

Smithills School

Smithills Dean Road, Bolton, Lancashire BL1 6JS

Inspection dates

26–27 June 2018

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	Requires improvement
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Inadequate

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- The very strong team of senior leaders has driven forward improvement at an impressive rate.
- Members of the joint executive board (JEB) have provided excellent strategic leadership. The local governing body is now in a strong position to hold leaders to account.
- The majority of pupils benefit from high-quality teaching. Teachers plan learning that engages pupils and helps them to develop their skills and understanding.
- Pupils generally demonstrate positive attitudes to their learning. Strong relationships between teachers and pupils contribute to the quality of learning.
- In recent years, pupils have not made good progress during their time in school. Resolute actions by leaders mean that pupils are now making better progress across a range of subjects.
- Leaders' actions have not had enough impact on improving the progress of disadvantaged pupils, the most able and international new arrivals.
- Leadership of the curriculum is dynamic. Leaders ensure that the curriculum is adaptive so that it effectively meets the needs of the diverse pupil population.
- While rightly proud of the significant improvements that they have made, senior leaders are very adept at identifying the areas of the school that still require attention.
- This is a truly inclusive school where every pupil is valued. The school provides excellent pastoral support for its most vulnerable pupils. Leaders have created a culture in which all are given the chance to be successful.
- The overall attendance rate gives no cause for concern. Leaders have taken a wide range of actions to improve the attendance of disadvantaged pupils. However, too many of these pupils are still not attending school regularly.
- A strong culture of safeguarding exists throughout the school. All staff contribute to creating a safe and caring environment for pupils. The welfare and personal development of all pupils is a high priority for leaders.

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?

- Ensure that all pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils, the most able and international new arrivals, make the best possible progress by providing them with the right academic support and challenge.
- Continue to take action to improve the attendance of disadvantaged pupils.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- The quality of senior leadership at Smithills School is very strong. This group of leaders has been the driving force behind the recent very impressive rate of improvement at the school. There is a very joined-up, collaborative approach to how they work. At the heart of everything that they do is the overarching aim of enabling all pupils to be successful.
- The appointment of the principal brought a much-needed sense of direction and purpose to the whole school community. His style of leadership brings out the best in his leadership team and the rest of the staff. During this inspection and earlier monitoring inspections, staff and pupils commented on the difference that the principal has made to the culture and morale in the school. As one Year 10 pupil said: 'It's just like a different school.'
- Leaders never use the contextual challenges that the school faces as an excuse for poor performance. They have high expectations of all their pupils and invest a great deal of time and effort to provide support to overcome any barriers to learning. Senior leaders bring very effective strategic leadership to their respective areas. They systematically monitor and evaluate the impact of their actions. Alongside this, it is clear that leaders also know individual pupils and their circumstances well.
- The recent appointment of two associate assistant principals has increased the capacity of the leadership team. Their focus is on raising the attainment of the most able and low-ability pupils. Leaders have focused on developing teachers' skills to help these pupils in the most effective way. In addition, they have made changes to the curriculum to ensure that it provides the right support and challenge for these groups of pupils. Although these are very recent developments, leaders can demonstrate that they are beginning to have an impact.
- Leadership of teaching and learning is very strong. Intelligent leadership of this area, underpinned by thorough and systematic quality assurance procedures, means that the quality of teaching across the school has improved significantly in the last year. A cohesive, reflective and proactive professional development programme is well received by staff. In the few areas where teaching is less than good, leaders provide the right balance of support and challenge to bring about improvement.
- Leaders understand the importance of ensuring that the curriculum meets the varied needs of all pupils. Leaders aim to provide a curriculum that is based on 'academic excellence' and is 'rich in opportunity'. In order to realise their vision, there are several changes planned for September 2018 onwards. Leaders are able to explain how the changes have been designed to meet the needs of their pupil cohorts more effectively and help them to make better progress. It is clear also that while the plans are appropriate for the context of this school, they are based on secure academic research and evidence from other schools. The planned changes are designed to enhance an already coherent curriculum that provides plenty of opportunities for enrichment to complement academic study.
- Leaders ensure that the curriculum provides a range of opportunities to promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development. A comprehensive personal, social, health and economic education programme is delivered during the half-hour

'session zero' at the start of every day. Provision for these aspects of pupils' education is imaginative and innovative. For example, a group of the most able key stage 3 pupils have been given the opportunity to develop SMSC schemes of work to be delivered in school.

- Nearly half of the pupils at Smithills School are disadvantaged. Leaders have a clear rationale for how they spend the significant amount of pupil premium funding that comes into the school. They evaluate very thoroughly the impact of their actions and decisions on the achievement of disadvantaged pupils.
- Most departments in the school are very well led. This is particularly the case for mathematics and English. Senior leaders have taken action to strengthen the quality of subject leadership in the small number of areas where it is not good enough.

