

Polam Hall School

Grange Road, Darlington, County Durham DL1 5PA

Inspection dates

18–19 April 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	Requires improvement
Outcomes for pupils	Requires improvement
Early years provision	Good
16 to 19 study programmes	Requires improvement
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement

- This is a school that has undergone major turbulence over the past three years. Leaders did not make sure that teachers were adequately prepared for change.
- When the number of pupils at school increased, leaders did not ensure that the curriculum adequately met the needs of new pupils.
- In 2017, the progress that pupils made was not good enough in many subjects, including English, mathematics and modern languages.
- Pupils' progress currently at school in key stages 2, 3 and 4 requires improvement. This is because the quality of teaching is too variable.
- The quality of pupils' writing is not good enough. The progress that pupils make in writing at key stage 2 requires improvement.
- Some pupils sit uninterested in lessons. They do not rise to the challenges presented to them. This is reflected in poor presentation in exercise books. The attendance of disadvantaged pupils is too low.
- The quality of teaching that students receive in the sixth form requires improvement. Not all teachers plan consistently good lessons.
- The impact of the work of some middle leaders is in its infancy. For example, the impact of strategies to improve disadvantaged pupils' performance in individual subjects is weak.

The school has the following strengths

- The new principal has wasted no time in identifying weaknesses at school and dealing with them. She is tenacious and effective. Aably supported by her senior team, leaders are improving provision at a rapid pace.
- The new sponsor provides effective support. The academy council is increasingly effective at checking the work of school leaders to ensure that the school continues to improve.
- Teaching in early years is good. Children make good progress and develop their skills and understanding well.
- Pupils make good progress in key stage 1, and increasingly strong progress across the school as the improvements that leaders have made are starting to kick in.
- Pupils develop as rounded citizens. Their personal development is good and their welfare assured.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of teaching by ensuring that:
 - teachers consistently set work which provides challenge for all groups of pupils in the class
 - all teachers know the specific needs of pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities, and plan effectively to meet them
 - pupils develop a greater tenacity when grappling with more complex concepts, for example when problem-solving in mathematics, or when conducting experiments in science
 - teachers in subjects other than English contribute effectively to the development of pupils' writing skills
 - additional funding is used effectively to support disadvantaged pupils in lessons so that they make greater gains in knowledge, skills and understanding
 - homework is used effectively to consolidate and build upon work covered at school.
- Improve leadership and management by:
 - ensuring that middle leaders have an increasingly positive impact on the quality of education at school and the progress pupils are making
 - further developing the curriculum, so that the academic needs of the pupils are increasingly well met
 - improving the quality of communication with parents and carers
 - embedding school improvement processes within school, including those to ensure that disadvantaged pupils reach their potential.
- Improve the rate of attendance of disadvantaged pupils.
- Improve the behaviour of pupils by ensuring that:
 - all teachers are able to manage the behaviour of classes effectively
 - all pupils have pride in their work, and that it is presented well in exercise books
 - pupils' imagination and interest are sparked in lessons, so that they enjoy their learning more often.
- Improve the progress that students in the sixth form make by ensuring that all teachers plan sixth-form lessons to a high standard.

An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Requires improvement

- The school has undergone significant turbulence over the past three years. Leaders did not make sure that teachers were adequately prepared for the change from being a fee-paying independent school to a free school. The school roll increased significantly at that time, and teachers were not ready to provide for the wide range of educational needs that new pupils brought. Many teachers and leaders lacked the skills, experience and knowledge to meet the needs of the pupils.
- Leaders did not ensure that the curriculum matched the needs of pupils adequately. They did not respond flexibly enough to new pupils to the school. As a result, some school performance measures in 2017 were negatively affected by choices made by leaders previously.
- Since the school became a member of Woodard Academies Trust, and since the appointment of the new principal, leaders have moved rapidly to improve the quality of education on offer. It provides an acceptable standard of education, but requires improvement to be good.
- The principal, ably supported by the trust, her senior team and the academy council, has brought structure and accountability to the school. She leads the school with tenacity, intelligence and a strong moral compass. The performance of teachers is managed; the progress pupils are making and the standards they are reaching are tracked with increasing accuracy; and the quality of teaching is improving strongly. The principal knows what is working well and what needs to improve.
- School self-evaluation is honest and accurate. Improvement planning uses this evaluation, and is ambitious and well thought through. Senior leaders know exactly what good-quality teaching looks like, and are able to help individual teachers improve their work accordingly.
- Teachers are increasingly confident about policies and procedures at school. Many teachers are very positive about opportunities to develop the quality of their teaching, and the professional development programme that is on offer. This increasingly reflective approach is supporting leaders' drive to improve the quality of teaching.
- Many parents are very positive about the quality of education on offer. A sizable minority, however, are very concerned about the behaviour of pupils and the quality of teaching. Inspectors saw variation in the quality of teaching and its impact on the progress pupils make.
- Middle leaders are keen to develop their skills. They are increasingly effective in supporting members of their teams, and in challenging them to do even better. They use information about the progress pupils are making and the standards they are reaching effectively. The impact of their work is beginning to bear fruit, but they know that there is a way to go to ensure that pupils make good progress throughout the school.
- Extra-curricular opportunities are a strength of the school. The house system is a strong example of this. Here, pupils work together on theatrical and musical performances, in addition to competing in a variety of sporting events. Pupils develop

