

Merlin Top Primary Academy

Braithwaite Avenue, Keighley, West Yorkshire BD22 6HZ

Inspection dates

27–28 March 2019

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school

- Leaders have created a culture of high expectations in which 'good' is never good enough. There is a 'no excuses' climate.
- Morale and motivation across the staff are high as a result of leaders' vision and actions and the very positive ethos that has been created.
- Teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve are high. Teachers challenge pupils to excel virtually all of the time. They skilfully ensure that all have grasped the learning before moving on.
- Pupils' personal development and welfare is a strength of the school. A rich and deep curriculum provides pupils with ample opportunities to nurture their emotional and physical well-being.
- Pupils' standards of behaviour are very high. They respond positively to staff requests and behave considerately towards one another. Pupils' rates of attendance are above the national average compared with similar schools.
- Pupils' progress and attainment in a range of subjects and in both key stage 1 and 2 are very strong. Pupils' progress in writing, in particular, is improving substantially. Pupils currently in the school, including those who are disadvantaged and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are making substantial gains in their learning from their mostly below-typical starting points.
- The quality of provision in the early years foundation stage (EYFS) is very strong. Teaching is very effective, with skilful questions used almost all of the time to consolidate and extend children's learning. Children's progress across the EYFS curriculum is substantial.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that the most able pupils in mathematics achieve even higher standards through work that stretches them even further.
- Continue to strengthen the progress already being achieved in writing even further, so that outcomes by the end of key stage 2 are at least as good as those of reading and mathematics.
- Further develop teachers' already skilful use of questioning in the EYFS so that children are even more challenged in their learning.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Outstanding

- Leaders, supported by the trust, have established the school as a beacon of aspiration and achievement. They have a 'no excuses' attitude and approach. The principal's and deputy principal's unwavering determination and purpose, strengthened by trust leaders' support, have created a school climate which enables pupils to excel.
- Leaders focus relentlessly on pupils' outcomes. Even when pupils make substantial progress and attainment is rising, leaders do not sit back with self-congratulation. They immediately set about improving things even more.
- Staff at different levels are highly motivated by leaders' aspirations for what pupils can achieve. They feel empowered by the high-quality training they have received, particularly from within the trust. Morale among staff is high.
- Leaders have put in place a curriculum which enables pupils to be challenged and to succeed in a range of subjects across all years. Particularly, the wide and varied extra-curricular provision offers pupils a plethora of opportunities. For example, almost all pupils in Year 5 play a musical instrument. A bicycle programme provides the chance for pupils to learn how to ride safely. There is a broad selection of sporting and physical activities available at lunchtime and after school. The effect of this provision is that pupils have a keen sense of teamwork, responsibility and the importance of sticking at something.
- Pupils are well prepared for life in modern Britain. In discussion with inspectors, pupils spoke about their awareness of different lifestyles, faiths and cultures to their own. Pupils describe a school community which is tolerant and respectful of differences. They have learned about bigotry. A recent cross-curricular art project, 'Keighley's Got Worth', gave pupils an insight into the culture, history and technology of their local community.
- Leaders' use of additional funding, namely the pupil premium, the primary physical education and sport premium, and the funding for SEND, is very effective. As a result of leaders' grasp of how to make use of these funds, disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND are making strong progress from their starting points. A large and growing number of pupils participate in sporting activities.

Governance of the school

- Governors have a clear and accurate understanding of the school's strengths and relative weaknesses. Supported by the trust, they make effective use of school performance information to hold leaders to account.
- The trust has taken effective action to broaden and deepen governors' expertise further, through training, so that leaders can be even more stringently held to account.
- Governors have established helpful links with leaders, to better equip them with knowledge about how well pupils are doing. For example, governors meet regularly with the leaders responsible for safeguarding, SEND and teaching, learning and assessment. Consequently, their understanding of the school is detailed.

