

Sycamore Academy

Abbotsford Drive, St Ann's, Nottingham, NG3 4QP

Inspection dates 19–20 November 2014

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected
	This inspection:	Good 2
Leadership and management	Good	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils	Good	2
Quality of teaching	Good	2
Achievement of pupils	Good	2
Early years provision	Good	2

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school.

- Together with senior leaders, the headteacher is rapidly improving the quality of teaching and raising achievement.
- Consistently good teaching helps all groups of pupils to make good progress in English and mathematics. As a result, standards are rising.
- Pupils make good progress in reading because of the effective teaching of letters and sounds (phonics).
- The good attitudes and behaviour of the vast majority of pupils contribute well to the academy's calm learning atmosphere.
- Pupils feel safe and well looked after.
- Disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs make good progress because they have well-focused individual support.
- Children make a good start to their academy lives in the Nursery and Reception classes.
- Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is promoted well. This contributes to the marked sense of community throughout the academy.
- Good use is made of the support available from teaching assistants. They contribute well to the development of pupils' early reading skills.
- Pupils enjoy coming to the academy and attendance has improved since 2013. They particularly benefit from the good provision for music and physical education.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- In a few lessons, the work that teachers set for the most-able pupils is too easy.
- The expectations communicated through the marking of pupils' work in some subjects are not high enough. Pupils are not always required to follow up advice on how they can improve their spelling, punctuation and presentation, and learn from their mistakes.
- The attainment of particular groups of pupils, including those who have difficulties in communication and language, is often below that of the others in English and mathematics in the early years and Key Stage 1.
- Several governors are new to their roles and do not yet have the skills needed to hold leaders and managers to account for the quality of teaching and pupils' achievement.

Information about this inspection

- The inspectors observed teaching and learning in 16 lessons. Several lessons were observed jointly with members of the senior leadership team. Senior leaders also joined the inspectors in reviewing pupils' written work.
- The inspectors observed the breakfast club and two assemblies, and made a number of short visits to classrooms.
- Pupils were observed at break and lunchtimes.
- The inspectors held discussions with the headteacher, staff and pupils, three members of the governing body and two representatives of the Academy Trust.
- Groups of pupils of different ages were heard reading.
- The inspectors took account of the 17 responses to the staff questionnaire
- There were insufficient responses to the Ofsted online questionnaire (Parent View) for these to inform the report.
- Inspectors looked at the academy's policies, teachers' plans, samples of pupils' work, academy improvement planning and records on behaviour and safety. Inspectors also looked at information on individual pupils' progress and teachers' performance, and records of meetings held by the governing body.

Inspection team

Kenneth Thomas, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Nicola Crossley

Additional Inspector

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Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- This is an above average size primary academy.
- The predecessor school, Sycamore Primary School, converted to become an academy in September 2012 and is part of the L.E.A.D Academy Trust. When the predecessor school was last inspected by Ofsted it was judged to be good.
- Children in the Early Years Foundation Stage attend the Nursery for either morning or afternoon sessions and attend the academy full-time in the Reception Year.
- The pupil premium provides support for almost seven in 10 pupils in the academy. This is well above the national average. The pupil premium is additional government funding for disadvantaged pupils who are known to be eligible for free school meals, and those who are looked after by the local authority.
- Seven in 10 pupils are from a minority ethnic heritage background. This is well above the national average.
- Four in ten pupils have English as an additional language. This is above the national average.
- The proportion of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs is close to three in ten. This is above average.
- The academy is growing in size with an increasing number of pupils joining the academy at other than the usual times part way through the school year.
- The academy meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress.
- The academy provides a breakfast club that is managed by the governing body and has recently introduced an after-school extended learning club

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Further improve the quality of teaching and raise standards in English and mathematics by ensuring that:
 - there is an even stronger focus on supporting particular groups of pupils, including those who have difficulties in language and communication in the Early Years Foundation Stage and in Key Stage 1, so that all pupils develop a more secure foundation for their learning in Key Stage 2.
 - the most-able pupils are consistently given tasks that makes them think and work hard
 - the expectations communicated through the marking of pupils' work are consistently high in all subjects
 - teachers systematically check that pupils act on the advice they are given, particularly with regards to spelling, punctuation and the presentation of their work.
- Improve leadership and management by ensuring that all governors, particularly those new in post, have the skills needed to check how well the academy is doing so that they are more able to challenge it to improve.

