

Skerne Park Academy

Coleridge Gardens, Darlington, County Durham DL1 5AJ

Inspection dates

1–2 May 2018

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement

- Teaching across the school is too variable. Teachers are not consistent in ensuring that the activities they plan meet the needs of all pupils, particularly the most able and middle-ability pupils.
- Pupils' outcomes across the school are variable, as is the quality of work seen in pupils' books. Pupils are not studying at a sufficient depth to be able to achieve consistently at both the expected and higher standards.
- Leaders, including governors, are united in their desire to improve pupils' outcomes. However, the implementation of the school curriculum has not been precise enough to bring about rapid improvement. As a result, some of the areas identified as in need of improvement at the previous inspection remain.
- Leaders have been overgenerous in their view of the quality of teaching. They have focused too heavily upon teachers' compliancy with school policy, rather than focusing on the impact of teaching on pupils' learning.
- Leaders' action-planning identifies the right priorities for improvement, but the actions they take are not linked sharply enough to the gains in pupils' achievement they desire. This makes it difficult for leaders to evaluate their work accurately.
- Governors are proud to represent their school and are keen for all pupils to be successful. While they have ensured that performance management processes are firmly in place, they have not ensured that the targets they set are sufficiently rigorous to hold school leaders to account effectively.

The school has the following strengths

- Pupils of lower ability and those who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities make strong progress from their varying starting points.
- Leaders promote pupils' pastoral care successfully. They ensure that pupils' well-being and emotional needs are prioritised. This forms the bedrock of pupils' good spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.
- Children in the early years get off to a good start in all areas of their learning. This is because activities are carefully planned to meet the needs and interests of young children.
- Pupils say that they feel safe and that there is a trusted adult in whom they can confide, should they feel the need to do so.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of leadership and management by ensuring that:
 - performance management procedures are rigorous and reflect more precisely the improvements in pupils' achievement that leaders desire
 - action plans contain measurable targets and milestones that are linked sharply to gains in pupils' achievement so that they can be evaluated accurately
 - subject leaders are increasingly accountable for ensuring that their recommendations to staff are focused upon improving pupils' learning and that staff act upon these recommendations
 - curriculum plans are refined so that there is greater consistency in the depth with which pupils acquire knowledge, skills and understanding across a range of subjects, at both the expected and higher standards.
- Improve consistency in the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by ensuring that:
 - all staff share the same high expectations of what pupils can and will achieve
 - pupils, particularly the most able and those of middle ability, receive an appropriate level of challenge so that they can achieve more highly than is currently the case
 - recently introduced approaches to the teaching of reading are thoroughly embedded so that pupils acquire greater confidence in explaining their thinking
 - the same standard of writing is expected in all subjects
 - the expectations for pupils to develop and apply their mental arithmetic skills are raised so that pupils can approach calculations with increased confidence and efficiency.
- Continue to improve pupils' attendance and reduce persistent absence rates.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Requires improvement