leadership, performance and social skills through these programmes, and leave school with strong inter-personal skills. Leaders know that the formal curriculum requires improvement so that the academic needs of pupils are met more effectively. For example, the development of writing skills is inconsistent in subjects other than English.

- Teachers ensure that there are adequate opportunities for pupils to explore ideas and to learn about other people's values and beliefs. They are taught about the dangers of extremism, and about the importance of equality of opportunity.
- The academy trust has supported the school very effectively. Representatives from the trust, including peer principals, have given advice and support to leaders. Working in partnership with other trust schools has helped the school develop its self-evaluation and improvement planning processes.
- Communication with parents is not strong. As school leaders continue to develop the quality of provision at a rapid pace, some parents want to know more about what is going on, and how they can support the school in moving forward. Procedures used to deal with any complaints have been overhauled, and these are now strong. Parents, too, were not adequately briefed at the time about the changes needed in the process of the school being a fee-paying independent school to becoming a free school.

Governance of the school

- Recent governance of the school has been highly effective. The skills of the academy council are used well to provide support and challenge for school leaders. Its members have helped leaders to develop stronger human resources policies, and have reviewed the effectiveness of safeguarding.
- The academy council ensures that leaders fulfil their obligations to keep pupils safe. Its members visit the school regularly, and check, for example, that the school adheres to legislation regarding the safe recruitment of staff. In collaboration with the trust, the school site has been checked, and additional fencing added to improve pupils' safety. Site risk assessments also help keep pupils safe. Entrances to areas where pupils learn require an electronic fob to gain access.
- The academy council knows the school well. It rightly has faith in the new principal, but also knows, for example, that the impact of additional funding for disadvantaged pupils needs to be better evaluated. The academy council knows that the quality of teaching and other additional provision for these pupils is not strong enough. It is also aware that outcomes for pupils in school and students in the sixth form require improvement.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- School policies reflect the latest requirements. Leaders make the appropriate checks when staff are appointed. Governors, senior leaders and members of staff are all suitably trained in safeguarding. They understand what to do if they have a concern about a pupil's welfare or safety.

- Leaders work well with other agencies to ensure that pupils are kept safe. They keep detailed records of any concerns. Leaders are tenacious with other professionals should they not receive support for their pupils quickly enough.
- Pupils report that they feel safe at school. This is echoed by the majority of parents who responded to Ofsted's online parent questionnaire, Parent View.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is too inconsistent. The gap between stronger teaching and weaker teaching is too wide. As a result, the progress pupils make is variable. The quality of education that a pupil receives is currently too dependent on which teachers they get, and is, therefore, determined by chance.
- Teachers do not consistently set work that is well matched to the abilities of all of the groups of pupils in the class. Teachers, therefore, do not have consistently high expectations for all pupils and pupils are not challenged enough. Sometimes, teachers do not encourage pupils to deepen their thinking. Some pupils give up too easily when grappling with more complex concepts, for example, when problem-solving in mathematics, or when conducting experiments in science.
- In the past, some areas of the curriculum were not covered, as they were not statutory for independent schools. Not all teachers use their time effectively to help pupils to catch up with what is required for external tests at key stage 2, or GCSE qualifications.
- Not all teachers are precise enough in the support they give to pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities. The pupil premium strategy is not effective enough in ensuring that disadvantaged pupils make strong progress in lessons.
- Undoubtedly, there is some great teaching at the school. Here, precise planning and structured activities capture pupils' imagination and, as a result, they 'fly' in lessons. A 'dragon' had laid an 'egg' on site near the primary building before the inspection. Pupils were very excited to discover more about this, and their writing about the event was descriptive and accurate. In the secondary phase, some excellent practice was seen, specifically in drama and history. School leaders told inspectors that they wanted more teaching to spark the imagination of pupils throughout the school.
- Teaching is consistently good at key stage 1 and in early years. Here, planning is stronger, and pupils have experienced more stability as they were less affected by turbulence. The teaching of phonics is good across the school. The progress pupils make in reading is stronger than in other subject areas as a result of a strong foundation in phonics.
- Leaders have been focusing on the quality of homework recently. Its use is not always effective in consolidating and building on work covered at school, but this is improving.
- School leaders have both the skills and ability to improve the profile of teaching at school. They are wasting no time in doing so and their work is effective. As a result, the quality of teaching is improving at a rapid pace.