Inspection judgements

The leadership and management are good

- The headteacher, with the support of a strong leadership team, is rapidly improving achievement and sustaining the good behaviour and well-being of all the academy's pupils. All staff share a common sense of purpose and determination to promote equality of opportunity and tackle discrimination. They are keen to ensure that each individual pupil realises his or her potential.
- Leaders have made good use of the expertise available through the Academy Trust, for example, to help develop teaching and learning, and to improve the reliability of teachers' assessments. Assessment information is now used much more accurately to check pupils' progress and provide extra help where necessary. Following the removal of National Curriculum levels, the academy is collaborating with other academies in the Trust to develop a common approach to assessment.
- Action to improve reading standards is particularly successful as pupils move through the academy. Teachers' sharp focus on supporting pupils' reading has been supported by successful strategies to involve more parents and carers in listening to their children read at home. This is helping to raise standards. Leaders fully recognise that, given the challenges facing many pupils when they first enter the academy, they must continue to make every effort to raise younger pupils' attainment in reading, writing and mathematics. They have good plans in place to make this happen.
- Careful checks of the academy's work enable senior leaders to identify the correct areas for improvement. These, linked to effective procedures for the management of teachers' performance and good training opportunities, have enabled teachers to develop their skills and improved the quality of teaching. This is particularly the case in the teaching of phonics.
- Teachers with subject and other leadership roles are provided with appropriate training and support. Through checks on the quality of teaching in their areas of responsibility ensure they play an effective part in the academy's drive for improvement. This is particularly effective in English and mathematics. Good leadership in the Early Years Foundation Stage also ensures that children make good progress in all aspects of their personal development.
- The curriculum is well planned to engage pupils' interest and promotes achievement well. It is enhanced by a range of clubs and visits, including residential visits, which assist pupils' learning and their personal development. Pupils have access to an excellent range of enrichment opportunities, for example, all pupils have the opportunity to learn to play a musical instrument and many play in the academy orchestra or sing in the academy choir.
- A strong ethos of care and inclusion runs through the academy's life. The acceptance of cultural and religious difference is central to the good promotion of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Pupils develop a clear sense of values and the vast majority show respect and consideration for others. Pupils are well prepared for life in modern Britain.
- The additional primary school sports funding is being used well to employ specialist staff, develop teachers' skills and widen the range of activities the academy offers. As a result, more pupils participate in physical activities regularly and there are more opportunities for competitive sport.
- Good use is made of the substantial additional funding the academy receives through the pupil premium. Additional staffing and resources are used well to help meet the needs of pupils for whom this funding is intended, especially in literacy and numeracy. Although the academy acknowledges that more needs to be done, the use of this funding has already led to a narrowing of the attainment gap between these pupils and pupils nationally in reading, writing and mathematics.
- The Academy Trust has provided the academy with good support, for example in developing subject leadership and effective approaches to assessment and systems for financial management.

■ The governance of the school:

- The governing body is very supportive and keen to ensure that the academy continues to improve. Governors represent and have strong links with the local community. They make sure that key values such as tolerance and understanding of the beliefs of others are carefully promoted. Together with the academy's leaders, governors carefully check that there are appropriate procedures for keeping pupils safe and that all safeguarding requirements are met. They make sure that finances are managed well and that the primary sports funding and pupil premium funding are used for the intended purposes.
- Governors understand that teachers' pay and promotion must be justified by the impact of their teaching on pupils' progress. They receive regular reports about the strengths of teaching and what needs to improve and oversee the arrangements for managing the performance of teachers, including the headteacher. However, they are very reliant on reports from the headteacher, and some governors, for example those new in post, do not fully understand how best to use assessment information to recognise good teaching for themselves or challenge leaders about the academy's performance.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are good

