

Inspection of Darwen Vale High School

Blackburn Road, Darwen, Lancashire BB3 0AL

Inspection dates:

3–4 March 2020

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

The quality of education

Requires improvement

Behaviour and attitudes

Requires improvement

Personal development

Requires improvement

Leadership and management

Requires improvement

Previous inspection grade

Requires improvement

What is it like to attend this school?

The pupils with whom we spoke said they are happy at Darwen Vale High School. They said that the school is a safe place to be. Older pupils told us that there have been many positive changes at the school since the previous inspection.

Pupils said that behaviour has improved. They appreciate the new behaviour and rewards systems that leaders have introduced. Pupils told us that bullying has decreased. They are confident that staff tackle any incidents of bullying promptly. However, pupils said that there is still more work to be done to tackle poor behaviour.

By the end of key stage 4, pupils do not achieve as well as they should. Their achievement has been hampered by a weak curriculum and a lack of ambition for their learning. Leaders' and teachers' expectations have not been high enough. As a result, pupils have significant gaps in their knowledge. Younger pupils are learning more in some subjects due to recent improvements to the curriculum.

Pupils enjoy the range of different clubs and activities on offer. For example, they take part in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme. Pupils are proud of the work that they do to support charitable causes.

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

Pupils have underachieved at Darwen Vale High School for too long. Although there are signs that pupils' attainment is improving, leaders have been slow to address the issues that have held pupils back. The attainment of Year 11 pupils in 2019 remained weak in too many subjects.

Leaders have started the process of overhauling the school's curriculum so that it better meets pupils' needs. They have now taken appropriate decisions to prioritise a more ambitious curriculum, including the English Baccalaureate (EBacc). They have worked closely with colleagues from the Aldridge Education Trust to develop subject curriculums.

Leaders are improving the planning and delivery of the English and mathematics curriculums at key stage 4. As a result, the achievement of pupils in Year 11 in 2019 improved in English and mathematics. Pupils made more progress between key stages 2 and 4 in these subjects than previous cohorts have done.

Younger pupils are also now learning better than before in some subjects, especially English and mathematics. This is particularly the case for Years 7 and 8. Leaders are in the process of redesigning the curriculum across key stage 3. However, there remains much work to do to ensure that the quality of the curriculum enables pupils to know and remember more.

Across the school, in subjects such as science, geography, history and modern foreign languages, the development of the curriculum is still in its early stages. In these subjects, leaders have not given enough thought to what they want pupils to learn and the order in which they should learn it. Where leaders have bought appropriate commercial curriculums, not enough consideration has been given to how to adapt them for the pupils at the school.

Teachers are not doing enough to address the wide gaps in pupils' knowledge across subjects, particularly in key stage 4. As a result, older pupils do not learn new content as well as they should. Their ability to recall previously learned content is very mixed, as is the quality of their work. Some pupils find it difficult to make connections between topics and concepts.

Over time, leaders have not been ambitious enough for pupils, particularly those who are disadvantaged. This means that some staff have lower expectations of disadvantaged pupils. The low proportion of disadvantaged pupils entered for an academic curriculum, for example the EBacc, reflects this lack of ambition. Added to this, a minority of pupils are withdrawn from studying a modern foreign language to support their literacy development.

Overall, pupils' behaviour continues to improve across the school. This, in part, is because pupils are rising to leaders' and teachers' increased expectations of their conduct. Pupils are pleased with the new systems that have been put into place to manage their behaviour. However, they told us that these systems are not used consistently by staff.

Some pupils do not attend school regularly enough. This is particularly the case for disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Pupils with SEND do not achieve as well as they should.

Leaders have increased the range of opportunities to promote pupils' personal development. They are in the process of introducing a new personal development curriculum which is delivered during form time. However, evidence from the inspection showed that some pupils do not take these sessions seriously.

There are clear signs that leaders, governors and trustees have begun to address some of the issues that have prevented pupils from learning better. Parents and carers have greater confidence in the school. Nearly four fifths of parents who completed the Ofsted survey indicated that they would recommend the school to others.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders complete all necessary pre-employment checks on new staff. Staff follow the school's policies for reporting and recording any safeguarding concerns.

Staff receive training on a range of safeguarding issues. This enables them to spot any signs that pupils may be at risk of harm. However, a small number of staff who have joined the school in the last 16 months have gaps in their training. Leaders now have plans in place to remedy this.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Leaders have been too slow to tackle the shortcomings in the curriculum. Although they have begun to address these issues in some subjects, such as English and mathematics, the improvements in other areas are very recent. As a result, pupils' attainment remains weak in many subjects, particularly in humanities, science and modern foreign languages. Leaders must ensure that they plan the curriculum effectively for each subject. They should think carefully about what they want pupils to learn and the order in which they should learn new knowledge.
- The delivery and implementation of the curriculum do not do enough to address the wide gaps in pupils' knowledge and understanding. Consequently, not enough is being done to compensate for the historical weaknesses in the curriculum. Pupils' ability to recall prior learning varies significantly, as does the quality of their work. Leaders should ensure that teachers identify and address gaps in pupils' basic knowledge so that they are able to learn new content well.
- Over time, leaders have not been ambitious enough for pupils, especially disadvantaged pupils. A minority of pupils are withdrawn from some modern foreign language lessons in key stage 3. A very low proportion of pupils follow an ambitious curriculum, for example the EBacc. This limits pupils' learning and reduces their future options. Leaders should ensure that they, and their staff, are ambitious and have high expectations of all pupils.
- Some pupils' attendance is much lower than it should be. During the current school year, rates of absence have increased further. Rates of absence are particularly high for disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND. Too many pupils are regularly absent from school. This is having a negative impact on pupils' learning because they miss too many lessons. It is exacerbating the gaps in their knowledge. Leaders must therefore strengthen their strategy for improving pupils' attendance so that rates of absence quickly decline.

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	141321
Local authority	Blackburn with Darwen
Inspection number	10121993
Type of school	Secondary comprehensive
School category	Academy sponsor-led
Age range of pupils	11 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	835
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of governing body	Ian Richardson
Headteacher	Matthew Little
Website	www.darwenvale.com
Date of previous inspection	15–16 November 2017, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- Darwen Vale High School is part of the Aldridge Education Multi-Academy Trust.
- The school has experienced an increase in the number of pupils on roll since its previous inspection.
- The school currently uses alternative provision for a number of pupils at The Heights Free School and St Thomas' Centre.

Information about this inspection

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

- We held meetings with the headteacher, senior leaders and subject leaders.
- We met with members of the governing body, including its chair of governors, and the chief executive officer of Aldridge Education Trust.
- We held a telephone conversation with leaders educating pupils at The Heights Free School and St Thomas' Centre.

- We met with the special educational needs coordinator and those with responsibility for safeguarding, attendance and behaviour.
- We also met with those responsible for disadvantaged pupils and the school's personal development programme. We met with newly and recently qualified teachers.
- We checked safeguarding documentation, including the school's pre-employment checks on staff.
- We spoke with pupils and groups of pupils in key stages 3 and 4.
- We considered the 73 responses from parents to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View. This included the comments made to Ofsted's free-text facility.
- As part of the inspection, we did deep dives in the following subjects: English, mathematics, science, history and modern foreign languages. In these subjects, we met with subject leaders, visited a range of lessons, talked to pupils about their work, looked at pupils' work and met with teachers. We also considered other subjects, including art, geography and physical education.

Inspection team

Alyson Middlemass, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
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Timothy Gartside	Ofsted Inspector
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