- Leaders, including governors, share the same determination to ensure that pupils achieve the best they can and that they receive the very best pastoral and emotional support in order to do so. However, insufficient adjustment of the school's curriculum means that pupils have been ill-prepared for the increased demands of the new national curriculum and assessment arrangements. As a result, pupils' outcomes at both key stages 1 and 2 declined markedly in 2016. Leaders acted swiftly to improve their approaches to the teaching of English and mathematics. This has resulted in some improvements to pupils' outcomes in 2017. While this is positive, leaders know there is still considerable work to do to ensure that teachers provide the challenge needed for pupils. This is particularly so for the most able and middle-ability pupils to achieve as highly as they should.
- Leaders complete detailed 'question-level analyses' of pupils' written assessments. This helps them to identify accurate priorities for improvement. Leaders' subsequent improvement plans are detailed documents that list several actions to be taken and how resources will be allocated. However, the plans lack a sharp focus on the gains in pupils' achievement that leaders desire. Actions do not identify clearly enough how they will improve pupils' learning. It is therefore difficult for leaders to evaluate accurately the impact of their work on raising pupils' achievement and improving the quality of teaching.
- Subject leaders are enthusiastic in their roles and value the national training programmes provided to improve their leadership skills. They play a full part in reviewing the quality of teaching and learning in their subjects. However, their resulting plans lack measurable targets or the precise actions needed to raise pupils' achievement quickly. Too much of their time is spent reviewing teachers' adherence to school policy, rather than the impact of the policies themselves. This has given them an overly generous view of the quality of teaching in the school.
- Across the school, the wider curriculum is taught through a topic-based approach. Leaders have ensured that pupils receive their statutory entitlement to a broad curriculum, in accordance with the national curriculum expectations. However, while pupils study different subjects, evidence seen in pupils' books would indicate that they receive insufficient challenge to deepen their understanding, knowledge and skills in subjects beyond English and mathematics. Likewise, in some year groups, the heavy emphasis upon securing pupils' basic skills of literacy and numeracy has been at the expense of raising pupils' achievement in other subjects. As a result, pupils' skills in subjects across the broader curriculum are not as strong as they could be.
- The headteacher cares deeply for the pupils in her charge. She is acutely sensitive to the needs of the most vulnerable pupils at the school and is committed to providing a haven of safety and security for all pupils. She has established a calm and purposeful learning environment in which pupils thrive emotionally. She has a clear understanding of the improvements required for the school to be good.
- The headteacher is ably supported by the deputy headteacher, who shares her commitment to ensuring that pupils are supported and encouraged to succeed. She too

has an accurate view of what needs to improve further and provides effective additional capacity to do so.

- Staff welcome leaders' investment in their continuing professional development and training. Those new to the profession are particularly grateful for the opportunities they receive to visit other settings and to access regular training and support in order to improve their skills.
- Additional funding to promote physical education (PE) and sport is used effectively. It has increased the range of opportunities pupils have during core PE sessions and in lunchtime and after-school activities, and has improved pupils' skills in and enjoyment of sport. Staff across the school receive support and training from an experienced sports coach to increase their confidence in teaching PE successfully. The PE subject leader is working closely with the sports coach to refine the school offer to ensure its sustainability.
- The school is in receipt of significant funding to support disadvantaged pupils. It is used effectively to provide additional support and resources to help pupils access their learning. However, despite this work, differences between disadvantaged pupils, particularly the most able disadvantaged pupils, and other pupils nationally remain. This is also the case for other pupils in the school. Leaders track pupils' progress and attainment carefully and have a raft of interventions in place to fill gaps in pupils' learning effectively.
- Additional funding received for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities is spent wisely. It ensures that they receive appropriate adaptations to access the curriculum. The support they receive is of high quality, particularly 'Leapfrogs', which provide social and emotional support to some of the school's most vulnerable pupils.
- The SEN leader has a strong understanding of the needs of pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities across the school. Over time, she has established highly effective relationships with a wide range of professionals and external agencies who provide support and advice to the school. She manages effectively the significant number of teaching assistants who provide additional support to an increasing number of pupils with high needs. As a result, pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities make strong progress from their varying starting points.
- The school is extremely outward-facing and is keen to develop partnerships with other local schools to support its work. It has accessed effective support from the local authority to develop aspects of the early years curriculum and to access training for those new to the teaching profession.
- Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is well served by the school's strong pastoral care and guidance.

Governance of the school

- Governors are committed to the school and are keen to improve the effectiveness of their work. Several new governors have been recently appointed following a period of flux in their membership.
- A new chair of the governing body has been in post since the start of the spring term. Although new to the role, he already demonstrates a strong understanding of the

changes required to make governance at the school more efficient. He has already identified the need to better align governors' skills and responsibilities in order to maximise their effectiveness.