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good. Most pupils display positive attitudes to learning and behave well, both in lessons and around the academy. This is an important factor in the good progress they make in lessons. Staff, pupils and the parents and carers spoken to during the inspection, agree that the behaviour of most pupils is good.
- The emphasis on good behaviour begins in the Nursery and Reception classes and is reinforced throughout the academy. There are well-structured procedures to recognise and reward good behaviour and the consequences of any misbehaviour are made clear. Although in a few lessons some of the most-able pupils occasionally lose interest when they are not challenged by their learning, most pupils conform to the academy's high expectations of their behaviour. As a result, the academy is calm and the learning environment is purposeful.
- The academy is generally successful in helping pupils who find it hard to comply with behavioural expectations to improve. These pupils make good progress, because most teachers have the necessary skills to manage their behaviour well. Consequently, temporary exclusion is used very sparingly and permanent exclusions are rare.
- All pupils spoken to said that they enjoy being at the academy. This is evident from the improvement in attendance, which is now close to average, and from the reduction in the levels of persistent absence.

Safety

- The academy's work to keep pupils safe and secure is good. All staff are checked for their suitability prior to appointment and all visitors and volunteers are also appropriately checked. Pupils feel safe in the academy and are confident that adults will look after them well if they have any concerns. The academy's determination that bullying or harassment of any kind will not be tolerated is made very clear.
- Pupils understand about different kinds of bullying, including cyber bullying, physical bullying and persistent name-calling. Pupils say that while there have been instances of bullying in the past, they are not aware of any current issues. They are confident that any incidents would be quickly dealt with by adults.
- Pupils respond well to opportunities to take on responsibility. Through, for example, their roles as academy councillors or members of the eco-team, they develop self-confidence and make positive contributions to the academy community.
- The breakfast club is well-supervised and provides the pupils who attend with a very welcoming, friendly and nutritious start to the day.

The quality of teaching is good

- Good and better teaching ensures that all groups of pupils make good progress and achieve well in reading, writing and mathematics. Good relationships and effective class management are features of the teaching in most lessons. These help to develop positive attitudes to learning and ensure that pupils almost always concentrate fully on their work.
- In most lessons, teachers make good use of their subject knowledge and assessment information to plan work that is appropriately demanding for all groups of pupils. However, in a few lessons, the work given to the most-able pupils is not hard enough and this slows their progress.
- Teachers make clear at the outset of lessons what pupils are going to learn. Through the effective use of questioning, pupils' progress is checked and their understanding is deepened because, in the main, they are forced to think hard. This is a strong feature of much of the good teaching seen in mathematics. For example, in a lesson with Year 6 pupils, rapid progress was made in understanding equivalent decimals and percentages because the teacher constantly asked pupils to explain the reasoning that led to their answers and checked that all understood before moving on.
- Good teaching of phonics provides the basis for the improving performance seen in the Year 1 screening check. This, together with the good teaching evident in all other classes, lays the foundation for pupils' good progress in reading as they move through the school. In lessons and in small groups, adults provide effective support for pupils so they become more competent in the use of context clues and the links between letters and sounds. As a result, they become increasingly confident readers who are able to read for purpose and for pleasure by the time they leave.
- The academy makes effective use of discussion to help pupils to decide how best to organise their writing, which is helping to raise standards in this subject. This is particularly helpful to pupils with weaknesses in language and communication, and for pupils who are at the early stages of learning to speak English. This, together with additional support, means that these pupils make rapid progress in spoken English by the time they leave the academy.
- The teaching of physical education and sport is a particular strength. Specialist coaches work alongside class teachers and share their specialist skills. This helps to improve their teaching.
- Teachers and teaching assistants work well together to make sure that disabled pupils and those with special educational needs make good progress. Each pupil has a well-constructed individual support plan, which includes their personal learning targets. These are used by teachers in planning to make sure that the work set is well matched to pupils' needs.
- There are inconsistencies in the marking of pupils' work. Some marking, particularly in English and mathematics, provides pupils with clear pointers for improvement, but other marking does not help pupils to improve enough. In some instances the teachers' expectations, as communicated through their marking, are not high enough. Spelling and punctuation errors are not always checked and poorly-presented work is sometimes accepted without challenge. Where pupils are given guidance, they are not always required to follow it through and so learn by correcting their own mistakes.

