant gains in improving pupils' reading, similar such gains have not been made in developing pupils' writing.
- Well-founded changes to subject content, choices and the range of qualifications available for study at the end of Key Stage 4 and 5 are underway. However, opportunities for outgoing sixth form learners have not provided sufficient challenge or breadth.

The school has the following strengths

- Drawing judiciously on their excellent leadership skills and experience, the interim Principal and her team have taken hold of a troubled staff and parent body and rebuilt the community's morale and confidence remarkably quickly.
- The new governing body is well led and well informed. Governors have high expectations of what St Mary's pupils can achieve and are determined to move on and learn from past failings.
- Parental confidence in the school is gaining momentum rapidly. The vast number of parental complaints at the time of the previous full inspection is no longer a feature.
- Leaders at all levels, including governors, are clear about their roles and accountabilities. They know where the best teaching resides within the school.
- Pupils take great pride in the school. They maintain a strong moral code and care greatly for each other.

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.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise achievement so that outcomes are consistently good or better for all pupils, including those in the sixth form, by ensuring that:
 - further plans to strengthen the range of academic courses and broaden the vocational opportunities available to pupils in Key Stages 4 and 5 are fully realised
 - teachers' assessment of pupils' learning in Key Stages 2 and 3 is checked by experienced teachers from other special schools.

- Consolidate and build on the improvements secured in teaching and reduce remaining variability across subjects and year groups, including the sixth form, by ensuring that:
 - teachers and other adults, including speech and language and other therapists, work effectively as a team, sharing, discussing and evaluating plans so that barriers to learning are understood and identified learning outcomes for individual pupils are consistently met
 - teachers of all subjects fully exploit opportunities to improve pupils' writing skills through the planning and execution of their teaching
 - staff enable pupils to learn from their mistakes and guard against stepping in too soon to provide them with the strategies or answers that they seek.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is good

- The interim Principal and members of the interim management board (IMB) have made the leadership and future success of St Mary's School and Sixth Form College a personal matter. This is reflected in staff and parents' positive responses since the beginning of the academic year. A well-targeted and expertly executed strategy of capacity building, coaching and development is yielding significant gains. Pupils feel better supported to achieve and staff feel confident to try new approaches.
- Senior leaders are accessible and well known to staff and pupils alike. Leaders, including governors, have an accurate picture of teachers' effectiveness. They have built consensus by demonstrating their willingness to listen actively and support staff to develop their strengths as well as improving their weaknesses. Joint observations and scrutiny of pupils' work conducted with Her Majesty's Inspector were accurate.
- Members of the IMB have empowered middle leaders to seize the initiative. They carefully model correct leadership behaviours. This close line-management approach has been particularly successful in securing an understanding on the part of all staff of how the care, therapy and teaching teams can reduce variability in pupils' outcomes through shared objectives, strong communication and challenging each other's practice.
- Teachers and other adults feel well supported to bring about improvements. In particular the turnover of staff has ceased and personalised training approaches are valued. Furthermore, strong links forged with a designated teaching school have enabled staff to learn from best practice elsewhere and raise their expectations of what St Mary's pupils can achieve.
- In the past, the absence of reliable assessments of what pupils know, understand and can do on entry to the school has meant that judgements about pupils' progress over time were, at best, speculative. However, leaders have now ensured that all pupils are rigorously assessed when they arrive, with challenging targets set.
- Improvements secured to teaching and assessment mean that current pupils are prepared well for the next steps in their education, employment or training and better than in the past.
- Leaders have evaluated and redesigned the subject content and range of qualifications available for study in Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form. As a result, older pupils and those in the sixth form can now access more challenging qualifications. Moreover, there are excellent plans to strengthen and extend the range of vocational opportunities available for pupils when they reach the sixth form.
- Pupils benefit from regular visits and well-planned opportunities for enrichment designed to complement what is taught during the day, such as the recent Punjabi celebration supper. Pupils' spiritual, moral and cultural development is a strength of the school. It is reflected in the ways in which teachers and adults fully exploit opportunities to promote an inclusive culture where difference is celebrated, and misunderstandings are thoughtfully resolved.
- Leaders are making increasingly effective use of the pupil premium funding. In the past, they were unable to identify the funding they received or offer an evaluation of its effectiveness. This is no longer the case. Disadvantaged pupils are now known to staff and their outcomes are tracked and being evaluated.
- Provision for physical education is a strength of the school. There are good opportunities for older pupils to mentor and encourage younger pupils as sports leaders and ambassadors. Leaders have ensured that additional funding secured through the PE and sport premium is used effectively to sustain these strong participation rates.
- Pupils with whom Her Majesty's Inspector spoke reflected the school's well-understood values, of mutual respect and understanding. Discriminatory language or behaviour are not condoned. The strong promotion of fundamental British values and democratic processes is reflected in the importance attached to the pupils' voice. For example, recent changes to the timetabling of vocational subjects were secured by sixth form learners through well-reasoned advocacy and debate.
- Pupils feel supported well to access relevant careers advice and guidance. They feel fully informed about the opportunities open to them at age 16, including the possibility of internal college courses, different providers, and the qualifications required to support their aspirations. They especially value the individual help provided by teachers and key workers.
- East Sussex local authority personnel have provided an objective external lens through representation on the school improvement board and routine school improvement visits. Input from the East Sussex designated safeguarding officer has also helped leaders strengthen their risk assessments, policies and procedures.