- Records of meetings of the governing body demonstrate that leaders are required to present governors with pupils' performance and attendance information and that governors challenge leaders about the effectiveness of leaders' actions.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- One member of staff's comment that 'We are all responsible for safeguarding' is typical of the safeguarding culture at the school. Staff have a secure understanding of their responsibilities towards keeping children safe. They know the signs of abuse to look out for and what to do should they become worried. Leaders have made sure that staff are appropriately trained and understand the particular safeguarding risks in the school's local setting. Staff are trained in, and are vigilant about, the government's 'Prevent' duty for recognising and preventing the risks of radicalisation and extremism.
- The staff with particular responsibility for safeguarding are effective in identifying and helping those pupils who are vulnerable and in need of support. These leaders maintain detailed and accurate records of the help that has been put in place and requested. They make appropriate links with external agencies. Leaders' high level of vigilance has resulted, for example, in referrals to appropriate, specialist agencies to support vulnerable pupils who are facing a range of challenging circumstances.
- Leaders' processes for vetting and checking the suitability of adults to work in the school are effective and meet legal requirements.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Outstanding

- Teachers' expectations of what pupils should achieve are consistently high. Whenever teaching assistants are engaged in supporting pupils, their expectations of pupils are equally high. Consequently, pupils are set work which challenges and stretches them at the right level, virtually all of the time, across all years and in a range of subjects.
- Teachers make good use of pupils' progress and attainment information in their planning of learning tasks. As a result, teachers are very effective in enabling pupils from their different and often well-below-national-average starting points to make substantial gains in their learning. Pupils who are disadvantaged and those with SEND make strong progress as a result of teachers' planning.
- Teachers are skilled in their use of questions to enable pupils to learn. Consistently, questioning is targeted and precise, so that pupils' understanding is checked and consolidated before the teacher moves on. During the course of the inspection, inspectors saw no pupils who were stuck and left behind in their learning. Frequently, teachers use questions to stretch and challenge pupils' understanding more deeply.
- The combination of teachers' high expectations and effective planning, together with pupils' positive attitudes to learning, has resulted in classrooms which are characterised by the 'buzz' of learning. Pupils are consistently inspired to want to learn and to know more. They work with enthusiasm in small groups, in pairs and individually. To a very large extent, this is because teachers make the work both interesting and mostly appropriately challenging. In the Year 3/4 classes, for example, pupils were seen by inspectors to be engrossed in their learning about Egyptology and mummification.

- Leaders have made the teaching of writing a priority since the previous inspection, with the result that pupils' writing skills are improving substantially across the school. Consistently, pupils' writing demonstrates increasingly strong standards of content and accuracy. It is typical to see extended pieces of writing in pupils' books, in both English and in the school's wider curriculum of the foundation subjects. From the very beginning of Year 1, pupils' writing is precisely targeted and improved. A group of boys in Year 1, for example, are already writing extended pieces which contain a range of grammatical constructions and complex spellings such as 'mischievous'.
- The teaching of mathematics is similarly strong. From early in key stage 1, pupils are required to take on problem-solving and reasoning tasks, as well as basic arithmetic. Teachers are effective in supporting pupils' understanding through the use of 'modelling' the correct processes for different calculations. Very occasionally, however, the most able pupils in mathematics are set tasks which do not consistently challenge them enough.
- The teaching of phonics in Years 1 and 2 is strong. Pupils are enabled to read with fluency and comprehension as a result of effective phonics teaching. Pupils are systematically introduced to new sounds and given opportunities to practise and apply them. Teachers adapt their approach as required to meet the reading needs of disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND. As a consequence of the effective teaching of phonics, pupils' reading across the school is strong.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Outstanding

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding.
- Leaders have placed pupils' personal development and welfare at the heart of the school. Leaders' unswerving aim is that pupils' emotional and physical well-being must be central to the school's work, so that pupils are able to give their all to their studies. This aim is not merely a noble aspiration: it is lived and breathed throughout the school through leaders' 'i-challenge' curriculum and creates the whole ethos of the school.
- Through the 'i-challenge' curriculum, leaders provide access to a wide range of opportunities which promote pupils' emotional, physical and intellectual development. Activities provide pupils with opportunities to develop what they and leaders call the 'building blocks' of successful life skills, such as teamwork, resilience, responsibility and friendship. All of the pupils, when asked by inspectors, strongly believe that the 'i-challenge' curriculum is playing a key role in their health and development as future citizens.
- Leaders' focus on the 'building blocks' necessary for a healthy and successful life has resulted in pupils who are resilient, enthusiastic learners. Pupils do not give up on their work, even when it is hard. They routinely work together to solve problems, to acquire new knowledge and understanding, and to explore ideas more deeply. Across all years and subjects, the 'i-challenge' curriculum has enabled pupils to be active, engaged participants in their own learning.
- Pupils have a strong understanding of how to keep themselves safe. Leaders have

ensured that pupils learn about many aspects of safe, healthy living. For example, through the school's 'Stay Safe With Braithe' project, pupils across all years have age-appropriate knowledge about some of the risks and dangers they might face. For example, 'Stay Safe With Braithe' teaches younger pupils of the dangers of hot items such as fires and kettles, and all pupils of the potential risks posed by the internet and social media.