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- A major strength of provision at the school is the way in which pupils are actively prepared for life in society. The focus on developing 'rounded individuals' who are able to communicate well, express themselves confidently and work positively with others is effective. The house system is pivotal to this aspect of school life.
- Teachers provide pupils with guidance on how to stay safe, including how to protect themselves from risks associated with radicalism, exploitation and the use of the internet, particularly social media.
- The few pupils who attend off-site provision are well looked after. Leaders have close relationships with these providers.
- Pupils say that if ever there is any bullying, members of staff deal with it well. Inspectors confirm that the school is increasingly effective in supporting pupils, either when there are issues of bullying, or unkind behaviour. Pupils understand the need to treat others with respect, and the vast majority do so.
- Leaders have worked with parents and pupils to develop a 'learner profile'. Successful learners 'develop confidence, practise creativity, discover curiosity and build community'. More and more pupils are exhibiting these traits.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils requires improvement.
- Some pupils are uninterested in lessons. These pupils sit passively and do not rise to the challenge of learning. They show that they do not particularly care about school by the way they present their work in exercise books, which is too messy. Senior leaders have noted this, and professional development programmes for teachers are explicitly linked to ensuring that all pupils engage with subject material in lessons. Green shoots are visible, but not enough for inspectors to judge behaviour to be good overall.
- Some parents have expressed concern about the behaviour of pupils at school. Pupils agree that behaviour in some lessons is not good. Leaders know where behaviour is weaker and are tackling this.
- Nonetheless, inspectors found the majority of pupils at school to be courteous, friendly, polite and helpful. They are tolerant of others. These pupils work hard in lessons and focus well on the task in hand. Most pupils have pride in their school, and are confident and articulate. They move sensibly around school. They care for others. One pupil in the primary phase talked about the 'friendship stop', and said, 'If anyone sees you looking sad, they ask you to join in their game... not many people need to come to it'.
- Pupils attend school regularly. The attendance of disadvantaged pupils is less strong, and leaders are developing strategies to support families where pupils are absent too often.

Outcomes for pupils

Requires improvement

- In 2017, pupils left Year 11 having made overall progress which was below that of all pupils nationally. Their progress was below average in mathematics, English and modern foreign languages. In addition, most-able pupils did not make enough progress. When this year group started key stage 4 in 2015, leaders at the time did not make sure that pupils were studying a wide range of appropriate courses. Leaders did not ensure that the large proportion of pupils who moved from other schools during their secondary education, rather than at the start, caught up with their peers.
- In the primary phase in 2017, the progress that Year 6 pupils made in writing was not strong enough. The progress that they made in reading was good. The progress that they made in mathematics was hampered by weaker problem-solving skills.
- Inspection evidence confirms the school's own self-evaluation. The progress that current pupils are making at school requires improvement. Rates of progress are, however, improving.
- At key stage 1, pupils are making good progress overall, including in reading, writing and mathematics. At key stage 2, pupils are making good progress in reading and increasingly strong progress in mathematics and writing. Their progress is also being tracked more precisely in subjects other than English and mathematics. 'Convince me' challenges are being used to encourage pupils to deepen their understanding and knowledge in a range of subjects, including geography and science. Pupils are also developing their research and independence skills through these activities.
- In the secondary phase, the progress pupils are making requires improvement. They are making good progress in history and creative arts. Some teachers ensure that pupils in their classes are making good progress, but this is not consistent across key stages 3 and 4.
- The school tracks the few pupils who attend courses off site well. These pupils are making gains in some areas of the curriculum.
- The progress that pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities are making requires improvement. Some of these pupils are very well supported and are making strides in their learning. For others, teachers do not consistently meet their needs in class. This is a similar picture for disadvantaged pupils. Most-able pupils need to be pushed to reach even higher standards. Pupils who have been at Polam Hall for their whole school career have, historically, made stronger progress than those who have arrived part-way through their education. This remains the case for pupils currently at school.
- Although progress was weak in 2017, the standards that pupils reached were in line with or above national averages. This ensured that they were prepared for their next stages in education, employment or training. A large proportion passed English and mathematics at grades 4 and 5, and many pupils studied and passed the suite of qualifications in the English Baccalaureate (English, mathematics, science, modern foreign languages and a humanities subject).