- An external review of governance, commissioned by the executive headteacher of the trust, outlines the main actions needed for strengthening the work of the governing body as it moves forward.
- Scrutiny of the governing body minutes identifies successfully the extent of professional dialogue and challenge given to the school leaders to account for the spending of additional funding for disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Staff understand the important role they play in keeping pupils safe. They have access to regular training to ensure that they are up to date with the government's most recent legislation. Rigorous checks are made on anyone employed at or visiting the school.
- Leaders are particularly sensitive to the needs of the most vulnerable pupils and their families. They ensure that pupils receive the most appropriate support. Leaders are equally vigilant in reporting any concerns to appropriate safeguarding agencies and handle them in a timely manner.
- Strong partnerships exist with a range of external agencies to support leaders in developing their safeguarding practice. For example, the school employs a police community support officer to support its work to improve attendance and reduce the incidence of persistent absenteeism.
- Pupils say they feel safe in school but told inspectors that bullying can happen sometimes. A review of school records showed that there was an increase in the number of reported incidents of bullying this academic year. This is, in some way, due to leaders' proactive work in providing pupils with more information about what constitutes bullying and with a thoughtful programme of assemblies.
- There has also been a spike in the number of reported racist incidents at the school. All but one of these were first-time offences and all were dealt with appropriately and sensitively by the headteacher.
- Inspectors undertook a detailed review of school records of inappropriate behaviour and risk assessments. Leaders use an electronic system to record all incidents of inappropriate behaviour and to store risk assessments. This makes it easy for leaders to cross-reference and look for any emerging patterns of misbehaviour. Although leaders' entries onto the system are timely, many of their subsequent actions are not recorded. Likewise, some of the risk assessments reviewed lacked the detail required to be helpful documents. Leaders acknowledge that this aspect of their safeguarding procedures needs to be strengthened further and are taking action to remedy these weaknesses.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- Teaching across the school is too variable. Teachers are not consistent in ensuring that pupils of all abilities receive activities that challenge them to do their best and work hard. This is particularly the case for the most able pupils and middle-ability pupils, whose work is sometimes too easy or too hard.
- Following disappointing pupils' outcomes in the national tests of 2016, leaders introduced a new approach to the teaching of writing. This ensures that pupils are given opportunities to write in a range of styles. There is a clear sequence that all teachers follow, which is used to identify important teaching points and ends with pupils completing an independent piece of writing in the chosen style. This approach has undoubtedly contributed to the improvements in pupils' outcomes in 2017. Although heartening, it has not led to the consistent improvement expected this academic year. This is because teaching does not make consistently strong enough links to the specific language features associated with different styles of writing. As a result, pupils are not making the rapid gains in their writing skills required for more pupils to reach the expected and higher standard consistently.
- Likewise, pupils' outcomes in mathematics in 2016 were equally disappointing. Leaders completed a detailed analysis of pupils' work and found that pupils had too few opportunities to develop their reasoning and problem-solving skills. This is no longer the case, as pupils now practise their mathematical fluency, reasoning and problem-solving each day. While this is undoubtedly an improvement, it has become compartmentalised. In some cases, this is hindering pupils from deepening their skills and making meaningful links in their learning. Nor are pupils securing strong mental arithmetic strategies to enable them to use associated facts efficiently. For example, pupils were observed finding 55% of an amount. They had been given a process to follow, which was leading to some success. However, they were not enabled to apply their knowledge of halving amounts to support estimation and more efficient methods. As a result, pupils lack the confidence and resilience needed to grapple with more demanding problems successfully and determinedly. This is particularly the case for the most able and middle-ability pupils.
- The quality of teaching of subjects across the wider curriculum is too variable. Too many activities focus upon the coverage of subject-specific knowledge, with limited evidence of pupils developing their subject-specific skills. For example, in geography, there was evidence of pupils researching geographical facts, but only very limited evidence of pupils developing their fieldwork skills.
- Over the course of the last academic year, leaders have invested significant funding to increase the range of reading books for pupils. This is in order to raise the profile of reading in the school and to encourage more pupils to read for pleasure. This investment is having a marked effect on improving pupils' attitudes to reading. Pupils heard to read by inspectors were keen to talk about their reading and about their favourite stories and authors.
- Leaders have also reviewed their approaches to the teaching of pupils' comprehension skills. There is now an increased focus across the school on developing pupils' skills of inference and deduction. While this is beginning to improve pupils' comprehension skills, teachers are not yet consistent in ensuring that pupils think deeply about their

answers and provide the required amount of detail to support their conclusions fully.

