

Marston Vale Middle School

The Crescent, Stewartby, Bedfordshire MK43 9NH

Inspection dates

26–27 January 2016

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

Effectiveness of leadership and management	Requires improvement
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Requires improvement
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Requires improvement
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an academy that requires improvement

- Pupils do not make enough progress from their starting points. This is especially the case in mathematics, where teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve are too low.
- The quality of teaching is too variable. While some lessons are very effectively taught, others are slow-paced and learning is limited.
- Subject leaders do not monitor the quality of teaching effectively enough. Their understanding of how well pupils are doing is superficial.
- Systems to gather and analyse information on pupils' performance have only recently been introduced. This has impacted on senior leaders' ability to precisely support areas of underachievement.
- Teachers' assessments are inconsistent. Some teachers are overgenerous in their assessment of how well pupils are doing.
- The presentation of work is too variable for middle- and lower-ability pupils, whose handwriting is often untidy.

The academy has the following strengths

- The headteacher has brought about significant improvements. She has dealt effectively with staffing changes and has a clear vision for the academy's future.
- Pupils behave well in lessons and around the academy. They enjoy almost all of their lessons and are enthusiastic about learning.
- Governors have effectively managed change since the previous inspection. They know the academy's strengths well and understand the challenges it faces.
- Pupils' personal development is supported by a staff team who know them well and prioritise their well-being.

Full report

What does the academy need to do to improve further?

- Improve pupils outcomes by:
 - increasing the rate of pupils' progress, especially in mathematics
 - narrowing the attainment gaps between disadvantaged pupils and others
 - ensuring that all pupils are able to write neatly and present their work well.

- Improve the quality so that all teachers:
 - have high expectations of what pupils are capable of
 - assess pupils' progress accurately
 - routinely provide challenge for the most-able pupils
 - make good use of assessment information to plan learning.

- Improve leadership and management by:
 - developing the skills of subject leaders so that they effectively monitor the quality of teaching
 - moderating teachers' assessments more rigorously to ensure that information on pupils' performance is accurate
 - analysing the impact of interventions and support more robustly
 - making better use of existing good practice to support improvements across the academy.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management requires improvement

- The headteacher has overseen a period of considerable change since her appointment in 2014. The senior leadership team has been restructured and several members of staff, some with leadership roles, have been absent from the academy due to long-term illness.
- During this time of change, the headteacher has introduced several changes to the way that teachers work, improving the quality of teaching in many cases and setting out clear expectations for how she wants things to be. The appointment of an assistant headteacher in Easter 2015 provided the academy's leadership with increased capacity to monitor how well these initiatives are being implemented. Leaders are becoming increasingly clear about precisely where strengths and weaknesses lie.
- The role of the subject leader is underdeveloped and this limits the impact of the senior leaders' work. Those responsible for subject leadership are not monitoring the quality of teaching and learning in their areas effectively enough. This undermines the improvement planning as senior leaders do not receive accurate and evaluative information from subject leaders. The information that is gathered is vague and is not acted upon swiftly enough to make an impact.
- There are some examples of effective subject leadership. In physical education (PE), for example, the leaders is clear about the quality of teaching and makes regular, informal visits to lessons to maintain a view on the impact of teaching on learning.
- There is a structured cycle of annual observations undertaken by senior leaders alongside subject leaders. Each teacher is observed once each term and receives feedback. The quality of this feedback varies considerably. Some is very focused on the impact of teaching on learning, and pinpoints exactly what the teacher is doing to promote progress. In contrast, some of the feedback avoids commenting on learning at all, and focuses on what the teacher is doing and whether they are complying with academy policies.
- The academy's assessment gathering systems have improved recently. A new software package to manage all of the academy's information, including achievement, attendance and behaviour, is now in place and is beginning to present leaders with a much clearer picture of the academy's work. This has replaced a series of independent systems that were difficult to interpret quickly.
- Some of the assessment information that senior leaders are presented with is unreliable. A scrutiny of pupils' work which has been assessed at the same level showed too much variation. It was clear that some teachers are very accurate in their assessments but that this is not always the case. This inconsistency prevents leaders from gaining an accurate view of exactly how well pupils are doing.
- The academy's curriculum has been reviewed recently and has improved. Pupils are offered the full range of national curriculum subjects and additional time has been provided to strengthen maths and English. The transition of Year 5 pupils into the academy is managed well, and this year group has their own 'base' in one part of the academy where their pastoral needs can be closely monitored to make sure that they settle in. The academy offers a range of extra-curricular options, including several sports, and is proud of its achievements in, for example, rugby.
- A system to manage the performance of teachers is now in place. Previously, little was recorded about the impact of teachers' work and the new approach sets teachers clear targets, based on pupils' outcomes.
- The use of additional funding, including that of the pupil premium, PE and sport premium are evaluated, but this is a recent development. In the past, too little attention was given to the impact of this spending and leaders could not determine which interventions or programmes of support were being the most effective and which, if any, were having no impact.
- Leaders ensure that pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is structured within the curriculum. Visits and visitors add to this but most of this work is undertaken in tutor time. Within this work, the academy promotes modern British values effectively. The school council is active and contributes to the school effectively.
- Leaders have welcomed the support of external partners. The local authority has provided significant amounts of support, much of which has been without charge, to improve the quality of teaching in English, mathematics and for pupils with special educational needs. In addition, an audit of the academy's effectiveness was undertaken quickly after the new headteacher took up her post in order to provide her with a clear, objective assessment of what the priorities for improvement were. Leadership support is ongoing, and the academy values highly the quality of support that they have received from the local authority.