- Pupils understand about bullying and how to keep themselves safe from it. Pupils who spoke to inspectors know about cyber bullying as well as other forms. They are confident that bullying is very rare in school but feel that they could tell an adult if worried and that it would be resolved quickly.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding.
- Throughout the inspection, the standard of behaviour in lessons was impeccable. Pupils' behaviour around the site at breaktime and lunchtime was equally excellent. Pupils display a high level of self-discipline, because the relationships between staff and pupils are so strong and because the routines of expected standards of behaviour are well established.
- The school caters for a small number of vulnerable pupils who, at times, display very challenging behaviour. However, leaders have ensured that staff have received appropriate training to enable them to support these pupils and to manage their behaviour when it becomes challenging. In addition, leaders have established a range of ways in which these pupils are supported, such as 'The Den', 'Magic Breakfast' and support from specialist counsellors in social and mental health. The pupils who receive such support speak highly of its benefits to them.
- Leaders' effective implementation of behaviour management routines, together with staff 'buy-in' to the system, has contributed to the school's well-below-national-average rates of fixed-term exclusion and repeat fixed-term exclusion. There have been no permanent exclusions since the previous inspection.
- As a consequence of leaders' dogged focus on attendance, the rate of pupils' attendance is improving and is now in line with the national average. When compared to schools with a similar level of deprivation, pupils' attendance is above the national average.
- The rate of persistent absenteeism from school is in line with the national average. For pupils who are disadvantaged and those with SEND, the rates of persistent absence are below the national averages. Over time, leaders' actions are resulting in a reduction in the rate of persistent absence overall.

Outcomes for pupils

Outstanding

- At the end of key stage 2 in 2017/18, pupils' progress in reading and mathematics was well above the national average. Pupils' progress in writing at the end of key stage 2 in 2017/18 was in line with the national average, but their writing attainment is improving substantially over time and is closing rapidly on the national average. Pupils' attainment at the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics combined was above the national average at the end of key stage 2 in 2017/18.
- The progress of pupils who are disadvantaged in each of reading, writing and mathematics was well above the national averages for other pupils at the end of key stage 2 in 2017/18. Disadvantaged pupils' attainment in reading, writing and mathematics combined is improving substantially over time and in 2017/18 was well above the 'like-for-like' national average.
- The progress of pupils with SEND at the end of key stage 2 in 2017/18 was well above average in each of reading, writing and mathematics. The attainment of pupils with SEND in reading, writing and mathematics combined is improving substantially and rapidly over time compared to the national averages.
- The most-able pupils at the end of key stage 2 in 2017/18 made progress in reading and mathematics which was well above the national averages. In writing, progress is improving over time by a substantial margin compared to the national average.
- Pupils' attainment in grammar, punctuation and spelling at the end of key stage 2 in 2017/18 was above the national average, including for disadvantaged pupils.
- Pupils' attainment at greater depth in reading and writing at the end of key stage 2 in 2017/18 was below the national averages, but over time is improving strongly and quickly for all pupils, including those who are disadvantaged and those with SEND. In mathematics, pupils' attainment at greater depth was in line with the national average in 2017/18.
- At the end of key stage 1 in 2018, pupils' attainment in reading, writing and mathematics was above the national average. This represents strong progress from pupils' starting points when they join Year 1. Over time, the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND at the end of key stage 1 is improving substantially compared to the national averages.
- Pupils currently in the school, including disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND, are making sustained, substantial progress from their starting points in a range of subjects, including reading, writing, mathematics and the broader curriculum. As a result, pupils are extremely well prepared for commencing secondary school.
- Leaders have prioritised the importance of pupils' ability to read fluently and widely. There is a bedrock of support across the school for pupils to access and enjoy reading, which is helping them to make such strong progress across the curriculum by the time they finish key stage 2.

