

Links Academy

1 Hixberry Lane, St Albans, Hertfordshire AL4 0TZ

Inspection dates

5–6 October 2016

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- The headteacher provides outstanding leadership and receives excellent support from senior leaders and governors in driving improvements forward.
- The school continues to improve year on year. Teaching, pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare, and pupils' outcomes, have moved from requiring improvement to good.
- Leaders are effective in promoting pupils' physical well-being and their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.
- Leadership is not outstanding because subject leaders have not yet ensured that teachers are using the new assessment systems to move learning forward in all subjects.
- Teachers have high expectations for learning. They use their good subject knowledge and effective questioning to enable pupils to learn well. All adults work well together to promote each pupil's learning.
- Teaching is not yet outstanding. Occasionally, less experienced teachers do not manage incidents of disruption in lessons well enough. Not all teachers are implementing the new systems of assessment consistently.
- Pupils' behaviour in lessons and around the school is usually good; occasionally it is outstanding. Most pupils make rapid progress in re-engaging with learning and develop positive attitudes to school.
- The school provides good welfare and guidance for pupils and promotes pupils' well-being and safety effectively. As a result, pupils feel safe.
- Pupils make good and occasionally outstanding progress across a wide range of subjects including English and mathematics. The most able disadvantaged pupils make outstanding progress.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Move teaching, learning and assessment to outstanding to further raise achievement by making sure that:
 - on the rare occasions when a pupil is severely disruptive in a lesson, the teacher and other adults manage such behaviour effectively
 - teachers implement the new systems for tracking progress across different subjects consistently well
 - subject leaders rigorously check that teachers are using the new systems of assessment to enable all pupils to learn effectively and make rapid progress.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- The headteacher is exceptionally ambitious for the school and has a very clear vision to move all aspects of its provision and pupil outcomes to outstanding. This strong ambition is successfully communicated to staff, parents and pupils alike and reflected in the school's successful journey from special measures three years ago to a strongly good school with some outstanding elements now.
- Leaders and governors engage effectively with parents, carers, local schools, the local authority and outside agencies to support the learning and well-being of all pupils. Leaders go 'the extra mile' in monitoring and promoting good attendance and in maintaining contact with families after pupils have left the school.
- The school's expanding outreach service is exceptionally well led and is highly valued by schools and parents alike.
- The headteacher is supported extremely effectively by senior leaders, trustees and governors in setting high expectations for both staff and pupils. They work consistently well together in successfully driving the right priorities for development forward, based on the accurate evaluation of the school's work. They have created a strong culture of high expectations for achievement and good behaviour.
- The school's accurate view of its strengths and areas for improvement is based on rigorous monitoring of all aspects of its work. School leaders use the monitoring outcomes well to improve provision, pupils' behaviour and achievement. This has led to significant improvements in teaching and learning over time and in pupils' rapid progress in their behaviour and attendance.
- Leaders are taking effective action to secure and sustain good teaching, learning and assessment across the school. The arrangements for managing the performance of staff are thorough and securely based on improving teaching and raising achievement. Leaders regularly visit lessons, frequently check pupils' books and hold half-termly meetings to review each pupil's progress. They use this information effectively to identify the progress of individual pupils to ensure that none fall behind or underachieve. They identify strengths and set appropriate targets for improvement in teaching and learning.
- Leaders provide good support and training where relative weaknesses in practice are identified. In discussion, recently appointed staff praised the quality of support that leaders and more experienced staff are providing to help them to develop their practice. Staff are well motivated and proud to work in the school.
- The curriculum is well designed and highly personalised with appropriate opportunities for enrichment, through, for example, a range of sports activities and trips. This facilitates pupils' re-engagement with learning. The curriculum is implemented effectively to provide pupils with a choice of academic and vocational subjects, based on their chosen pathways when they leave the school.
- At key stage 3, there is a strong emphasis on English, mathematics and science to facilitate pupils' return to mainstream school. At key stage 4, pupils have good opportunities to take GCSE examination courses in English, mathematics and science, and some successfully follow GCSE programmes in other subjects such as art and modern foreign languages. They also have well-conceived opportunities to choose

three vocational examination courses of their choice, such as equine studies, animal care, hair and beauty, childcare, construction, and motor vehicle maintenance. As a result, the curriculum is having a positive impact on pupils' achievement, and their behaviour and personal development.