- The interim Principal, governing body and IMB members have worked hard to rebuild the confidence of parents in the school, and to good effect. Roll numbers are beginning to increase and feedback from parental surveys in relation to the leadership of the school has been very positive.
- **The governance of the school**
 - The governing body and IMB members' well-judged approach to securing new and very effective leadership, well-suited to the needs of the school, has been critical to the successful removal of special measures.
 - Governing body and IMB members have a clear, shared and optimistic vision for the future of the school. They monitor the improvement strategy closely and provide a strong level of challenge to the senior leadership of the school. They are very clear about what they expect from staff employed within the school at all levels and how, in turn, staff will be supported, through high-quality training. They recognise that in the past the voice of the parent body and that of the staff were not sufficiently heard and are determined not to repeat the same mistakes twice.
 - Performance management processes are thorough and effective. There is no inadequate teaching and there is sound evidence of teachers raising their game through high-quality bespoke training and support.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Training for staff is comprehensive and up to date. This has included training on safeguarding, child protection and radicalisation. Staff show an understanding and awareness of policies and there is good evidence of liaison, where necessary, with external agencies, including the local authority and with parents.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment requires improvement

- Teaching has improved significantly from a low base and is no longer inadequate. However, teaching is not good enough to ensure that all groups of pupils make rapid progress. There is still variability across year groups and in a few subjects.
- All teachers share a responsibility for the development of literacy and communication skills, encouraging pupils to apply key words in most subject areas. However, some pupils are not challenged sufficiently to write across all subjects. In a few subject areas the requirement to write does not extend beyond minimal tick box activities.
- A few teachers do not check pupils' learning carefully enough, including when they are being supported by additional adults. Sometimes they do not cross-reference identified pupils' targets to the learning activity. Equally, a few additional adults or teachers occasionally struggle with standing back and allowing pupils to learn from their mistakes.
- Teaching in English is improving securely. The head of literacy has introduced an 'accelerated reader' scheme with good support provided for tutors to ensure that reading is promoted and tracked during tutor periods as well as in English. This has enabled many pupils to make very significant gains in their reading ages since the introduction of the scheme in September.
- Teaching in mathematics is a strength. The head of numeracy has ensured that across all year groups, pupils are very aware of their personal targets. Improved teaching and good use of resources is enabling pupils to develop their understanding and master their mathematical skills. Where pupils have lagged behind, catch-up sessions have been provided.
- Pupils state that teachers and other adults support them well with their learning. Over time some pupils have voiced concerns about frequent changes of teachers. During this inspection, however, all of the pupils with whom Her Majesty's Inspector met asserted that teachers are helpful. They also agreed that targets set by teachers help them to focus on what they need to do to improve.
- Leaders have ensured that all pupils now have robust assessments on entry to the school against which their targets are set and their progress is measured. As a result, newly established, sensible systems to track pupils' progress are now enabling staff to plan far more effectively for pupils' individual progression.
- Teachers access academic targets, speech and language and education and healthcare targets about each pupil to inform their plans and teaching strategies. Teachers work closely, sharing their plans with other adults including the therapies staff to ensure that pupils' targets are met. Leaders are monitoring this approach carefully. However, they recognise that this approach is in its infancy and not all staff involved are realising the desired outcomes for pupils consistently well.
- Teaching in art and physical education is consistently strong. In these subjects, teachers' planning for pupils' progression is effective because teachers' expectations are consistently high. They make good use of assessment information, check pupils' learning often and provide valuable feedback and advice.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare is good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Pupils feel safe, secure and well looked after in the school. Good systems are in place to offer help and support, sometimes involving external agencies when appropriate. Pupils with whom Her Majesty's Inspector spoke commented favourably about the changes since the last inspection and their enjoyment of school.