Early years provision

Outstanding

- The leadership of the EYFS is very effective. Since the previous inspection, leaders have made further improvements to the outdoor learning environment and the communication and language provision.
- Leaders make effective use of pupil premium funding in the EYFS. In particular, this is well used in the development of children's speech and language skills.
- Children benefit from high-quality teaching. Teachers and teaching assistants use skilful questioning to probe and deepen children's understanding almost all of the time. A well-planned learning environment, both indoors and outdoors, provides varied teaching opportunities which teachers take full advantage of in extending children's learning.
- The teaching of phonics in the EYFS is very strong. Children are taught sounds, letters and blends systematically, so that they make good progress. Teachers' consistent application of the school's policy for the teaching of phonics ensures that, where necessary, they can review and revisit sounds and letters so that children do not get left behind.
- The teaching of handwriting is also very strong. In the Reception Year, children are taught to write legibly. They are very strongly prepared for the writing curriculum at key stage 1.
- A high proportion of pupils enter the Nursery Year with knowledge, skills and understanding below what is typical for children of their age. Staff quickly identify children's learning and development requirements and ensure that these are addressed. As a result, gaps in children's learning in the different aspects of the early years curriculum are quickly closed. From their starting points, children make strong progress across the early years learning goals, including literacy and mathematics.
- Children's behaviour and personal development are strengths of the early years provision. They play and work together with consideration. Staff reinforce the school's expectations and, through the 'i-challenge' curriculum, begin to teach children about resilience, tolerance, teamwork and responsibility.
- The organisation of learning in the EYFS ensures a smooth transition on entry to the Nursery Year and Reception Year. Systems are in place to support transition, such as home visits and meetings with parents. Leaders have taken effective action to increase parents' opportunities to participate in their children's learning, such as a 'starter' meeting to offer guidance on reading support, expectations around attendance and behaviour, cooking sessions and parent/child story sessions.
- Leaders have ensured that all statutory welfare requirements for the EYFS are met and that the school's safeguarding processes are adhered to.

School details

Unique reference number	139229
Local authority	Bradford
Inspection number	10087563

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

Type of school	Primary
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	3 to 11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	362
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of the academy council	Siân Stebbings
Principal	Lesley Heathcote
Telephone number	01535 210028
Website	www.merlintopacademy.org
Email address	merlintop.enquiries@northerneducationtrust.org
Date of previous inspection	29–30 November 2016

Information about this school

- Merlin Top Primary Academy is part of the Northern Education Trust multi-academy trust, which it joined on 1 April 2013. Responsibility for governance of the school rests with the board of trustees, which delegates some authority to an academy council.
- The school's pupils are of a largely White British heritage, with a smaller proportion of pupils who have a British Asian–Pakistani heritage.
- The school serves an economically disadvantaged area. The number of pupils who are entitled to the pupil premium funding is well above the national average.
- The proportion of pupils who receive support for their special educational needs is well above the national average.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors visited over 40 lessons across subjects and years, sometimes accompanied by the school's senior leaders. During these visits, inspectors talked to pupils and looked at work in their books.
- Inspectors scrutinised pupils' work across several subjects, with different year groups and pupil abilities represented.
- Meetings were held with the principal. An inspector met with the deputy chief executive officer of the trust. An inspector met the chair of the governors' academy council.
- Inspectors met senior leaders with responsibility for: the EYFS; attendance; behaviour; provision for SEND; the quality of teaching, learning and assessment; pupils' personal development and welfare; the pupil premium and sports premium funding; the curriculum; pupils' progress information; and safeguarding.
- Meetings were held with three groups of pupils, drawn from across year groups. Inspectors also spoke informally with pupils around the site at breaktime and lunchtime.
- Meetings were held with three groups of staff: middle leaders, non-teachers and teachers at different career points.
- Inspectors observed pupils' behaviour in lessons, on corridors, in social spaces such as the dining room and at the start of the day when pupils were arriving at school.
- A wide range of documentation was examined. This included: leaders' self-evaluation and plans; minutes of the governors' academy council meetings; attendance, behaviour and exclusion information; logs of incidents of bullying; and pupils' progress information. Leaders' processes for vetting adults' suitability to work in school were checked, along with safeguarding files.
- Inspectors took into account the 10 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire for parents, Parent View, together with six free-text parental comments. An inspector spoke on the telephone with one parent. An inspector spoke with parents at 'drop-off' time at the start of the day.

Inspection team

Steve Shaw, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Andrew Cummings	Ofsted Inspector
Howard Bousfield	Ofsted Inspector

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In the report, 'disadvantaged pupils' refers to those pupils who attract government pupil premium funding: pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years and pupils in care or who left care through adoption or another formal route. www.gov.uk/pupil-premium-information-for-schools-and-alternative-provision-settings.

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