- Leaders ensure that the school promotes pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development by developing pupils' confidence and self-esteem with good opportunities for reflection. Leaders promote pupils' sense of right from wrong effectively through the successful implementation of the discipline policy within the school and the provision of well-thought-out topics on the dangers and consequences of drugs and knife crime.
- The school prepares pupils well for life in modern Britain by promoting fundamental British values effectively. The much-improved programme for personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education, since the last inspection, includes units of work on democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law. It promotes mutual respect for, and tolerance of, others from different faiths and cultures.
- Leaders and governors are promoting all aspects of equality well. They are facilitating pupils' growing understanding of, and respect for, people of different faiths, those with no faith, and people of different race, gender, age, disability and sexual orientation. The curriculum provides good opportunities for pupils to follow these topics and increase their awareness and respect for those who are different from them.
- Leaders are also raising pupils' awareness of how to stay safe from the dangers of abuse, sexual exploitation, radicalisation and extremism through individual counselling and well-chosen topics in the PSHE education programme. This is reflected in the rapid progress pupils make in their behaviour towards others and the very few incidents of racial harassment or prejudice-based bullying recorded since the last inspection. Staff work closely with parents, carers and outside agencies within the community when they identify any pupils who are vulnerable to these issues.
- Leaders have only very recently implemented new assessment systems to support the curriculum, and subject leaders have not yet checked the consistency in the teachers' use of these new systems.
- Leaders are making good use of additional pupil premium funding to provide a range of additional intensive support dependent on each pupil's circumstances. They also provide a detailed evaluation of the difference that this funding is making to pupils' well-being, learning and achievement.
- The trustees are providing excellent support and oversight of the school's work through detailed reviews and highly focused visits.

Governance of the school

- The governing body continues to be most effective, highly competent, very proactive and well informed about the quality of teaching and pupils' performance since the last inspection. Delegated responsibilities between the governors and the school trustees are well thought out. They work closely with leaders to develop the strategic direction and promote a culture of ambition in the school.
- Governors rigorously hold leaders to account for all aspects of their work, including the quality of teaching, learning and behaviour, through regular focused visits to the school and challenging the reports submitted by senior leaders.
- They effectively oversee the arrangements for managing the performance of all staff, including the headteacher, and take effective action to address any staff

underperformance. They show very good understanding of how the school makes decisions about teachers' performance and salary progression.

