

Inspection of The Vale Academy

Wilbury Drive, Dunstable, Bedfordshire LU5 4QP

Inspection dates: 17 and 18 May 2023

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

The quality of education

Requires improvement

Behaviour and attitudes

Good

Personal development

Good

Leadership and management

Good

Early years provision

Requires improvement

Previous inspection grade

Good

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils enjoy coming to this welcoming school. Pupils like their teachers and know they are cared for. Pupils are keen to learn and like to earn 'motivator' points for their hard work. They want to succeed. However, pupils, including those in early years, do need more help to achieve their very best.

Pupils get along well together and know their teachers expect them to listen in lessons. Pupils are proud to uphold the 'VALE' values. They are accepting of each other's interests and celebrate them. Pupils report that bullying is rare. They know adults will quickly sort out any friendship problems. Pupils like that each class has a safeguarding and anti-bullying ambassador. Pupils have adults in school they trust and this makes them feel safe.

Pupils relish having special responsibilities, including being mental health, sport and play leaders. They enjoy opportunities in assemblies to debate topical issues. Pupils appreciate being able to express their own opinions and be themselves. They have many chances to take part in sports festivals, attend clubs and go on trips and residential. Pupils benefit from community links which offer them new experiences like fencing, learning Latin and charity work.

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

Leaders and trustees have an ambitious vision for the school. They have recently updated the curriculum to match their aspirations for pupils. The curriculum builds and connects knowledge logically over time. Leaders are in the process of refining how their curriculum design builds precisely from the early years into Year 1. Children do not yet have all the knowledge and skills they need for Year 1.

Leaders have provided staff with training on how to deliver the revised curriculum. In subjects, such as mathematics, where teachers do match work closely to the curriculum, pupils achieve well. However, in some foundation subjects, the curriculum is in the early stages of delivery. Teachers are still getting to grips with the new curriculum content. This means that sometimes teachers present facts to pupils that are not sufficiently detailed.

Leaders ensure pupils read books that widen their vocabulary. Leaders have also recently introduced a new phonics programme. Younger pupils, including in early years, are being taught the sounds they need to know. They have books that link to these sounds so they can practise their reading. Some pupils are becoming more confident readers. However, those who struggle to learn to read do not always get the support they need to improve. This means some pupils, including in early years, who find learning to read tricky are not catching up quickly.

Teachers and teaching assistants adapt activities for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and organise additional support well. However,

sometimes the work provided for pupils with SEND is not closely matched to meet their needs. Consequently, pupils with SEND do not achieve as well as they could.

Children in early years share, listen and follow routines well. Children are independent. However, the curriculum within early years is not fully developed. Leaders and teachers are in the process of organising how knowledge progresses from nursery to reception class.

Pupils across the school behave well. Adults ably support pupils who need additional help to settle and this does not affect the learning of others. Pupils understand what bullying is and how to report it. Leaders ensure that pupils attend school regularly.

Pupils are prepared well for life in modern Britain. Pupils understand democracy through elections to leadership roles and by voting in assemblies. Pupils understand free speech while being respectful of others' beliefs. Teachers increase pupils' awareness of discrimination, healthy relationships and prepare them well for adulthood. Pupils develop resilience through competitive sports. Leaders ensure pupils know how to keep themselves physically and mentally healthy.

Staff enjoy working at this school. They report that their workload is manageable and that leaders are supportive.

Trustees perform their statutory duties well. Trust leaders have been effective in broadening the personal development opportunities for pupils. Trustees and trust leaders know how to hold school leaders to account. Staff benefit from guidance from the trust on how to evaluate the curriculum delivery accurately.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Staff ensure pupils know how to stay safe online. Pupils are taught about the risk of gangs and criminal exploitation. They have visits from local police to help them know how to stay safe outside of school. Staff and trustees all have up to date safeguarding training. Staff know how to report concerns. Leaders respond swiftly to all concerns and make appropriate referrals. Leaders have set up effective systems in school to support vulnerable pupils. Safer recruitment practices are followed and all statutory checks are completed on adults who work in school. Trustees have effective oversight of safeguarding.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Some pupils, including those in early years, still have gaps in their phonic knowledge or cannot read fluently for their age. As a result, these pupils are not

able to read as well as they should. Leaders need to check that regular and effective support is put in place for weaker readers. Leaders also need to provide precise guidance for staff on how to help these pupils to catch up quickly.

- The revised curriculum is not yet consistently implemented across the school. This means that pupils do not gain the detailed knowledge leaders intend them to have in some subjects. Leaders need to strengthen teachers' subject knowledge in these subjects so that teachers provide pupils with work that accurately helps them to learn and make progress. Leaders, including trustees, then need to check that this happens as they intend.
- The early years curriculum is not sufficiently developed, nor its aims agreed and understood by staff. This limits how well children are prepared for Year 1. Leaders need to make sure the curriculum builds children's knowledge from nursery to Reception. Leaders also need to ensure staff teach children the knowledge pupils will need to thrive in Year 1.
- Sometimes, less effective practice for pupils with SEND can go unnoticed and is not picked up soon enough. Leaders need to regularly and rigorously check that the provision for pupils with SEND is ambitious, accurately matched to pupils' needs and working as intended so they achieve the best possible outcomes.

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

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| Unique reference number | 138714 |
| Local authority | Central Bedfordshire |
| Inspection number | 10268519 |
| 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 | 624 |
| Appropriate authority | Board of trustees |
| Chair of trust | David Sheridan |
| Headteacher | Tanya Knight |
| Website | vale.thesharedlearningtrust.org.uk |
| Date of previous inspection | 17 October 2017 under Section 8 of the Education Act 2005 |

Information about this school

- The school manages and runs its own before- and after-school provision.
- The school has been part of the Shared Learning Trust (formerly known as the Barnfield Academy Trust) since October 2012.
- The school currently does not use any alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

The inspector(s) 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 leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- The inspectors held meetings with the headteacher, deputy headteachers, assistant headteachers, special educational needs coordinator, subject leaders, teachers and some support staff.

- Inspectors also met trust leaders, including the chief executive officer, the executive principal, the chief operating officer and the trust lead for pupils with SEND.
- The inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: early reading, mathematics, geography, science and physical education. For each deep dive, inspectors spoke to subject leaders, visited lessons, spoke with pupils, looked at pupils' workbooks and spoke with teachers and support staff. The lead inspector also heard pupils read to a familiar adult. Inspectors also looked at pupils' work across the curriculum.
- The lead inspector met with representatives from the board of trustees, including the chair and vice chair of the trust. The lead inspector also met with members of the primary community cluster board.
- The inspectors scrutinised a range of documentation, including minutes of meetings of the trust and the school's own self-evaluation and improvement plan.
- The inspectors looked at the arrangements for safeguarding, including the single central record of recruitment checks. The inspectors spoke with leaders and staff about the systems and processes to support safeguarding, and the safeguarding ethos in the school.
- The inspectors considered the responses to Ofsted's online survey for parents, Parent View, including 58 free-text comments. There were no responses to the staff survey, yet inspectors spoke to a range of staff during the inspection. There were also no responses to Ofsted's pupil survey. However, inspectors spoke to many pupils across the school during the inspection.

Inspection team

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|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Sara Boyce, lead inspector | His Majesty's Inspector |
| Conor Heaven | His Majesty's Inspector |
| Fiona Webb | Ofsted Inspector |

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