

Inspection of Merchants' Academy

Gatehouse Avenue, Withywood, Bristol BS13 9AJ

Inspection dates: 26–27 February 2020

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

The quality of education

Requires improvement

Behaviour and attitudes

Requires improvement

Personal development

Good

Leadership and management

Requires improvement

Early years provision

Requires improvement

Sixth-form provision

Requires improvement

Previous inspection grade

Inadequate

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils are safe and well cared for at Merchants' Academy. They enjoy a wide range of activities and experiences that enhance their learning in classrooms. For example, workshops led by the school's sponsors develop pupils' awareness and understanding of engineering. Pupils receive good-quality careers guidance and participate in work experience placements with well-respected employers. This is helping them to aim higher in possible future careers.

Teachers have increasingly high expectations of pupils. In the primary phase, pupils follow teachers' instructions quickly. Pupils show respect for one another. As a result of the increased emphasis on religious education and personal, social and health education, pupils appreciate different faiths and cultures. This translates into their positive relationships.

The quality of education pupils receive is improving but it is still not good enough. The subjects and topics that pupils study have been reviewed. New plans are being developed to ensure that pupils learn a wider range of knowledge. However, teaching is not ensuring that pupils remember what they have been taught. In key stage 4 and the sixth form, pupils can now choose from a wider range of courses and qualifications. However, attendance remains low and pupils do not routinely catch up on the work they miss.

Around school and in class, pupils are generally calm. However, where the curriculum plans are not matched well to pupils' needs, pupils 'switch off' quickly. Pupils move around the buildings in an orderly manner. Bullying is rare.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

Leaders have made a real effort to improve both the range of subjects that pupils study and the content within those subjects. This content is now in place for most subjects but not all years. Some plans are not as well thought through as others. Within and across subjects, there is a lot of variability in how well the plans are implemented. Too often, pupils are covering the content in their classes, but the approaches teachers use are not ensuring that pupils remember what they have been taught.

School staff have worked hard to improve teachers' understanding of the various special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) that many pupils have. Teachers are now aware of these pupils and have some general tips that they use with these pupils. However, teachers do not have enough information about pupils' particular needs or guidance about how to support these needs in their subject. This is limiting the progress that pupils with SEND make.

Attendance and punctuality at school have improved year on year. However, they are still too low. Disadvantaged pupils' attendance is improving but not as quickly as that of other pupils. Leaders are continuing to work with families to raise pupils'

attendance further. When pupils miss school, they do not routinely catch up on work they miss. As a result, they have gaps in their knowledge.

Leaders have worked hard to improve pupils' behaviour and reduce exclusions. They have been successful in their efforts. Exclusions are now in line with the national average and the number of pupils who are removed from lessons continues to fall.

Since September 2019, leaders have made a determined drive to improve the teaching of early reading in the primary phase. Teaching staff have had training by experts and new plans are in place. Trustees have ensured that money was available to buy high-quality books. As a result, the teaching of reading in the early years and in key stage 1 is getting better but it is not yet ensuring that pupils have the knowledge they need to read fluently. Key stage 2, pupils still have significant gaps in their knowledge and they are not yet catching up quickly enough.

Leaders and school staff are wholly committed to improving life chances for pupils. Leaders make decisions with the best of intentions. However, although there is a lot of activity, it is not raising pupils' outcomes as rapidly or efficiently as it could. Nonetheless, school and trust leaders, trustees and local governors are all clear about the school's strengths and weaknesses and are continuing to improve all aspects of the school's work. They are keen for the school to be the centre of the community. Events, such as the fireworks display and summer fair, have been well supported by the community.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

School staff are vigilant. This is the result of the training they have received. They work well with families. Leaders draw on a network of specialist agencies, including medical practitioners and housing associations. This ensures that pupils who are at risk are protected well and that families receive timely support.

As a result of the teaching they receive, pupils have a strong awareness of the risks they may face in the community and when online.

Leaders have made certain that systems are effective in ensuring that adults who work in the school are suitable to do so.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Leaders have overhauled the curriculum from the Nursery to the sixth form. In most subjects, there is now a more cohesive approach that builds on pupils' knowledge over time. However, it is not yet fully in place for all subjects. Furthermore, as teachers implement some of the plans, weaknesses are emerging. Leaders need to tackle these weaknesses quickly. They should ensure

that cohesive plans across phases are in place for all subjects and in all years and that they are carefully thought through, so that pupils' knowledge builds over time.

- Pupils do not have a strong understanding of the concepts they explore and struggle to recall much of what they have learned. This is partly because, in some subjects, curriculum plans are not designed well enough and partly because teachers do not have strong enough subject-specific pedagogical knowledge to teach it effectively. Trust and school leaders should ensure that teachers and teaching assistants receive the training they need to develop their own practice further.
- 'Pupil passports' are in place for pupils with SEND. These identify broad categories of need and generic strategies for teachers. However, they lack specificity about pupils' particular needs and subject-specific strategies teachers may use. Leaders should continue to refine the information they provide to teachers so that teachers have what they need to best adapt their teaching approaches to meet pupils' needs.
- Leaders gather a lot of information about pupils. However, they are not sufficiently analytical in the information they gather. Consequently, actions are not planned strategically in order to address specific issues. Trustees and local governors should ensure that leaders are more strategic in analysing and using this information to develop effective plans to improve outcomes for pupils.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use Ofsted Parent View information when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

If you are the school and you are not happy with the inspection or the report, you can [complain to Ofsted](#).

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

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.

School details

Unique reference number	135597
Local authority	City of Bristol
Inspection number	10111455
Type of school	All-through
School category	Academy sponsor-led
Age range of pupils	3 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1,178
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	98
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Gail Bragg
Principal	Samantha Williamson
Website	www.merchantsacademy.org
Date of previous inspection	24–25 September 2019, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- Merchants' Academy is an all-through school with a Nursery, primary phase, secondary phase and a sixth form. It is based on two sites in the Withywood area, approximately half a mile apart.
- The school is part of Venturers' Trust, a group of eight schools in Bristol. It is jointly sponsored by the Society of Merchant Venturers and the University of Bristol.
- The school makes use of three alternative providers: Bristol Hospital Education Service, City of Bristol College and Lansdown Park Academy.
- The proportion of disadvantaged pupils is much higher than the national average.
- The proportion of pupils with SEND is much higher than that of similar schools nationally.

Information about this inspection

We carried out this inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

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.

- We met with the principal, senior leaders, class teachers and a group of newly qualified teachers.
- The lead inspector met with three trustees, six members of the local governing body, the trust's chief executive officer and other trust leaders.
- We did deep dives in reading, English, history, mathematics, science, and personal, social and health education. These included discussions with subject leaders; visits to lessons; looking at examples of pupils' work; discussions with teachers; discussions with pupils and listening to pupils read.
- We reviewed the school's records of safeguarding checks and referrals to the local authority. We spoke with staff about how they keep pupils safe. We also asked the pupils about how they keep themselves safe and what to do if they have concerns.
- We observed pupils at breaktime and lunchtime.
- One inspector spoke to parents of primary-aged pupils at the start of the school day. Inspectors took account of the views of the 30 parents and carers who completed the Parent View survey.
- We also considered the views of the 36 members of staff who completed Ofsted's online survey. The views of the 30 pupils who completed the pupil survey were taken into account.

Inspection team

Iain Freeland, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Deborah Wring	Ofsted Inspector
Matthew Shanks	Ofsted Inspector
Paula Marsh	Ofsted Inspector
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