

Inspection of The Cooper School

Churchill Road, Bicester, Oxfordshire OX26 4RS

Inspection dates: 29 and 30 November 2022

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

The quality of education

Requires improvement

Behaviour and attitudes

Good

Personal development

Good

Leadership and management

Requires improvement

Sixth-form provision

Good

Previous inspection grade

Good

What is it like to attend this school?

Strong positive relationships between staff and pupils lie at the heart of The Cooper School. The school's motto challenges pupils to 'dream big, work hard and be kind'. Pupils are caring and feel that they can be themselves in school. Sixth-form students are mature and confident, and relish studying at a higher level on the wide range of courses available to them.

Pupils enjoy a range of clubs and opportunities to develop their talents and interests. Pupil groups such as 'student voice' and the 'feminist book club' are empowered to suggest and make changes. Pupils of all ages enjoy leadership roles in clubs, societies, musical productions and student leadership teams.

Leaders have high aspirations for pupils. Pupils are inspired to aim high and achieve the best grades that they can. However, they are not always given the appropriate learning opportunities to apply and connect their knowledge so they can test out what they do or do not know.

In the last year, there has been an improvement in the behaviour of some pupils who have behaved poorly in the past. While some pupils and their parents still worry about bullying in the school, leaders have taken action to ensure that bullying is not commonplace.

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

In places, the curriculum is not yet ambitious enough. Leaders have recognised this and have made some changes. For example, they have reinstated a three-year key stage 3 programme based on the national curriculum. Much of this reorganisation is promising. However, there is more to do to ensure that the key content pupils should know and remember is precisely defined and well ordered. Teachers have good subject knowledge. However, they do not consistently help pupils to build their learning securely. They do not check carefully enough how well pupils remember what they have been taught. This means that some pupils struggle to make links with previous learning and do not achieve as well as they should. This is not the case in the sixth form, where learning is challenging and students achieve well.

Leaders have detailed knowledge of the needs pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), and these are communicated to teachers. However, leaders also know that the support for some pupils, including those with SEND, disadvantaged pupils and those in the early stages of reading, has not been as consistently helpful as it should be. Consequently, leaders are now making sure that teachers have a better understanding of pupils' different needs. Strategies for how to adapt learning to meet these pupils' needs are in their early stages. Similarly, leaders are still establishing provision to support pupils who find reading more difficult.

Those responsible for governance know the school well and hold the school to account over strategic decisions. Over time, however, they have not ensured that the quality of education has remained strong. Governors have recognised this and have re-organised themselves so that they are now more effective in their roles. Current leaders have laid out clear priorities for school improvement and are on their way to realising their vision. With the support of trustees, the capacity of leadership has grown, enabling school leaders to make changes in many areas of the school. Some staff, however, reported to inspectors that they would like further support and training to manage recent changes and implement new policies.

Leaders prioritise pupils' personal development. Pupils study topics that are well chosen and timed to best support the needs of different age groups. Pupils have found presentations on risks in their locality from external speakers particularly engaging. The ACE (Achieving and Creating Excellence) centre is well regarded in school. Staff there help pupils with SEND, including social, emotional and mental health needs, to overcome any barriers to learning.

Older pupils and sixth formers receive useful careers advice and guidance. They are informed about the range of opportunities that are available to them and are eager to know and understand this information. Almost all continue into education, employment or training following GCSE or A level examinations.

Recently, behaviour has significantly improved. Pupils behave well around the school and in lessons. Leaders recognised an increase in poor behaviour since the last inspection, alongside the growing social and emotional needs of pupils. They have implemented new strategies and pupils have responded positively.

Most pupils attend school regularly. Some, including a few sixth-form students, do not attend as regularly as they should. Staff have a range of appropriate strategies to support good attendance, and these are working well. Leaders are very clear about how much pupils benefit from being in lessons, and they work tenaciously to remove any barriers to attending school.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Safeguarding leaders ensure that staff are well trained and knowledgeable. Staff know the signs to look out for that may indicate a pupil is at risk from harm. Concerns are reported promptly. This allows leaders to make connections and tackle emerging issues in a timely way. They are determined to get pupils any additional help they need to keep safe. This includes working effectively with external agencies. Leaders follow safer recruitment practices to ensure adults are suitable to work with children.

Pupils know that there are trusted adults to go to and are rightly confident that they will be listened to.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- The quality of the curriculum is too variable. As a result, pupils do not always understand what they are being taught in the depth that they are capable of. The school should ensure that the curriculum and how it is delivered in all subjects is designed to build pupils' learning securely over time.
- Strategies to support pupils with SEND are not yet embedded. Their needs not always well understood and so they are not always well supported in their learning. Leaders must ensure that all teachers have the training and expertise to adapt their teaching to meet the needs of all pupils.
- The support provided for weaker readers is not strong enough. This limits the opportunities for pupils to access the curriculum and expand their learning. Leaders should ensure that support for these pupils is precisely matched to their needs, so that pupils' fluency, accuracy and confidence in reading improve rapidly.

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 information from Ofsted Parent View 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.

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	141069
Local authority	Oxfordshire
Inspection number	10241929
Type of school	Secondary Comprehensive
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	11 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1282
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	213
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Brian Brown
Headteacher	Robert Whannel
Website	www.thecooperschool.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	6 June 2017, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The school is part of the Bernwode Schools Trust, a multi-academy trust comprising of The Cooper School and a nearby primary school.
- The school currently uses three alternative providers.
- The school meets the requirements of the Baker Clause, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 8 to 13 with information about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.

Information about this inspection

The inspectors carried out this graded inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors met with the headteacher, deputy headteachers, assistant headteachers, lead practitioners and other leaders, such as the special educational needs coordinator.
- Inspectors met with the chair of the trust, the chair of the governing body and other trustees and governors.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: English, mathematics, science, technology, business studies and history. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with the subject leader, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to pupils about their learning and looked at a sample of pupils' work.
- Inspectors met with leaders of personal, social and health education to discuss the curriculum and provision in this area.
- Inspectors observed pupils' behaviour around the school and in lessons. Inspectors met with groups of pupils and spoke to a range of pupils in and out of lessons. Inspectors also took into account pupils' responses to the Ofsted pupil survey.
- To inspect safeguarding, inspectors checked the single central record of recruitment checks, talked to leaders responsible for safeguarding and looked at the school's safeguarding records and documents. Inspectors also talked to a range of staff and pupils about safeguarding.
- A range of the school's documentation was scrutinised, including information about pupils' behaviour and attendance, minutes of governors' meetings and the school's development plan.
- Inspectors met with members of staff to discuss the school's work and considered responses to the confidential Ofsted staff survey. They also looked at parents' responses to the online questionnaire, Ofsted Parent View.

Inspection team

Nick Simmonds, lead inspector	Ofsted Inspector
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