

Inspection of Darwen St James CofE Primary Academy

St James Crescent, Darwen, Lancashire BB3 0EY

Inspection dates: 22 and 23 February 2023

Overall effectiveness

Inadequate

The quality of education

Inadequate

Behaviour and attitudes

Good

Personal development

Good

Leadership and management

Inadequate

Early years provision

Requires improvement

Previous inspection grade

Good

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils are enormously proud to be part of this tight-knit school community. They welcome newly arrived pupils, and visitors, with a ready smile and open arms. Pupils accept and appreciate the differences between people. They work and play in harmony. If they experience hurtful comments or incidents of bullying, leaders take their concerns seriously and deal with them effectively.

Pupils enjoy their time at school. They value the relationships that they form with each other and with their teachers. Pupils bask in the care, attention and nurture that they receive from staff. This helps them to feel special and safe.

Pupils do their best to follow the high standards of behaviour that leaders expect. Most pupils behave well in classrooms and at social times.

Pupils benefit from a range of activities, such as clubs and visits that help to foster their interests and talents. They willingly take on leadership roles, such as school councillors, to support the smooth day-to-day running of the school. Pupils especially enjoy the experiences that they gain through the carefully crafted 'bucket lists'.

While pupils thrive socially and emotionally, their academic achievement is poor. In 2022, a considerable number of the pupils who left Year 6 were not ready for the demands of their secondary schools. An ill-designed curriculum, coupled with leaders' and teachers' low expectations, means that pupils continue to underachieve considerably. Leaders' actions to remedy this situation have not been effective. Pupils are not gaining the knowledge that they need to unlock their future success.

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

Leaders and staff want the best for pupils. They share an aspiration for every pupil to achieve their dreams and live happy and fulfilling lives. However, leaders are only partially successful in realising this ambition. While pupils' personal development is carefully nurtured to help them become positive members of society, their academic achievement is weak. Pupils, and particularly those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), are ill-equipped for the next stage of their education.

Without doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic has played a part in the gaps that pupils have in their learning. However, it is not the only reason that pupils do not thrive academically. Leaders' and teachers' expectations of what pupils can and should know and be able to do are low. Too little thought has been given to the fundamental knowledge that pupils must have grasped in order to learn effectively. Considerable weaknesses in pupils' written communication skills, and their lack of fluency when using number, go unnoticed or unchecked during and beyond their time in key stage 1. As a result, pupils lack the foundations on which to build. Their path to success across the curriculum is severely hampered.

Leaders have attempted to bring about changes to improve pupils' achievement. However, this work has failed to make a real difference. This is because the curriculum in some subjects is weak, while for others, there is too little information for teachers about what pupils should learn. Despite knowing about shortcomings in the curriculum for some time, it is only very recently that some subject curriculums have been revised.

Teachers do their best to follow the subject curriculums that are in place. However, in the absence of clear guidance, they either pick and choose from a huge amount of subject content or they get caught up in the strategies for teaching, rather than what pupils must learn. For example, teachers over-emphasise ambitious vocabulary in English, at the expense of teaching the techniques for writing. As a result, pupils do not build their knowledge in a carefully ordered manner. They do not get the chance to recap on what they have learned, or to practise it until it becomes second nature. Pupils remember very little of what they have been taught.

Teachers adhere to the assessment procedures set by leaders, but their checks on teaching do not help pupils to overcome gaps in their understanding. Misconceptions are not dealt with decisively. This means that pupils form their own, often incorrect, conclusion about what they have been taught.

Pupils with SEND fare worse than most. Leaders do not identify or assess the needs of these pupils early enough. Teachers are ill-equipped to design learning that helps pupils with SEND access the content of the lessons. These pupils make poor progress through the curriculum.

Leaders have been more successful in reshaping the phonics programme. Children in the early years, including those in the two-year-old provision and pupils in key stage 1, learn phonics through a structured approach. Most are able to use their phonics knowledge to read unfamiliar words in books that match the sounds that they know. Catch-up sessions are helping some of those pupils who struggle to read gain ground. Even so, some pupils struggle to read with fluency and confidence. In contrast, the reading curriculum for older pupils does not help them to read with accuracy or understanding. These pupils are not invested in the joy of reading. They take pleasure in visiting the library and listening to their teachers read. However, their knowledge of the vast array of books and authors available for them to enjoy is extremely limited.

Teachers in the early years ensure that children, including those in the two-year-old provision, learn to follow routines, to take turns and to listen to others. Even so, the substance of what children will learn from their starting points is less clear. There is a lack of oversight of the early years. This has led to a disconnect between the curriculum on offer in the two-year-old and Nursery class, and the learning programmes in the Reception class. This stops some children from making the best possible start as they move into Year 1.

Pupils typically behave well. They listen attentively and follow instructions. Leaders are alert to those pupils who sometimes cause disruption to learning. They take effective action to tackle such incidents, so that for the most part, classrooms are calm and pleasant spaces. Leaders place the highest importance on ensuring that pupils attend school regularly. Although a considerable number of pupils continue to miss chunks of time away from lessons, there are clear signs of improvement this academic year.

Pupils' personal development is cultivated well. They know how to manage their mental and physical health. Pupils gain the strategies to recognise and deal with peer pressure and unhealthy relationships. They have a good appreciation of the diverse society in which they live. Pupils know the importance of upholding British values in their everyday life.