- Governors have a good understanding of the school's assessment systems, making use of them to ask probing questions about the progress of each individual pupil. They successfully hold the school to account for its spending of the additional pupil premium funding to achieve good value for money.
- Governors are effectively ensuring that the school promotes pupils' spiritual, moral social and cultural development, including pupils' understanding of fundamental British values and ensuring that they are protected from any form of extremism.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. There is a strong culture of safeguarding throughout the school. High levels of supervision and support are provided for all pupils at all times throughout the day, and close engagement with parents and carers ensures that pupils are safe. Staff are making good use of their regular updated training in child protection to identify any potential signs of abuse. All staff and regular visitors are thoroughly checked for their suitability to work with children.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- The quality of teaching has improved significantly since the previous inspection. This is seen in pupils' work, in the records of leaders' and governors' visits to lessons over time and in the school's tracking information of pupils' progress across both sites.
- Teachers' high expectations for learning were seen in the school's monitoring of teaching over time and confirmed in pupils' books.
- Across both sites and in a wide range of subjects, including English, mathematics and science, teachers use their good subject knowledge and effective questioning to enable pupils to learn and quickly acquire new skills, knowledge and understanding.
- Strong teamwork between teachers and teaching assistants provides an interesting range of activities, making good use of well-chosen resources, such as laptop computers, to promote good learning. This ensures that all pupils rapidly re-engage with learning and make good progress.
- Basic skills of communication, reading, writing and mathematics are taught well. In English, pupils are now using reading passports to improve their reading. Pupils' work shows that there are more opportunities for pupils to practise their writing. In mathematics, there is a strong emphasis on deepening pupils' reasoning skills through problem solving.
- Teaching assistants provide good additional support for pupils with an education, health and care plan for their special educational needs and/or disability. They also provide good additional support for disadvantaged pupils, including the very few children who are looked after. Teaching assistants effectively implement the individual support programmes planned with teachers, for the pupils they support, and provide additional resources using different methods or approaches to meet pupils' needs.
- Teachers encourage all pupils to complete homework to consolidate their learning, which has a positive impact on the progress pupils make.

- Experienced teachers manage pupils' behaviour effectively. Occasionally, staff new to the school do not manage incidents of disruption in lessons well enough, which slows learning and progress.
- Most teachers are using assessment, including the school's marking policy, well to plan individual activities which challenge learning and to provide effective feedback on how well pupils are doing and what they need to do to improve.
- New systems of assessment to determine pupils' progress have been introduced recently, but not all teachers are implementing them consistently.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good. Good pastoral care ensures that pupils grow in confidence and develop an understanding of the need to catch up quickly on their missed education and to be successful in learning. They develop good attitudes to learning over time.
- Staff provide a highly structured, predictable and dependable learning environment. As a result, in lessons, pupils listen carefully to staff and follow instructions as they successfully re-engage with learning.
- Pupils are encouraged to stay healthy; they abstain from smoking, they eat healthily and exercise vigorously.
- As they move through the school, pupils develop a good understanding of British values and learn to tolerate and respect others from different backgrounds. More established pupils take increasing responsibility for their own learning and complete coursework to a good standard in a relatively short period of time.
- Pupils receive good-quality independent careers guidance which enables them to make free choices about their future pathways.
- The school works very effectively with families to ensure the safety and well-being of each individual pupil. As a result, most pupils say that they feel safe in school. They hand in mobile phones, cigarettes and lighters to staff on arrival to school. They know how to use the internet safely, and are consistently reminded to do so whenever they use computers in lessons. On rare occasions, pupils do not act safely.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good. Occasionally, at the Hixberry site, pupils' behaviour is outstanding. Pupils, parents and staff agree that pupils make rapid progress in their behaviour as they settle into the school. Most respond well to the system of rewards and sanctions, behave well in lessons and around the school, and take pride in their work.
- Incidents of disruption have decreased significantly since the last inspection, although occasionally a few pupils display challenging behaviour.
- Pupils make good progress in developing acceptable relationships and respect for others.
- Attendance has improved significantly since the last inspection and is moving towards the national average from very low levels of attendance on admission. This is because leaders are tackling persistent absence effectively to ensure that pupils arrive punctually and well prepared for lessons.