- Attendance is above the average for special schools nationally. Almost all absences are owing to medical appointments or ongoing health-related issues.
- Exclusions for poor behaviour are very rare. Leaders have begun to record and celebrate positive behaviours and achievements, a process that pupils greatly appreciate. Lunchtimes now kick off with a strong sense of community spirit, led by the head of education who invites pupils to share their successes with other pupils and with staff.
- Pupils attest to frequent opportunities to learn about keeping themselves safe, in lessons and assemblies, as well as online. Learning about e-safety has a well-judged high status.
- St Mary's staff are committed to providing an inclusive community where pupils have an equal opportunity to learn and to thrive. Parents with whom Her Majesty's Inspector spoke provided frequent testimony to the success of this approach. In particular almost all of these parents' stories revolved around their child's sense of security and well-being and a redoubled desire to be in school after experiencing isolation and unhappiness elsewhere.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good. St Mary's School and Sixth Form College provides a purposeful environment with a calm and inviting atmosphere.
- Pupils conduct themselves well around the site at all times. Pupils are polite, articulate and respectful to staff, visitors and each other. They take a pride in their school and are eager to explain why they value being here so greatly.
- Punctuality is good and lessons are characterised by pupils' infectious readiness to learn.
- Pupils recognise that teaching has improved since the last inspection and were keen to explain how. For example, one pupil commented on how much she valued the accelerated reader scheme because it had helped improve her reading age. Other pupils agreed.

Outcomes for pupils require improvement

- Outcomes across all year groups are improving and are no longer inadequate. However, a legacy of inaccurate assessment on entry to the school has meant that despite overall improvements in pupils' rates of progress, a few pupils, particularly the most able, have not secured the outcomes of which they are capable.
- Although teachers' assessments of older pupils' work for accredited qualifications have been verified by external examination moderators, this is not the case in relation to younger pupils, whose work has not been externally checked and therefore the assessments may not be entirely accurate.
- Leaders have sourced several linked special schools for the purposes of external verification and at the time of this inspection work had been submitted for scrutiny but had not been returned. This process has been slow to get off the ground and is not yet an established feature of the school's routines.
- Leaders' actions to improve the rates of progress of all pupils are bearing fruit. Pupils are set challenging aspirational targets against which their progress is now routinely measured. A process of internal standardisation of assessment has been established and there is now a shared understanding of its purpose and importance.
- School data are now analysed to compare the progress of different groups of pupils, as well as to compare progress in English, mathematics and science. For example, the progress of groups such as girls and boys and disadvantaged pupils are evaluated.
- Leaders have initiated new projects funded through the pupil premium to improve the outcomes of disadvantaged pupils; for example, the provision of a school shop run by pupils to support the development of life skills and numeracy. However, it is too soon to evaluate the success of these initiatives.
- Data, scrutiny of work and observations of learning show that girls participate equally with boys and some

make better progress. Disadvantaged pupils and those from all backgrounds and with all types of need make similar progress in most subject areas. This demonstrates the school's success in fostering positive relations and in promoting equal opportunity.

- In their evaluation of the subjects and qualifications available to pupils, leaders recognised a lack of challenge and opportunity available to some of the most-able pupils. This shortcoming has been addressed through curriculum change. Nevertheless, the most-able pupils' outcomes have not been routinely tracked as a distinct group. Neither has the progress of those pupils who need to catch up. Leaders acknowledge this and have adjusted their tracking accordingly.
- Good-quality careers information, and links with local colleges, are valued by pupils. These links, coupled with the support offered by staff, ensure that pupils are confident and well placed for the next stage of their education, employment or training.

