

Inspection of Merchants' Academy

Gatehouse Avenue, Withywood, Bristol BS13 9AJ

Inspection dates: 19 and 20 March 2024

Overall effectiveness

Inadequate

The quality of education

Inadequate

Behaviour and attitudes

Inadequate

Personal development

Inadequate

Leadership and management

Inadequate

Early years provision

Inadequate

Sixth-form provision

Inadequate

Previous inspection grade

Requires improvement

The headteacher of the primary phase is Geeta Verrell. The headteacher of the secondary phase is Guy Swallow. This school is part of Venturers Trust, which means other people in the trust also have responsibility for running the school. The trust is run by the interim chief executive officer, David Moran, and overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by Gail Bragg.

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils' learning is severely compromised by poor behaviour. In recent months, older pupils have experienced a sharp rise in incidents such as fights and assaults. Pupils often defy the reasonable requests of staff. While the school has been able to restore order to some degree, there remains an uneasy atmosphere. The school does not always provide a safe environment.

In the secondary phase, pupils receive confusing messages about how they should behave and how this will be managed. A significant number of students in the sixth form behave anti-socially. Older pupils sometimes experience bullying and intolerance from their peers. The school does not know who is affected and so cannot protect these pupils effectively.

Pupils' attendance is very low. Over time, many pupils have missed a lot of school. As a result, they have significant gaps in their knowledge, including of reading and mathematics. The curriculum does not address these gaps effectively. Therefore, these pupils continue to fall behind and do not fulfil their potential.

Despite all of this, there are many examples of positive relationships between staff and pupils. Pupils of all ages told inspectors that there are adults within the school who they can trust with their worries. Children benefit from their experiences in the nursery. Primary-aged pupils are responding well to clearer expectations. In the secondary phase, including the sixth form, there are some classes in which pupils learn successfully.

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

The trust has failed to sustain improvements to pupils' behaviour and attendance since the last inspection. At times, pupils' conduct is dangerous. This affects the well-being of both pupils and staff, leading to widespread absences. The school has changed its approach to behaviour management on many occasions. Consequently, pupils and staff are not clear on what is expected of them. In the secondary phase, pupils make limited progress through the curriculum due to frequent disruption and absence. Staff do not feel supported to manage pupils' behaviour.

The school's curriculum is not designed or taught in a way which enables pupils to learn successfully, considering their starting points. Many pupils are disadvantaged and also have an identified special educational need and/or disability (SEND). The strong start that children make in the nursery is not sustained. The school is not ambitious for all children. For example, some children do not learn phonics from the start of the Reception Year. Therefore, some of the most disadvantaged pupils are held back when they should be learning to read. This makes it very difficult for them to ever catch up with their peers.

Pupils experience a reduced curriculum while the school tries to address significant gaps in their knowledge. Pupils in key stage 2, have not learned mathematics topics

appropriate to their age, because the school limited the scope of the curriculum for an extended period of time. A significant proportion of pupils in key stage 3 learn a reduced curriculum in English and Spanish because they need support with the basics of reading.

Expectations of pupils with SEND are too low. In the Reception Year, activities to promote independence among all children are restricted because the school does not consider these opportunities appropriate for some pupils with SEND. In key stage 3, some pupils with SEND have not followed a full curriculum alongside their peers. The school has taken recent steps to address this. However, pupils with SEND are not ready to learn the secondary curriculum, due to the limits placed on their learning over time.

Pupils do not build up their knowledge and understanding of the curriculum successfully, due to their frequent absences from class. This challenge is so widespread that teaching is not able to keep up with the number of pupils who require help to make up missed learning. Therefore, pupils are not well prepared for their examinations. The curriculum in the sixth form does not match students' needs and aspirations. All of this means that many do not leave the school with the qualifications they need.

Some primary-aged pupils receive support in managing their relationships with others. In the secondary phase, however, pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs find it hard to manage social situations due to unclear boundaries and a widespread culture of poor behaviour. As a result, the school places a significant number of pupils, including those with education, health and care (EHC) plans, in unregistered alternative provision. Often, this does not meet their needs. For example, pupils are not always offered a full-time education, or teaching to support their personal development, and they do not receive their entitlement to the support set out in their EHC plans.

Pupils in the primary phase are helped to understand puberty and the importance of healthy relationships. Secondary-aged pupils are offered a curriculum which covers increasingly complex issues as they grow older. However, pupils, including students in the sixth form, often miss these lessons due to lateness or absence. This limits their social and moral development, and the opportunities they have to develop an understanding of other people, for example from different cultures and backgrounds.

Careers education is basic, and many pupils do not benefit from some of its key features, such as work experience and independent careers advice.

Over time, the trust has failed to support the school with its challenges. As a result, the quality of the school's work has deteriorated. The quality of education is not of an acceptable standard. The trust does not have the capacity to bring about the improvements necessary. The school is reliant on external support for guidance. Some early signs of improvement in behaviour have given staff reason for optimism. However, it is too soon to tell whether these improvements can be sustained.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are not effective.