Governance of the school

- Over the last 18 months, members of the JEB have provided very strong strategic leadership for the school. The board comprised a group of extremely committed people who possessed the necessary skills and expertise to be the driving force of improvement following the last full inspection.
- Although the JEB is no longer required, Smithills School is still benefiting from the highly effective strategic leadership of the former chair of that group, as she has now taken on the role of chief executive officer of the trust.
- Members of the JEB have organised a smooth transition for the future governance of the school. They have ensured that the members of the newly formed local governing body's standards committee have the required skills and expertise to provide ongoing challenge to leaders in relations to pupils' progress.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. All safeguarding protocols and practices are fit for purpose. Systems to ensure that only suitable people are recruited to work with pupils are secure. Staff keep detailed records of safeguarding concerns.
- Leaders ensure that all staff have a good understanding of their responsibilities in relation to safeguarding. Staff receive regular training on potential areas of risk for young people. Concerns are dealt with promptly and appropriately, including through referrals to outside agencies.
- Leaders have created a strong culture of safeguarding in which pupils feel safe, valued and happy. Staff with specific responsibilities for safeguarding demonstrate tenacity and unfailing determination to ensure that all pupils, particularly those who are vulnerable, receive the right care and support.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- The overall quality of teaching in the school has improved significantly over the last year. Most pupils now benefit from good teaching across a range of subjects that enables them to make better progress than in recent years.

- The very positive relationships that exist between staff and pupils make a strong contribution to the quality of learning in most classrooms. Teachers generally use questioning skilfully to check understanding and encourage pupils to develop their own thinking.
- Most teachers have high expectations of what their pupils can achieve. They make good use of assessment information to pitch the learning at the right level, ensuring that pupils are challenged to make good progress. Leaders identified that providing the right type and level of challenge for the most able pupils was a weak area of practice for some teachers. This has been a focus for training sessions and has had some impact. However, leaders know that in a small number of classrooms this is still not happening. This is preventing the most able pupils from reaching the highest standards.
- The school's model for planning learning is now fully embedded. It is used consistently across the school and has helped pupils to become more engaged in their learning. Staff and pupils use the same language to talk positively about learning. Pupils cite the way that teachers plan the learning as a significant factor in the way that the quality of teaching has improved. Pupils are very positive about the teaching that they receive and the impact that this is having on their progress. One pupil stated: 'I'm now achieving the grades that I want and setting higher standards for myself.'
- Throughout the monitoring inspections, pupils have spoken very positively about the teaching that they receive, particularly in performing arts and English. During this inspection, pupils were also keen to tell inspectors about the improvements to teaching in mathematics. Improving the quality of teaching in this department has been a high priority for leaders and their actions are now bearing fruit. This is having a positive impact on the progress that pupils are now making in mathematics.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good. All pupils are valued in this very inclusive school. Leaders have created a very nurturing environment in which pupils can thrive. Pupils' welfare is a high priority for all staff. Vulnerable pupils are particularly well supported.
- Staff and pupils speak very positively of the school's diverse population. This racially diverse school community is very much at ease with its rich and varied context. The culture is one that values individuals, recognising that everyone is different but equal. This creates an environment in which pupils feel safe and comfortable. This gives them confidence, for example, to be open about their sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Pupils say that bullying is very rare and that when it does happen it is dealt with effectively. Pupils know that staff have their safety and welfare at heart. All the pupils who spoke with inspectors felt proud of their school and would not hesitate to recommend it to others.
- Leaders ensure that the personal development and welfare of pupils who attend alternative provision is a high priority. Effective communication exists between school

staff and the providers. Very thorough procedures are in place to check on these pupils' attendance.

- Pupils benefit from an effective careers guidance programme. Pupils in all year groups have the opportunity to attend a range of careers events, such as a computer science roadshow.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good. Pupils were very keen to tell inspectors how much behaviour has improved over the last year. They particularly like the fact that leaders now deal swiftly and decisively with any individual who behaves badly or disrupts learning.
- Pupils demonstrate very positive attitudes to learning. Lessons are very rarely disrupted by poor behaviour. Pupils generally conduct themselves well around school. They are polite and friendly to adults and each other. They are very welcoming to visitors.
- During the monitoring visits, Her Majesty's Inspector raised some concerns about the school's inclusion unit, Pathways. Senior leaders responded swiftly and decisively to these concerns. Pathways is now proving to be a strength of the school. Improvements to the leadership, physical environment and curriculum mean that the unit now provides appropriate support to meet the emotional, behavioural and educational needs of the pupils. Pupils and parents speak highly of the support that staff in the unit provide.
- Overall absence figures give no cause for concern as they are broadly in line with national averages. Senior leaders use attendance data very effectively to identify any issues that lie behind the headline figures. They are acutely aware that despite the range of actions that they have taken, too many disadvantaged pupils are still not attending school regularly. Leaders have meticulously identified the reasons why specific groups within the wider disadvantaged cohort are frequently absent from school. This has enabled them to target their actions more precisely.