- The teaching of phonics is effective. Staff are well trained in delivering the school's phonics programme. Teaching is highly effective in enabling pupils to apply their phonics knowledge to read unfamiliar words. Pupils are routinely encouraged to apply their phonics skills outside of the discrete lessons provided daily.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Strong relationships are evident in all aspects of school life. A raft of external partners and agencies are used to good effect to ensure that the most vulnerable pupils are well supported.
- Pupils say that they feel safe in school and that there is someone whom they can rely on and confide in, should they need to do so. A strong focus upon pupils' personal and social education supports pupils' sense of safety and well-being.
- Pupils have a strong understanding of bullying in all its forms. This includes an increased focus upon the dangers associated with the misuse of social media, which has led to an increase in the number of reported incidents this school year. Leaders have taken effective action to tackle this and have involved community groups, including the 'mini police', to support them in their work. As a result, there have been no reported incidents since December 2017.
- There is a strong focus on improving pupils' attendance and reducing the proportion of pupils regularly away from school. The attendance officer and family liaison officer work well together and are committed to ensuring that pupils are safe. Procedures are well established and leaders do not shy away from issuing warning notices when they are needed. Their concerted efforts have seen improvements to the overall rates of pupils' attendance and a reduction in the proportion of pupils regularly absent from school. Leaders know this is a continuing priority for improvement.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- Leaders have ensured that there is a strong behaviour code in the school that is consistently applied by all staff. This ensures that there is a calm and purposeful atmosphere in the school and that pupils' learning is rarely disrupted by inappropriate behaviour.
- Playtimes are lively occasions which are well supervised. For the most part, teaching assistants provide the supervision, which means that they have strong relationships with pupils already established. This also means that any situations that may arise are defused effectively. Some pupils who talked to inspectors said they would like more things to play with. Leaders are taking action to take account of their views.
- A number of pupils have significant behavioural needs. Overall, staff deal with the pupils effectively. These pupils are exceptionally well supported and nurtured in order

to enable them to manage their own emotions sensibly and maturely. Leaders constantly strive to find new ways of supporting such pupils and to equip them with the skills they need to manage their feelings successfully. This is the only school in the country to offer pupils 'choice therapy'. It was heart-warming to hear pupils' stories of the new-found confidence they have as a result of accessing the programme. Pupils proudly told inspectors, 'Now I just walk away, I don't fight' and 'I just wish I could have done it sooner.'

- There has been a spike in the number of fixed-term and permanent exclusions this school year. A review of the school's documentation shows that this is generally a last resort for leaders or in response to a serious incident. It reflects some of the significant needs of a minority of pupils.

Outcomes for pupils

Requires improvement

- Since 2016, pupils' outcomes at the end of key stage 2 have been below the national average in reading, writing and mathematics at both the expected and higher standards. In 2017, there was some improvement in pupils' outcomes and progress. This was particularly noticeable in pupils' progress in writing, which improved markedly to be average, along with pupils' progress in mathematics. Pupils' progress in reading remained below average.
- Over the same period, pupils' outcomes at key stage 1 were equally low in 2016, but improved in 2017 to be broadly in line with national averages at the expected standard. They remained below national averages at the higher standard.
- Outcomes for pupils currently in the school remain variable in all subjects. The review of work in pupils' books, particularly for the most able and middle-ability pupils, endorses this. Pupils are not challenged to produce work that is of their very best, consistently. As a result, pupils are not making the rapid progress they need to be able to reach the expected and higher standards with a degree of consistency. Leaders acknowledge that there is more work to do to ensure that pupils make consistently strong progress from their generally low starting points.
- In all year groups, there are high proportions of pupils who are identified as disadvantaged. Their outcomes mirror those of their peers, with variability in all year groups and subjects. There are very few disadvantaged pupils who are able to reach the higher levels of achievement.
- Pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities make good progress from their varying starting points. This is because of the effective support they receive and the careful plans and close monitoring of their achievement.
- Pupils' outcomes in the phonics screening check showed a slight decline over three years. This is in some way due to the recent arrival of overseas pupils new to the school and to the country. Across the school, the teaching of phonics is effective and consistent. It equips pupils with the required skills to be competent readers by the time they leave key stage 1. Indications are that outcomes in 2018 are already improved upon this time last year, with more pupils set to reach the required standard.

