

Inspection of a good school: Acorn Academy

Spa Road, Witham, Essex CM8 1NA

Inspection dates:

14 and 15 November 2023

Outcome

There has been no change to this school's overall judgement of good as a result of this ungraded (section 8) inspection. However, the evidence gathered suggests that the inspection grade might not be as high if a graded (section 5) inspection were carried out now. The school's next inspection will be a graded inspection.

The headteacher of this school is Cheryl Noble. This school is part of the Bridge Academy Trust, which means other people in the trust also have responsibility for running the school. The trust is run by the chief executive officer, Mark Farmer, and overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by Keith Mogford.

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils receive lots of care and encouragement. The daily 'soft start' includes the offer of a tasty, nutritious breakfast for all. Here pupils can mix and mingle with their peers, as well as let staff know if anything is playing on their mind. Feeling full, and having staff iron out any issues, ensures pupils feel happy, safe and ready to learn.

Pupils want to learn, listing a range of subjects as their favourite part of school. However, what they learn in lessons is not always explained well or checked carefully enough. Consequently, some pupils struggle to remember what was taught and fall behind in their learning.

A simple approach to the school rules means pupils understand how to show kindness, manners and respect. Pupils become animated when discussing the stickers and house points they collect for doing the right thing. They appreciate the individual and group rewards they receive. For example, the winning house having an extra playtime.

The extra-curricular offer helps to develop pupils' talents and interests. It includes clubs, such as art, football and gardening. There are also regular inter-school sports events. These introduce pupils to new sports, as well as allowing them to compete in sports they know to show off their sporting prowess.

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

Leaders recognised the school was not doing as well as it should. They have started to reverse this. They have improved safeguarding, raised pupils' attendance, and compiled a clearly sequenced curriculum. Now, safeguarding systems are even more rigorous and pupils attend school more frequently.

The curriculum is well-structured and sequenced. Leaders liaised with other schools in the trust about how to do this. They carefully selected appropriate schemes of work in a range of topics and subjects. However, leaders now need to develop staff's understanding of the curriculum and how best to teach it. Ongoing support from the trust provides assurance that through the sharing of best practice, there is the know-how to effect the necessary changes.

Currently, the curriculum is not being taught consistently well. Historically, staff were left to their own devices. They went without the guidance needed to strengthen their practice. A lack of training and support means there are staff who are insufficiently skilled. For example, they sometimes pose confusing questions. When pupils struggle to answer these, staff skim over it. They are unaware of how best to guide pupils to the right responses. This affects pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. They lack the prior knowledge needed to make sense of any unclear explanations, instructions or questions.

The school has a rigorous phonics programme. However, leaders do not routinely check how well it is working to inform staff training. As with other subjects, staff do not consistently use their checks on how well pupils can read to inform their teaching. Pupils like reading. They particularly like listening to their teacher reading aloud. Children in the early years get the chance to vote for the book the teacher will read. This helps to encourage a love of reading. Even so, some pupils receive books they struggle to read. They cannot remember the sounds letters make. Staff sometimes provide unhelpful prompts. These perpetuate pupils' misunderstanding of how to read words and how to understand what has been read. It hinders pupils developing into confident and fluent readers.

Though subject to the same variable quality of teaching, the additional support pupils with SEND receive is well-considered. For example, leaders' expertise means they support staff well in setting clear targets. These help staff to measure the small steps of progress pupils make in their learning and behaviour. Parents appreciate the care and attention afforded to their children's additional needs. They are particularly grateful for how the school acts as an advocate for vulnerable families. This includes securing support from external agencies.

The school takes account of its community to cater well for pupils' wider development. For example, the school invites visitors in to discuss their careers and raise pupils' aspirations. Also, they broaden all pupils' experiences, such as having a travelling zoo stop by. Regular opportunities to socialise help to develop pupils' communication skills. For instance, Year 2 pupils visit the junior school to read with an older pupil. This has the added benefit of preparing them for moving on to the 'big' school. Staff value leaders' support. They trust

in leaders to manage change well. Positive relationships mean staff are ready for the training needed to strengthen their practice.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- Leaders do not routinely check what is happening in classrooms. As a result, staff are unaware of what they do well and what they should be doing better. Therefore, inconsistencies in the delivery of the curriculum affects how well pupils achieve. Leaders should access the training and support to develop their subject expertise, as well as their understanding in how best to evaluate provision to identify and iron out any issues. In doing so, leaders should arrange the training and guidance staff need to teach all aspects of the curriculum well.
- Staff lack expertise in how best to teach pupils to read. Subsequently, there are issues that hinder pupils' achievement, such as pupils receiving books they cannot read. Leaders should prioritise the training and support staff need to teach reading lessons well, deliver efficient and effective catch-up support, and ensure all pupils receive a book that matches the sounds they know to encourage fluent reading.

Background

When we have judged a school to be good, we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains good. This is called an ungraded inspection, and it is carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. We do not give graded judgements on an ungraded inspection. However, if we find evidence that a school would now receive a higher or lower grade, then the next inspection will be a graded inspection, which is carried out under section 5 of the Act. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the ungraded inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour or the quality of education, we will deem the ungraded inspection a graded inspection immediately.

This is the second ungraded inspection since we judged the predecessor school, Powers Hall Infant School, to be good in January 2014.

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](#)' is used to mean pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND); pupils who meet the [definition of children in need of help and protection](#); pupils receiving statutory local authority support from a social worker; and pupils who otherwise meet the criteria used for deciding the school's [pupil premium funding](#) (this includes pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years, looked after children (children in local authority care) and/or children who left care through adoption or another formal route).

School details

Unique reference number	147255
Local authority	Essex
Inspection number	10288575
Type of school	Infant
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	3 to 7
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	273
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Keith Mogford
Headteacher	Cheryl Noble
Website	www.acornacademy.net
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this school

- Acorn Academy converted to become an academy school in July 2019. When its predecessor school, Powers Hall Infant School, was last inspected by Ofsted, it was judged to be good overall.
- Acorn Academy was originally part of the North Essex Multi-academy Trust. However, the schools from that multi-academy transferred to the Bridge Academy Trust in April 2021.
- The headteacher took up the post in September 2022.
- The school has a specially resourced provision with space for 12 pupils with specific speech and language needs. These pupils are fully integrated into the mainstream classes. They receive tailored support within the classroom with trained staff to cater for their additional needs.
- The school does not make use of any alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

- Inspections are a point-in-time judgement about the quality of a school's education provision.

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. The inspector discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school and has taken that into account in his evaluation of the school.
- The inspector held meetings with leaders, including the chief executive officer of the trust, the primary director, the chair of the local governing committee, the headteacher, and the assistant headteacher who is also the special educational needs co-ordinator.
- The inspector carried out deep dives in these subjects: early reading, mathematics and religious education. For each deep dive, the inspector discussed the curriculum with subject leaders, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to staff, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work. The inspector also listened to a sample of pupils read to a familiar adult.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, the inspector reviewed the single central record; examined safeguarding records; took account of the views of leaders, staff and pupils; and considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils' interests first.
- The inspector reviewed a range of documentation, including school policies, the school development plan, self-evaluation form, minutes from meetings of the trust board and local governing committee.
- The inspector spoke with pupils to gather their views. The inspector also took account of the seven responses to Ofsted's pupil survey.
- The inspector gathered parents' views by reviewing the 28 responses, including 21 free-text responses, submitted to the online survey, Ofsted Parent View.
- The inspector gathered the views of staff by speaking with several of them and reviewing the 34 responses to Ofsted's staff survey.

Inspection team

Daniel Short, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

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