Outcomes for pupils

Requires improvement

- In recent years, pupils have not made good progress across a range of subjects during their time in school. This has particularly been the case for disadvantaged pupils and the most able.
- During the last year, senior leaders have been resolute in their determination to ensure that all pupils make better progress. Their focused and determined approach has paid off. The school's assessment information shows that improvements to teaching and learning have had a positive impact on current pupils' progress.
- Leaders use pupils' performance information very effectively to inform their ongoing decisions and actions. The strategic leadership of this area is very strong. The 'Routes to Success' system provides all pupils with aspirational targets. Pupils, staff and parents like the clarity of the system. Leaders ensure that the assessment information that teachers enter into the system is accurate.
- This assessment information shows that, overall, pupils are making better progress

across the school than in the previous two years. However, underneath the positive headline figures, leaders are aware that their actions have not had enough impact on improving the progress and attainment of the most able and disadvantaged pupils.

- During the monitoring inspections, pupils' progress in mathematics was an ongoing area of concern. There was clear evidence during this inspection that improvements to the leadership and quality of teaching in this subject have enabled pupils to make better progress in mathematics than in recent years.
- Nearly 50% of pupils at Smithills School speak English as an additional language. Overall, these pupils make better progress than their peers in school. A small but significant number of pupils who speak English as an additional language are international new arrivals. These pupils often have very low levels of English speaking skills, if any at all. Leaders provide an intensive language support programme for them. This helps the pupils to develop decoding reading skills. However, in classroom situations, the language barrier is preventing many of these pupils from making progress.
- Pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities make progress at a similar rate to their peers in school. Support is tailored well to their specific educational needs. Teaching assistants are well trained and some have specialist skills, for example in cognition and learning. Leaders liaise well with a range of external partners to ensure that good-quality provision is available for all pupils.
- Improving pupils' literacy skills has been a high priority for leaders over the past year. The strategic leadership of this area is very strong. Leaders' approach has not focused on 'quick fixes' but has put literacy at the heart of high-quality teaching. Leaders shared with inspectors compelling evidence of the positive impact of the intensive reading programmes for pupils who join the school with very low literacy skills.
- Leaders have taken a range of actions to promote reading for pleasure. For example, there is a regular shared reading session for form groups during 'session zero' for Years 7 and 8. Texts are selected to develop cultural awareness and vocabulary. The profile of reading has clearly been raised.
- Pupils are well prepared to move on to further education and training. Destination information for recent years shows that the proportion of Year 11 pupils that go on to further education, training or employment is above the national average.

School details

Unique reference number	140500
Local authority	Bolton
Inspection number	10051949

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	Secondary comprehensive
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	11 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	880
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair	Nigel Johnson
Principal	Michael Sidebottom
Telephone number	01204 842 382
Website	www.smithillsschool.net
Email address	office@smithillsschool.net
Date of previous inspection	15–16 November 2016

Information about this school

- This is a smaller than average-sized school.
- The proportion of disadvantaged pupils is much higher than the national average.
- The proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language is three times the national average. A small but significant number of pupils are international new arrivals.
- The proportion of pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities is higher than the national average and an average proportion of these pupils have an education, health and care plan.
- The school uses alternative provision for a small number of pupils. At the time of the inspection, Red Box, Lomax Recruitment, Heart Lift, The Prince's Trust and Ed Start were the providers being used.
- In 2017, the school met the government's floor standards. The floor standards set the

minimum expectations for progress and attainment at key stage 4.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed teaching and learning in lessons across a range of subjects, including joint observations with leaders. Inspectors looked at pupils' work during their observations. Two inspectors carried out a work scrutiny with senior leaders.
- Inspectors met with three groups of pupils. They also talked with others informally during breaks and lunchtimes. Discussions were held with staff, including senior and middle leaders, pastoral staff and classroom teachers. A meeting was held with the chief executive and chair of the trust.
- Inspectors scrutinised a range of documents. These included: the school's self-evaluation; information about the school's performance; and a selection of policies, including those relating to safeguarding.

Inspection team

Anne Seneviratne, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
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Antony Edkins	Ofsted Inspector

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