

Inspection of The Ladder School

40 George Street, Walsall WS1 1RS

Inspection dates: 3 and 4 July 2023

Overall effectiveness	Good
The quality of education	Good
Behaviour and attitudes	Good
Personal development	Good
Leadership and management	Good
Sixth-form provision	Good
Previous inspection grade	Not previously inspected under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils join The Ladder School after a tricky and difficult educational journey. Many have lost faith in school, struggle to manage their behaviour and see little point in attending. Staff address this head-on. They work alongside each pupil with kindness, consideration and determination. Over time, this helps pupils to attend well, reconnect with their learning and prepares them for life beyond school.

Leaders expect pupils to achieve academically and to behave well. Staff celebrate pupils' good behaviour and address issues when things go wrong. Pupils told inspectors that staff treat them fairly and respectfully. Each day begins with a 'decluttering' session. This helps set the tone for the day and readies pupils for learning. This consistent approach, rooted in high expectation, supports pupils to improve.

School is a safe place to be. Staff notice if pupils appear to be unhappy or worried. They do their best to help. Pupils appreciate and value this. Leaders take swift action to address any bullying. Staff and pupils sit and eat together every day as a school. This is an important and special part of the school day. Staff use this time to get to know each pupil, share a joke and build rapport.

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

Leaders lead with integrity and determination. They are ambitious for all pupils. They do not use pupils' chequered experience of education to excuse low standards. Instead, they demand the best from pupils. Leaders monitor pupils' behaviour, for example by using daily 'trackers'. They reward and celebrate with pupils when things go well. However, staff do not shy away from having difficult conversations when needed. They are calm and clear and help pupils understand the consequences of their actions. The positive mantra of 'reward, reset, redo, reflect' underpins these conversations.

Leaders have thought carefully about the curriculum that pupils will learn. They have put English, mathematics and science at its heart. This is complemented by a range of vocational options that tap into pupils' interests and aspirations. This helps equip pupils with the skills, knowledge and qualifications needed for their next steps. This is especially so in the sixth form, which offers students a unique and tailored experience.

Within each subject, leaders have considered what pupils will learn and when they will learn it. In Year 9, pupils revisit the important knowledge and concepts from earlier years that they need for future learning. Leaders have then planned a curriculum that aims to build on these foundations. For instance, in art and design, pupils learn how to use tone and texture before incorporating this knowledge in a series of 'mini-projects'.

Teachers have the subject knowledge needed to deliver the curriculum well. They select resources and materials that help pupils learn. They explain new ideas carefully and listen to pupils' questions so they can provide further explanation when needed. However, in some instances, teachers do not help pupils to integrate new learning with what they have learned before. This means that some pupils do not connect their learning and see how it fits into other ideas.

All pupils have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Leaders share information about pupils' existing needs with staff. They are also quick to identify any new emerging need. Staff use information well to help pupils learn and to support with their behaviour. When needed, staff provide pupils with targeted support to help them improve their reading. Leaders also review the guidance given to staff regularly. This means that staff can meet pupils' changing needs.

Despite leaders efforts, too many pupils are suspended from school. Leaders use suspensions appropriately and as a last resort. However, their use means that some pupils miss too much school, and this hinders their progress. If pupils are suspended, leaders make regular checks to ensure that they are safe.

Pupils' social, moral, spiritual and cultural education is a golden thread that runs throughout the curriculum and the wider school. Pupils benefit from a range of opportunities, from theatre trips to discussing migration with visitors from the Red Cross. Learning coaches deliver 'skills' sessions to pupils each day. These provide pupils with pertinent information about the wider world and help them reflect on their values and beliefs. Topics range from knife crime to equality and diversity. Pupils receive accurate and up-to-date careers advice. Staff support pupils so that they can successfully take their next steps. This is especially effective in the sixth form.

Staff morale is high. Leaders utilise expertise from the trust to develop staff. This makes a positive difference to the quality of education in the school. It supports staff well-being, reduces workload and makes staff feel valued. The trust executive team, trustees and local governors provide support and challenge for leaders. The school ethos of 'high standards, daring to dream, traditional values, success and personalised support' is shared by all.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Keeping pupils safe sits at the core of all that leaders and staff do. Staff are knowledgeable about the local risks that pupils face. They report all concerns promptly and leaders act swiftly. Leaders work closely with other agencies and tap into expertise from within the trust to ensure that pupils and families get the help and support they need.

Staff know pupils well. They use their knowledge of each individual pupil to help them keep pupils safe. Pupils know that they can talk to staff if they have any concerns. They trust staff to listen to them and take their worries seriously.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Leaders have not ensured that the curriculum is implemented consistently well in all academic, vocational and personal development lessons. In some instances, teachers do not help pupils to draw on and link their new learning with prior learning to build a connected web of knowledge. Leaders should ensure that all staff consistently emphasise, refer to, use and draw on the most important knowledge that pupils need to know and remember so that pupils develop a wider understanding in each subject.
- Despite leaders' continued efforts, the number of days that pupils miss through being suspended from school remains too high. This means that too many pupils miss too many days of their education. Leaders should continue to be innovative and creative to reduce the number of days that pupils miss from school due to suspensions.

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	143750
Local authority	Walsall
Inspection number	10256828
Type of school	Alternative provision
School category	Academy free school
Age range of pupils	13 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	46
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	14
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Kevin Davis
Principal	Chris Bury
Website	www.theladderschool.org
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this school

- The Ladder School is an alternative provision that provides education for pupils from Year 9 to Year 13. The school admits pupils who have been excluded, are at risk of permanent exclusion or who have become disengaged from learning. Many pupils have experienced disruption to their education or have refused to attend school in the past. Leaders aim to offer pupils a 'second chance' at education.
- Pupils have a range of SEND. Most pupils have social, emotional and mental health difficulties, and a number have an education, health and care plan.
- The school opened to pupils in January 2019 and moved into a new purpose-built building in the summer term of 2022.
- The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 7 to 13 with information and engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.

- The school does not use any alternative provision settings.

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 leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors held discussions with the principal and other senior leaders.
- Inspectors spoke with members of the trust executive team, the board of trustees and members of the local governing body.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: mathematics, English, science, and art and design. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with subject leaders, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- Inspectors reviewed the school's extra-curricular activities, enrichment programme and personal development programme with leaders.
- Inspectors met with members of staff and spoke to pupils formally and informally at various points in the inspection. They took account of responses to a staff survey and Ofsted Parent View.
- Inspectors looked at records and spoke to staff in relation to attendance, behaviour, bullying and safeguarding.
- Inspectors reviewed safeguarding arrangements by checking the school's approach to staff recruitment, scrutinising policy documents and meeting with safeguarding leaders.

Inspection team

Ian Tustian, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

David Lisowski

Ofsted Inspector

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