The trust has left pupils at risk of harm because it has not established a culture of vigilance across the school that is underpinned by robust safeguarding practices.

Over time, safeguarding concerns reported by staff have been left unresolved. The school has only recently established a clear system for checking that reported concerns are followed up. The school does not yet have confidence that it understands the risks to secondary-age pupils well enough. There is work to do before the school can be sure that staff will notice and report the signs that older pupils may be at risk. High rates of staff absence and turnover mean that pupils are often supervised by staff who do not know them well. This reduces the chance that the subtle signs that pupils may be engaging in risky behaviour will be spotted.

A serious deterioration in the standard of behaviour in the secondary phase has resulted in pupils and staff coming to harm. Fights often break out between pupils, requiring staff to physically intervene. Pupils and staff are unsettled by the knowledge that their friends and colleagues have suffered injuries. Although there are signs that these incidents are less frequent, some pupils and staff do not yet feel safe in school. These ongoing feelings of unease are associated with high rates of absence among pupils and staff with many choosing to leave the school.

Very high levels of persistent and severe absence, affecting pupils of all ages, increase pupils' exposure to local risks such as gang activity and exploitation. The school carries out a high volume of welfare checks and works proactively with the police and other safeguarding partners when there is an acute concern. However, the trust's failure to establish a coherent strategy for building a culture of regular school attendance has left pastoral teams overstretched and unable to meet the full range of welfare needs.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- The trust has not established a culture of vigilance across the school. Consequently, the school cannot have confidence that staff will notice and report information that might help to safeguard pupils. This places pupils at increased risk of harm. The trust should ensure that all staff fully understand the signs that pupils may be at risk and that they report any indications or concerns immediately.
- The trust has allowed dangerous behaviour and defiance from pupils to spread. Pupils and staff worry that they may be hurt or injured in school. The trust should assert firm expectations and support the school to implement a clear and consistent approach to managing behaviour. This will help to reassure pupils and staff that the school is a safe place to study and work.

- A very large proportion of pupils are routinely absent from school. This severely limits the impact of the curriculum and pupils' educational outcomes. When pupils do attend school, they are not punctual. This limits what they learn further, and they also miss out on important personal development opportunities. The trust should establish a coherent strategy for improving attendance and punctuality across the school.
- In the primary phase, including the early years, expectations of pupils' reading, writing and mathematics are too low. As a result, many pupils do not secure knowledge of phonics or develop the basic skills in writing and mathematics well enough for their age. These pupils start key stage 3 without the knowledge and skills they need to learn the curriculum successfully. The trust should ensure that staff have high expectations of all pupils so that they have every opportunity to learn the curriculum content expected for their age.
- The trust has not ensured that, from the early years to the sixth form, the curriculum meets pupils' needs. Pupils with SEND, many of whom have social, emotional and mental health needs, experience an impoverished curriculum because, over time, the school has not been successful in supporting them to manage their behaviour, and has not addressed significant gaps in their learning effectively. The trust should ensure that all pupils learn a broad curriculum which urgently addresses any gaps in their knowledge and supports their personal development.
- Having considered the evidence, we strongly recommend that the school does 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](#)' is used to mean pupils with 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	135597
Local authority	Bristol, City of
Inspection number	10297970
Type of school	All-through
School category	Academy sponsor-led
Age range of pupils	3 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1,303
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	114
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Gail Bragg
Headteacher	Guy Swallow
Website	www.merchantsacademy.org
Dates of previous inspection	26 February 2020, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- Merchants' Academy is an all-through school. It includes nursery and sixth-form provision. The primary and secondary phases occupy neighbouring sites. The primary phase is located at Hareclive Road, Withywood, Bristol BS13 9JW. The secondary phase is located at Gatehouse Avenue, Withywood, Bristol BS13 9AJ.
- The school is jointly led by one primary and one secondary headteacher. The secondary headteacher joined the school in March 2024.
- The school is part of the Venturers Trust, a multi-academy trust which comprises 8 academies in the City of Bristol. The trust is sponsored by the Society of Merchant Venturers and the University of Bristol.
- The proportion of disadvantaged pupils is well above average.
- The proportion of pupils with SEND is well above average.
- The school uses 7 alternative providers, 6 of which are unregistered.

- 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.

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.

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

- This was the second routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed any continued impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors held discussions with the interim chief executive officer of Venturers Trust, the primary and secondary headteachers, members of the primary and secondary senior leadership teams, and two trustees, including the chair of the trust.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: early reading, English, mathematics, geography and hair and beauty. For each deep dive, inspectors held discussions about the curriculum, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- Inspectors also discussed the curriculum and visited lessons in other subjects.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, the inspectors: reviewed the single central record; 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.

Inspection team

Lydia Pride, lead inspector	His Majesty's Inspector
Matthew Morgan	Ofsted Inspector
Caroline Musty	Ofsted Inspector
Dale Burr	His Majesty's Inspector
Helen Coulson	Ofsted Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
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