- The academy has also forged link with the Chiltern Learning Trust. Support for leaders and professional development for teachers at all stages have helped to improve key aspects of the academy's work.
- The academy is improving the way that it communicates with parents. Leaders acknowledge that there is more work to be done here and this is reflected in the proportion of parents (almost one third) of those who responded to the online questionnaire who were concerned about the information that they receive about their child's progress. Equal numbers did not feel that the academy responds well to concerns they might have. The response in other areas was much more positive and 94% said that their child is happy at school.
- **The governance of the academy**
 - Governors know the academy well. Governors have an accurate view of where the academy needs to improve. They understand that aspects of leadership are not contributing enough and have plans to improve this.
 - Senior leaders independently commissioned an external review of how well the pupil premium grant was being deployed. The action points that arose from this review are now being tackled by the governing body.
 - Governors have a varied and useful set of skills. Governors bring with them expertise in many areas that benefit the academy.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. The academy's systems for recruiting and vetting staff meet requirements. Staff are trained in child protection appropriately. The academy supports the most vulnerable pupils well, working alongside external agencies effectively and promoting the best interests of these pupils at all times.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment requires improvement

- The quality of teaching varies significantly across the academy. A considerable proportion of teaching requires improvement because expectations of what pupils can achieve over time and in individual lessons are not high enough.
- The pace of learning is too slow in some lessons. Pupils' work books show that progress is too variable; in some classes, pupils repeat the same work and are not challenged to extend their learning. This is in sharp contrast with other sets of books from different classes, where pupils were progressing well and the quality of work was good.
- In a small number of classes, pupils' work is almost exclusively done on photocopied worksheets that do not match their needs. All of the pupils do the same work in these classes and many practice the same skill repeatedly despite being already being able to do it.
- The academy's assessment and feedback policy has improved the quality of feedback and guidance that pupils receive in many classrooms. More work is needed, however, as some teachers are not implementing the policy and provide little feedback. Similar inconsistencies exist in the way that pupils are made aware of their targets. In many classes they are attached to the front of their books, but this is not universal and there are some classes where pupils are unaware of what they are working towards. Subject leaders are not proactive in identifying and tackling these weaknesses because the rigorous scrutiny of pupils' work is not a regular feature of their work.
- Teaching varies within departments. In English, for example, some teaching lacks pace and expectations are too low. In a more-able class, for example, the teacher was too tolerant of incidental chatter during a time when a specific task had been set. In a parallel class, much swifter progress was being made because the teacher set very clear expectations of what needed to be achieved and monitored pupils' learning throughout. In this lesson, no time was wasted at all.
- The expectations that teachers have when teaching the same subject are also impacted by their planning. In two science lessons pupils had very different experiences. In one, pupils copied information and diagrams, later colouring them in. In the other class, pupils experimented and made predictions, took measurements and considered their findings. In this class, not only did the pupils learn much more but they also enjoyed their work more. A scrutiny of pupils' books in these classes indicated that these lessons were typical and that learning was unequal.
- The learning environment is also very variable. Some areas of the academy are well cared for, inviting and bright, with displays that provoke interest. The library and food technology areas are good examples of this. There are, however, some parts of the academy that are cluttered and untidy. The science laboratories are in need of urgent attention: displays are old and untidy, equipment is littered around benches and the general environment gives a poor impression.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare is good

Personal development and welfare

- The academy's work to promote pupil's personal development and welfare is good.
- Pupils are enthusiastic learners in almost all lessons. They respond well to teachers' requests and are well prepared.
- Pupils understand the different kinds of bullying. They have confidence in the academy's systems to tackle incidents where, and if, they arise. Very few pupils reported any bullying and many commented on how well pupils get along together.
- Pupils are provided with opportunities to participate in healthy extra-curricular activities and uptake levels are good. They are also encouraged to make healthy choices in their food, keep hydrated and take exercise.
- Pupils are well informed about the risks that the internet presents. During the inspection, a local police officer talked to pupils in Key Stage 2 about staying safe when using social media. Pupils were able to relate the key messages later on.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good. In lessons and around the academy, pupils are polite and courteous. They are welcoming and were very keen to help inspectors if they looked lost as they navigated the academy.
- Disruption to lessons is uncommon. Pupils told inspectors that where any incidents of poor behaviour occur, they are almost always low-level and are quickly tackled through the behaviour code.
- Pupils look after their school well. They drop very little litter and move through the narrow corridors in an orderly manner.
- Pupils' attendance has improved and is now in line with national levels. The attendance of disadvantaged pupils has been too low in recent years, but this has improved and is now in line with other disadvantaged pupils nationally. More work is needed to ensure that this continues to improve so that all pupils attend school as much as is possible. Levels of persistent absence are in line with national levels.