Early years provision

Good

- Children make good progress in early years. This is because staff are skilful in assessing children's abilities when they arrive and as they progress through Reception. Teachers use this information effectively to plan activities that help children move forward in their learning.
- Teachers and teaching assistants are particularly skilled at teaching phonics. Children focus well in small groups and help each other when they are stuck. Teachers observe children effectively and this keen eye helps them spot sounds or spellings that individuals are finding tricky. They then intervene effectively.
- Routines are well established. Children are kind and willing to share equipment with each other. They are confident when speaking to other adults. They are clearly happy and thriving at school.
- Teachers use simple, yet engaging techniques to support the curriculum. The learning journeys and 'busy books' help parents and staff see the progress children are making. 'Izzy-wizzy time', when children choose their activities, is good. Teachers thoughtfully provide tasks, both inside and outdoors, that spark children's imagination and match their interests.
- Leadership in early years is strong. The early years leader has an accurate grasp of the priorities for the key stage, and is aware that a greater proportion of children could exceed national expectations. Welfare requirements are met. Staff have high expectations of what the children can achieve. Children are happy and respected, and thoroughly enjoy school.

16 to 19 study programmes

Requires improvement

- The recent history of the sixth form mirrors that of the whole school. In the past, pupils in Year 11 did not receive effective guidance about their next steps. As a result, too many students in the sixth form were offered a curriculum that did not set them up to make good progress. The progress that they made from their starting points was weak, although most left Year 13 having secured places on appropriate courses at university or with concrete plans for the future.
- Current Year 12 students have benefited from improved advice and guidance and are following courses more closely suited to their interests and abilities. They are making stronger progress and reaching higher standards than their peers in Year 13.
- Students told inspectors that sometimes, teachers do not prioritise their lessons enough. They told inspectors that some teachers deal with younger pupils when they should be teaching them high-quality lessons. Inspectors agree that there is too much variation in the quality of teaching in the sixth form.
- The curriculum in the sixth form offers students support for applying to university or moving into employment. Students are offered pastoral support should they need it. They know how to keep themselves safe. However, both the delivery of the curriculum and the quality of pastoral support are inconsistent according to the students. The sixth-form offer is compliant with the requirements of 16 to 19 study programmes.

- The new head of sixth form is moving rapidly to improve provision. Students currently in Year 12 are benefiting from these improvements. The head of sixth form is effective, but the improvements she is making are taking time to have a positive impact on the quality of teaching, the perspectives of the students and the standards they are reaching. There is a way to go, and much to do, to ensure that provision is good.

School details

Unique reference number	142174
Local authority	Darlington
Inspection number	10048394

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

Type of school	All-through
School category	Academy sponsor-led
Age range of pupils	4 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in 16 to 19 study programmes	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	722
Of which, number on roll in 16 to 19 study programmes	44
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair	Patricia Pritchard
Principal	Kate Reid
Telephone number	01325 463383
Website	www.phs.woodard.co.uk
Email address	information@phs.woodard.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this school

- In 2015, Polam Hall School opened as a free school, having previously been a fee-paying independent school. In 2017, the school changed its governance structure and became part of Woodard Academies Trust as a sponsored academy.
- The proportion of pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities is now below the national average. The proportion of pupils who have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan is below the national average.
- The proportion of disadvantaged pupils is below the national average.
- The proportion of pupils who start school at times other than the beginning of

Reception or Year 7 is high.

- In 2017, the school did not meet the government's current floor standards in the secondary phase, which set the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress by the end of Year 11.
- The school uses alternative providers to extend the curriculum opportunities for pupils at key stage 4 and students at key stage 5. These are Rise Carr College and Open Arms School.
- A new principal was appointed in 2017. Since the school opened in 2015, there have been significant changes to teaching and support staff in both the primary and secondary phases.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed learning and groups of pupils working in all key stages at the school. Inspectors observed learning jointly with the headteacher and other members of the senior team and discussed what was seen. Learning in both the sixth form and early years was also observed.
- Inspectors observed pupils when moving around the school and at social times. They talked to pupils in lessons about their experience at school and looked at work in their books. They talked to four specific groups of pupils and sixth-form students to hear their views about the school and about the behaviour of other pupils. In addition, inspectors gathered a group of sixth-form students at random to listen to their views.
- Inspectors held meetings with members of the academy council and school staff, including senior and middle leaders. An inspector spoke with the chief executive officer of Woodard Academies Trust.
- Inspectors took account of the 50 responses to the staff questionnaire and the 235 responses to Ofsted’s online parent questionnaire, Parent View. Some parents, at their request, were also spoken to about the quality of leadership at the school.
- Inspectors observed the school’s work and scrutinised a range of documentation including: the school’s view of its own performance; monitoring records; information about pupils’ progress; improvement planning; and records of behaviour and attendance. They looked closely at records relating to safeguarding and child protection, and at policies, including those published on the school’s website.

Inspection team

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Andy Taylor	Ofsted Inspector

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