The achievement of pupils

is good

- Children enter the Early Years Foundation Stage with knowledge and skills that are often weaker than those typically seen at their age in communication, language, and personal and social development. Good care and support enable children subsequently to make good progress, although weaknesses remain in most areas of learning when children enter Year 1. For example, in 2014 over half of the children did not reach the levels that are expected for their age in communication and language, with a similar picture in personal and social development.
- Good progress continues in Key Stages 1 and 2, although the standards reached at the end of Key Stage 1 are still often well below average because of pupils' language and communication difficulties. They are affected by the large number of pupils who join the academy in different years, often with low attainment at entry. Children who join the academy in the Nursery and Reception generally reach higher standards

by the time they leave than those who join the academy in later year groups.

- Pupils make particularly good progress in reading and standards have been broadly average at the end of Year 6 over the last three years. These standards, which represent very good progress when pupils' skills on entry are taken into account, are underpinned by the good early progress made in pupils' ability to link letters and sounds (phonics). Results in the Year 1 phonics screening test have shown a year-on-year improvement and, whilst below average, are now approaching the nationally required standard.
- Although standards in writing and mathematics at the end of Year 6 were below average, in 2014, they represented good progress in relation to pupils' starting points. Nevertheless, because the academy is focused on the development of writing and mathematics, standards are improving and are on track to be higher this year. This is confirmed by pupils' current work and academy assessment information which show that the progress of pupils of all ethnic heritages and those with English as an additional language is good.
- The progress of the most-able pupils is closer to the nationally expected rate of progress rather than the proportions making rapid progress, because they are not always given hard enough work.
- Disadvantaged pupils make good progress and the attainment gap between these and all pupils nationally is narrowing. At the end of Key Stage 2 in 2014, they were close to pupils nationally in reading, about half-a-term behind in writing and just under two-terms behind in mathematics. Their attainment was about the same as their classmates in reading, and just over a term ahead in writing and mathematics.
- Displays of pupils' work show that they achieve well in a range of subjects. They produce good artwork, for example, and displays of topic work show the good development of creative and investigative skills. Music is a strength. Pupils showed high levels of commitment and good skills when the orchestra was rehearsing during the inspection.
- Disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs make good progress. Support for these pupils is managed well. Their individual needs are well known and additional support is carefully tailored to help meet them. Younger pupils with communication and language difficulties find reading and writing a challenge but the good progress they make throughout the school means that gaps between these pupils and the others narrow by the time they leave.
- Pupils enjoy physical activity. Their health and well-being are enhanced by their participation in well-taught physical education lessons.

The early years provision

is good

- Good leadership of the Early Years Foundation stage ensures that there are effective procedures for keeping children safe and regular checks are undertaken to make sure that equipment is safe. As a result, children feel safe and secure and settle quickly into the academy's routines. Parents and carers appreciate the approachability of staff, the care they take of their children and the good communication between home and school.
- Teachers make good use of their knowledge of the needs of early learners to provide a stimulating learning environment in which the development of children's language and their social development are high priorities. As a result, children of all backgrounds, including disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs, make good progress.
- Teachers' assessments of children's progress are used well to plan activities that extend the most-able and meet children's different needs. The attractive indoor and outdoor learning environments are used well to provide children with a variety of learning activities that capture their imagination and help them to develop and build on their starting points.
- Adults provide good role models in showing pupils how to speak clear and correct English. They model expected responses clearly and often correct and extend children's answers. As a consequence, children

learn new words and speak and listen well. Questioning is used well to help children develop their skills and confidence in description. The effective teaching of phonics (letters and the sounds they make) provides a good platform for the development of their reading and writing skills in Year 1.

What inspection judgements mean

School	Grade	Judgement	Description
	Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
	Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
	Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
	Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>

School details

Unique reference number	137786
Local authority	Nottingham
Inspection number	448625

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Primary
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	3-11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	308
Appropriate authority	Select
Chair	Rex Walker
Headteacher	Mr Paul Worley
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected
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