Outcomes for pupils

Good

- Pupils' attainment on entry is generally low because they arrive at the school with a history of disrupted education. Staff ensure that pupils make good progress across a wide range of subjects, including English and mathematics, from their different starting points. In a short period of time pupils begin to make up the differences between their attainment and that of other pupils nationally. This is evident in the work in pupils' books, the outcomes of visits to lessons over time by leaders and governors, and the school's assessment information.
- Pupils at key stage 3 make good progress, especially in English and mathematics, which enables many of them to successfully return to mainstream school. The school's improved approaches to the teaching of reading, writing and mathematics have led to considerable improvements in these subjects.
- Pupils at key stage 4 make good, and occasionally outstanding, progress in their academic and vocational examination courses. Pupils make good progress in work-related learning and gain valuable experience in the workplace. The school's strong links with local businesses ensure that pupils participate in relevant work experience programmes based on their preferred destinations when they leave. All pupils leave the school with at least three qualifications, including English and mathematics, and successfully transfer to further education, training or employment.
- Disadvantaged pupils make equally good progress across all subjects as other pupils with similar starting points because additional pupil premium funding is used well to make up the differences in achievement. The very small number of most-able pupils make outstanding progress in their examination courses because staff provide them with every opportunity to take the examinations of their choice.
- Pupils with an education, health and care plan for their special educational needs and/or disabilities make equally good progress, and become less reliant on specialist support to meet their needs.
- The most-able pupils make good progress from their higher starting points because their learning is challenged by all staff. This is reflected in their examination successes and confirmed in discussion by pupils who have recently transferred from the school to participate in higher-level courses at college or studying for A levels in a sixth form.

School details

Unique reference number	139197
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	10019625

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

Type of school	Pupil referral unit
School category	Academy alternative provision converter
Age range of pupils	11 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	32
Appropriate authority	The Links Academy Trust
Chair	Maire Lynch
Headteacher	David Allen
Telephone number	01727 836 150
Website	www.linksacademy.herts.sch.uk
Email address	admin@linksacademy.herts.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	16–17 October 2014

Information about this school

- The school meets requirements on the publication of specified information on its website.
- The school complies with DfE guidance on what academies should publish.
- The school has two bases providing on-site education for secondary-aged pupils only. Most pupils are based at the Hixberry site but a significant number of pupils, who cannot cope with small classes at Hixberry, attend the Woolam site for intensive support.
- Secondary-aged pupils are admitted to the school at various times throughout the year, mainly as a result of permanent exclusions, or of being at risk of permanent exclusion from school. They are placed at the school through the local authority admissions panel and all pupils need to catch up quickly on admission. Pupils at key stage 3 attend a 12-week programme with the intention that they then return to their home school. Currently there are no pupils in Year 7. Pupils at key stage 4 usually stay on until they transfer to post-16 provision.

- The school also provides outreach support in mainstream schools for children in the early years and pupils aged five to 16 years. This provision has increased fourfold since the last inspection.
- At its last inspection the school moved out of special measures and was judged as requiring improvement. The school subsequently received a monitoring inspection by Ofsted to determine how much progress it was making in meeting its areas for improvement.
- The school receives pupil premium funding for approximately two thirds of its pupils. This is much higher than other schools. A very small number of these pupils are children who are looked after and who have only just been admitted to the school.
- All pupils are identified as having special educational needs and/or disabilities arising from their social, emotional and mental health needs, and a few have education, health and care plans.

Information about this inspection

- The inspector visited a variety of lessons and activities in both sites, including breakfast club. Most of these were joint visits with the headteacher.
- The inspector looked at samples of pupils' work across both sites, including reading records, and heard a few pupils reading in lessons.
- He looked at the school's tracking system to determine the progress pupils are making across the school.
- There were too few responses from parents to the online questionnaire, Parent View, for these to be taken into account. Nevertheless the inspector considered the views of parents by examining the 22 responses to the school's recent survey of parents, and through telephone discussions with a small number of parents. He also held discussions with academy leaders and recently appointed staff to seek their views of the school.
- The inspector held meetings with the chair of the governing body, an school trustee, senior leaders from both sites, subject leaders, groups of pupils attending the school and a small group of pupils who left the school to move on to further education and training. He also held a telephone discussion with the local authority representative.
- The inspector looked at the school's website and a range of documentation including, safeguarding policies and procedures, records of behaviour, attendance information, and documents detailing provision for children looked after. He also looked at the school improvement plan, the self-evaluation document, records of governors' visits, and external reviews of the school's performance.

Inspection team

Declan McCarthy, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

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