Early years provision

Good

- The leader of the early years has ensured that, despite her relatively recent appointment and several changes of staff, provision has remained good. She has a strong vision for what she wants to achieve and has worked hard to enhance provision and provide children with effective play-based learning opportunities. Significant levels of staff training, provided by the local authority, have ensured that all staff are accurate in their assessments and have a secure understanding of the important milestones in children's learning.
- Teaching is strong across Reception and Nursery. Teachers are creative in their planning and provide a range of activities that engage and motivate children. They are particularly adept at finding activities that appeal to boys' interests. Historically, boys' outcomes have been significantly lower than those of girls. As a result of the thoughtful and skilful interventions of staff, assessment information is already showing that there will be a marked increase in the proportion of boys able to achieve a good level of development by the end of Reception.
- The vast majority of children enter Nursery with skills lower than those which would be expected for their age and stage of development. In 2016, the proportion of children reaching a good level of development declined markedly. It improved slightly in 2017, following the appointment of the early years leader. A continued focus upon enhancing provision further is showing that the proportion of children reaching a good level of development by the end of Reception will have improved again this year.
- Children get off to a good start with their acquisition of early phonics skills and are able to apply their phonics skills to read unfamiliar words and to write. Changes to the induction period for children starting the school mean that children begin their phonics programme sooner than was previously the case. Adults are mindful of engaging boys with reading and use boy-friendly activities and stories to encourage them into the reading process.
- Adults across the setting model language effectively and use resources to aid children's understanding of early concepts well. For example, a teacher in the Reception class made effective use of physical resources to enable a small group of children to record simple addition sums accurately and independently. This demonstrates the increasing confidence and enthusiasm with which children approach their learning. However, there are occasions when teachers could demand more of children and challenge them to think more deeply about their learning.
- Outdoor learning is well resourced. Children are encouraged quickly to become independent in the setting and are able to dress themselves for outdoor play. Activities are carefully designed to sustain children's interests, especially for boys, to enable them to engage in learning for longer periods of time.
- Children behave well for much of the time. They share, take turns and are beginning to develop friendships. They respond well to adults' requests. Occasionally, children forget the rules of the setting and run or climb when they know not to.

- All welfare and safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. This, together with the strong relationships between children and adults, good teaching and broad curriculum, ensures that children in the early years thrive and are well prepared for the challenges of key stage 1.

School details

Unique reference number	139195
Local authority	Darlington
Inspection number	10047629

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

Type of school	Primary
School category	Academy sponsor-led
Age range of pupils	3 to 11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	391
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair	David Liddle
Headteacher	Kate Chisholm
Telephone number	01325 380 831
Website	www.skernepark.org.uk/
Email address	admin@skernepark.darlington.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	October 2014

Information about this school

- The school is larger than the average-sized primary school. It is part of the Hummersknott Academy Trust. It is supported by an executive headteacher.
- The vast majority of pupils are of White British heritage.
- The proportion of pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities is above the national average. An increasing proportion of pupils have an education, health and care plan, which is also well above the national average.
- The school serves an area of high deprivation and the proportion of pupils who are disadvantaged is well above the national average.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards for primary schools.

Information about this inspection

- The inspection team visited teaching sessions across a range of subjects from Nursery to Year 6. The vast majority of these visits were conducted together with members of the senior leadership team.
- Inspectors held meetings with the headteacher, senior leaders, governors and representatives of the local authority.
- Inspectors looked at work in pupils' books with members of the senior leadership team. They also spoke to pupils, formally and informally, about their learning and heard them read.
- Inspectors looked at a range of documents provided by the school, including pupils' assessment information, leaders' self-evaluation report and development plans. The school's records relating to safeguarding and child protection were also checked.
- There were 10 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, including a similar number of free-text comments. The inspectors also took account of the 170 responses to the school's own parental consultation, along with the 31 responses to the staff survey.

Inspection team

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