Members of the local governing committee have an overly positive and inaccurate view of the school's effectiveness. In turn, trustees do not know about the weaknesses in the curriculum or pupils' poor achievement. As a result, the trust has not ensured that leaders have the support and challenge that they need to turn the situation around. Subject leaders, while willing and keen, do not have the expertise or support to help them design curriculums that secure pupils' knowledge. The capacity to improve the school is poor.

Most of the staff who shared their views are proud to work at the school. They appreciate the steps that leaders have taken to reduce their workload and to support their well-being.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders have created a culture where every member of staff understands their duty to keep pupils safe. Staff are trained well. This means that they know what to look for in pupils' behaviour, or in their physical appearance, that might signal abuse or neglect. They report their concerns, no matter how small, so that leaders gain a comprehensive view of the pupils in their care.

Leaders take appropriate action when concerns are raised, working with external agencies when needed, to secure help for pupils and their families.

Pupils learn how to keep themselves safe. Younger pupils know the dangers of being close to a busy road. Older pupils learn a range of strategies to avoid the risks associated with drugs, alcohol and using social media.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Leaders' and teachers' expectations of what pupils should know and be able to do are low. Too little thought is given to ensuring that pupils gain the fundamental knowledge that unlocks future learning. This hampers pupils' progress across other subjects. Leaders must ensure that the bar is raised in terms of pupils' achievement. They must make sure that pupils gain the basic knowledge that they need to succeed in their learning.
- Trustees, and members of the local governing committee, have not offered sufficient support and challenge to improve the curriculum and raise pupils' achievement. This means that weaknesses have not been rooted out and remedied. Trustees and governors must ensure that they gain an accurate insight into the school and that they aid its recovery.
- Leaders' capacity to improve the school is poor. Their efforts to bring about improvement have not made enough of an in-road on the many weaknesses. Subject leaders do not have the expertise or knowledge to resolve the issues with the curriculum. Consequently, pupils do not acquire the rich body of knowledge to which they are entitled. Trustees must ensure that they strengthen capacity within the school so that positive change happens quickly and its impact leads to sustained improvement.
- The curriculum in many subjects is not well designed. It does not provide teachers with the guidance that they need to know about what pupils should learn and when this knowledge should be taught. This hampers pupils from building their learning securely over time. Leaders must ensure that the curriculum enables pupils to learn all that they should. This is so that pupils are well equipped for the next stage of their education.
- Teachers do not check on pupils' learning well enough, nor do they give pupils the opportunity to recap what has been taught. Mistakes and misconceptions go unchecked. This causes gaps in pupils' understanding, and pupils struggle to recall what they have learned. Leaders should ensure that teachers use assessment information more effectively so that pupils know and remember more of the curriculum over time.
- The needs of pupils with SEND are not identified early or accurately enough. Teachers lack the expertise to meet the needs of pupils with SEND. These pupils fare poorly in terms of their academic achievement. Leaders must ensure that teachers are suitably trained to spot pupils' additional needs, secure the right support for these pupils, and help them to learn all that they should.
- The curriculum between the different classes in the early years is disjointed. This prevents children from making the best possible start when they enter Year 1. Leaders must ensure that there is greater oversight of the early years. This is so that children's learning builds up systematically from the start of their time in school.

Having considered the evidence, inspectors strongly recommend that leaders and those responsible for governance do not seek to appoint early career teachers.

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	140891
Local authority	Blackburn with Darwen
Inspection number	10256029
Type of school	Primary
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	2 to 11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	213
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Simon Lloyd
Headteacher	Laura Peckson
Website	www.darwenstjames.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	24 October 2017, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- A new headteacher has been appointed since the previous inspection. The leadership team has also been restructured.
- The school is part of Cidari Multi-Academy Trust.
- There is provision for two-year-old children at this school.
- This is a Church of England school. The last section 48 inspection was in May 2017.
- Leaders do not make use of alternative provision.
- Leaders offer a before-school breakfast club.

Information about this inspection

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

In accordance with section 44(1) of the Education Act 2005, His Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires special measures because it is

failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the school are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school.

- This is the first routine inspection that the school has received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with school leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors met with the headteacher, other school leaders and the chief executive officer of the Cidari multi-academy trust. They also met with a group of governors from the local governing committee and with trustees.
- Inspectors spoke to different groups of pupils about their learning and their views of the school. Inspectors observed pupils' behaviour during lessons and at breaktimes.
- Inspectors took account of the responses to Ofsted Parent View, including the free-text comments. Inspectors considered the views of pupils and staff shared through the Ofsted online surveys.
- Inspectors evaluated a range of documentation provided by school leaders or made available on the website. They checked the arrangements for keeping pupils safe, through a review of documentation and through discussions with leaders, including governors and trustees, staff and pupils.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in English, including early reading, mathematics and geography. For each deep dive, inspectors met with subject leaders, discussed the curriculum, visited a sample of lessons, looked at a sample of pupils' work, spoke to teachers and talked to pupils about their learning. One inspector also observed pupils reading to familiar adults.
- Inspectors also met with leaders of other subjects to consider the curriculum in these areas.

Inspection team

Jo Olsson, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Louise McArdle

His Majesty's Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
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