Outcomes for pupils require improvement

- From starting points that are slightly above average, pupils make uneven progress and leave the academy with levels of attainment in English and mathematics that are broadly in line with expectations for pupils in Year 8.
- In 2015, pupils in Year 6 achieved similarly to other pupils nationally in reading and writing. In mathematics and grammar, punctuation and spelling, however, standards were below average. This has been the case in mathematics for the past two years.
- A scrutiny of the work of pupils currently in school shows that there is variance between classes. Some pupils are making strong progress and are moving on swiftly, gaining important skills and using them across a range of subjects. In a small number of classes this is not the case. Progress is capped by teachers' low expectations and opportunities to build on previous learning are missed.
- The amount of challenge that the most-able pupils experience is also variable. This is too dependent on the teacher and their expectations of pupils. Evidence of high-level work was seen throughout the inspection in some books. In other books, this was absent and more-able pupils consistently undertook the same work as others.
- Some teaching is effectively developing pupils' thinking skills and encouraging them to question things. In a history lesson, for example, very precise questioning led pupils to produce responses which were both insightful and accurate. Inspectors were impressed by the confidence of many pupils as they responded to teachers' questions.
- The attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and others widened for Year 6 pupils in 2015. The academy's assessment information indicates that this gap is closing quickly as pupils move through Years 7 and 8. Although some of the performance information is unreliable, work scrutiny showed that disadvantaged pupils are making stronger progress, and that many are producing a higher quality of work than in the past.
- The quality of presentation is too variable. In general, the most-able pupils present their work neatly and often with pride. Their handwriting is neat and legible. There are a number of middle-ability or less-able

pupils who produce work of a much lower standard. Handwriting is difficult to read and is untidy. Books are not cared for and some work is unfinished. In these books, basic errors go uncorrected: pupils who began the year writing some letters as capitals all the time are still doing so. This group of pupils are not being well prepared for their next stage of education.

- Disabled pupils and those with special educational needs are making similar progress to other pupils. The support that they receive is effective and is now being more closely monitored. Teaching assistants, some of whom have been well trained, provide small-group support effectively. The teaching of reading and basic mathematical skills by teaching assistants is making a difference to the pupils who need it.

School details

Unique reference number	139161
Local authority	Bedford Borough
Inspection number	10005618

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	Middle deemed secondary
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	9–13
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	617
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Jim Bryce
Headteacher	Claire McMaster
Telephone number	01234 768224
Website	www.marstonvalemiddle.co.uk
Email address	school@marstonvalemiddle.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	29 February 2012

Information about this academy

- The academy is of an average size for a middle school.
- Following the previous inspection, the school converted to academy status in 2013.
- The proportion of pupils eligible for the pupil premium is below the national average.
- Around one in 10 pupils are from minority ethnic backgrounds. This is below the national average.
- Very few pupils speak English as an additional language.
- The proportion of pupils with a statement of educational needs or an education, health and care plan is broadly average.
- The academy has resource provision for pupils with speech and language or communication difficulties.
- The academy meets the government's current floor standards.
- The headteacher was appointed in January 2014.

Information about this inspection

- This inspection began as a short inspection for schools judged as good at their previous inspection. After the first day, Her Majesty's Inspector decided to convert the inspection into a full inspection as there were aspects of the academy's work that needed further scrutiny. On the second day of the inspection, three Ofsted Inspectors joined the existing two inspectors to complete the inspection.
- Inspectors observed learning in 34 lessons or parts of lessons. They evaluated pupils' work in lessons and outside them.
- Inspectors met with senior leaders, five members of the governing body, a representative from the local authority, a representative from the Chiltern Learning Trust, subject leaders and other teachers to discuss their work. They also met with pupils from Key Stages 2 and 3 formally and informally to discuss their experiences in the academy.
- Inspectors took account of 91 responses to the online questionnaire (Parent View).
- Inspectors spent time observing students' behaviour in and around the academy, at lunchtimes, tutor times, at the start of the day and during transition between lessons.
- Inspectors evaluated the academy's documentation, including self-evaluation records, improvement planning, assessment information, governors' minutes and safeguarding systems and records.

Inspection team

Chris Moodie, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Stephanie Lipinski-Barltrop	Ofsted Inspector
James Dyke	Ofsted Inspector
Andrew Hemmings	Ofsted Inspector
Janet Lewis	Ofsted Inspector

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