16 to 19 study programmes

require improvement

- Outcomes in the sixth form are no longer inadequate and rates of progress have significantly improved. Retention rates are strong. However, poorly matched past accreditation routes for those nearing the end of their college life mean that some learners are not meeting their full potential.
- Despite changes made to the qualifications that current learners are following, there is still a lack of suitable vocational opportunities. Leaders have exciting plans to provide a vocational offer that will develop employability skills, internships and employment for college learners. Sponsorship has already been secured; however, these plans will not be fully operational until the summer term.
- All learners complete work experience and are supported with literacy and numeracy as part of their courses and their independent living programmes for those who are residential.
- Teaching in the sixth form is improving. Expectations of learners in English and mathematics have already been raised, with some learners progressing well towards more demanding qualifications than in the past.
- Transitions to employment, further education beyond school and training are managed well and, as a result, all learners move on to further education, training, employment or apprenticeships.
- The leadership of the sixth form provision is ambitious, with a clear vision for the future. The newly appointed sixth form leader has already seized the opportunity to seek out new and exciting opportunities for the learners.
- Supported by school staff, who know them very well, learners participate in vocational or work preparation opportunities within the school or locality, occasionally led by governors with the relevant expertise. Many sixth form learners proudly take on leadership roles and support younger pupils with their numeracy or physical education.
- Learners participate fully in reviewing their own learning experiences and are able to influence which areas of learning or work experience they pursue. Some sixth form learners felt that their work was occasionally too easy. This concern was also voiced by a few of their parents.
- Learners are supported to complete accredited courses that are supportive of their next steps in learning and the responsibilities of adult life. Care taken with transition planning is ensuring that future learning programmes are matched to the individual needs and interests of each pupil.
- Learners in the sixth form behave well and attend regularly. They genuinely appreciate the support they receive from all school staff, and tackle learning with enthusiasm and commitment. Strong regard is given to ensuring learners' welfare and safety as they take greater steps towards independence. Learners report feeling happy and safe in school. They trust in the adults they work with and also in their peers.

School details

Unique reference number	133653
Local authority	East Sussex
Inspection number	448024

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	Special
School category	Non-maintained special
Age range of pupils	7–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in 16 to 19 study programmes	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	73
Of which, number on roll in 16 to 19 study programmes	30
Number of boarders on roll	51
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mary Briggs
Principal	Amanda Clugston
Telephone number	01424 730740
Website	Stmarysbexhill.org
Email address	admin@stmarysbexhill.org
Date of previous inspection	12–14 November 2014

Information about this school

- St Mary's is a special school for pupils with speech, language and communication needs; some pupils also have autistic spectrum disorder and other difficulties/disabilities.
- The school has the capacity for up to 130 residential pupils and 30 day pupils. At present, there are 73 pupils on roll.
- There are currently 51 pupils in the residential provision. The residential provision had its last full inspection on 18 May 2015.
- The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for the pupil premium funding (additional government funding for pupils eligible for free school meals and those in the care of the local authority) is below average.
- The school does not use any alternative provision.
- St Mary's is part of the Talking Trust and is a registered charity. It has a governing body whose members are also trustees.
- In July 2015 the chief executive officer/Principal resigned. Since that time the school has been led by an interim Principal and an interim management board. The interim Principal had already been involved in supporting the school as a consultant.

Information about this inspection

- Her Majesty's Inspector observed learning and scrutinised work in 10 lessons. She also took account of inspection evidence from the three previous monitoring visits.
- Her Majesty's Inspector met with the interim Principal, IMB members and other senior leaders and the Chair of the Governing Body. She also spoke on the telephone with a representative of East Sussex local authority who sits on the school improvement board.
- Her Majesty's Inspector met with a group of teachers and three groups of pupils.
- A wide range of school documentation was scrutinised, including leaders' self-evaluation, pupils' assessment information, the school's records relating to behaviour and attendance, safeguarding records, performance management information and the leaders' development plans.

Inspection team

Lesley Farmer, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

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