

Spires Academy

Bredlands Lane, Sturry, Canterbury, Kent CT2 0HD

Inspection dates

17–18 May 2017

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- The principal and her senior team have acted decisively to reverse a declining trend in results in recent years. Consequently, outcomes for pupils across the school are now good.
- Leaders are ambitious for the school and its pupils. They make careful checks on the progress that pupils make. They ensure that effective interventions are in place for pupils who need extra help to catch up.
- Leaders have created a warm and nurturing climate for learning, which is summed up aptly in the motto, 'a small school with a big heart'.
- Teachers use their strong subject knowledge to devise interesting activities that arouse pupils' curiosity and make them want to learn more.
- Teachers' skilful use of questioning requires pupils to explain their thinking and so explore topics in greater detail. As a result, pupils gain secure knowledge, skills and understanding over time.
- Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are supported very well and so make good progress from their starting points.
- Disadvantaged pupils do well because teachers pay close attention to their needs. Leaders make good use of the pupil premium grant to remove any barriers to learning.
- Pupils behave well in lessons and around the school. They wear their uniforms well and treat the fabric of the building with respect. Fixed-term exclusions have fallen sharply.
- Attendance is close to the national average and continuing to improve. Leaders take effective action to ensure that the attendance of those pupils who are frequently absent improves.
- The curriculum is broad and balanced and pupils benefit from a range of interesting extra-curricular activities, including golf and show jumping.
- Pupils have frequent opportunities to learn about democracy and the rule of law and about different people, religions and cultures. As a result, they are well prepared for life in modern Britain.
- Governors have a good understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. They are taking effective action to secure the long-term future of the school.
- Leaders are aware that some pupils, mainly boys with low prior attainment, do not make rapid enough progress. This is because teaching does not always meet their needs, particularly in the development of their writing skills.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that boys with low prior attainment make more rapid progress in their learning, by:
 - improving their writing skills, so that they can present their work clearly, accurately and neatly
 - ensuring that learning activities are more closely matched to their needs.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- Over the last 12 months, the principal has successfully galvanised staff and pupils to reverse a declining trend in outcomes. She has created a distinctive family ethos, accurately captured in the motto 'a small school with a big heart'. Ably supported by an energetic and close-knit leadership team, she has raised aspirations, restored pride in the school and transformed all aspects of the school's work.
- Many parents recognise and appreciate the rapid improvements that the principal has brought about in the culture of the school and in outcomes for their children. One parent who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, wrote, 'The staff, both teaching and support, are doing a great job and really seem to want the school to succeed and achieve.'
- Staff morale is high. Teachers feel well supported by leaders and say that they have good opportunities to develop their expertise. At the same time, leaders hold teachers rigorously to account for the progress pupils make. A member of staff who responded to the online survey wrote, 'I absolutely love my job. I am very much supported in my role and guided to be the best I can be every day. I am lucky to work at Spires Academy.'
- In the past, the school has struggled to recruit high-quality teachers. However, since the previous inspection, the turnover of staff has slowed considerably. As a result, in many subjects well-established leaders oversee stable teams of teachers. Several teachers have been appointed after completing their initial training in the school. The school's work in training new teachers is held in high regard and existing staff enjoy the opportunities that they have to mentor trainee teachers.
- Leaders, including subject leaders, have a clear understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. They bring considerable passion to their work and stop at nothing to remove barriers to learning and raise standards of achievement. They have developed robust systems for checking the quality of teaching and for assessing pupils' progress. Teachers benefit from high-quality training, led by the school's most effective practitioners. As a result, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment has improved significantly since the previous inspection and is now good.
- Leaders have been relentless in their drive to ensure that pupils accept responsibility for their behaviour and that staff follow agreed approaches to managing behaviour. Consequently, pupils conduct themselves well in lessons and around the school and disruption in lessons is rare.
- Leaders responsible for managing the pupil premium and Year 7 literacy and numeracy catch-up grants are rigorous in identifying individual pupils' needs and putting in place effective interventions to address these needs. In all year groups, disadvantaged pupils and those who need to catch up make rapid progress in a range of subjects, including in English and mathematics.
- Leaders make effective use of additional funds provided to support pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. These pupils make strong progress because leaders allocate support staff and resources to where they have most impact.

- Pupils follow a broad, balanced and mainly academic curriculum. The proportion of pupils studying subjects that make up the English Baccalaureate at GCSE has risen sharply since the previous inspection, as has the proportion of pupils obtaining grades A to C in English, mathematics and science. The school makes good provision for those pupils for whom a vocational curriculum is more appropriate, leading to strong and improving outcomes for these pupils.
- At key stage 3, leaders have established an effective curriculum and assessment framework that covers all subjects. This framework ensures that all pupils experience high levels of challenge and that they master the basic skills and concepts needed to progress to key stage 4.
- Until last year, the school offered post-16 courses for a small number of students who were not ready to progress to further education or apprenticeships. Outcomes for those students, who were following academic or applied A-level courses or retaking GCSE English and mathematics, were good. However, leaders rightly decided that the numbers of pupils entering the sixth form had become unsustainably small and that local providers were able to offer a wider range of courses. Consequently, leaders took the decision to discontinue offering post-16 courses at the end of the 2015/16 academic year.
- There is a vibrant extra-curricular offer for pupils in all year groups. The sports academies provide access for talented pupils to sports that might otherwise be unavailable to them, such as show jumping, golf and dance. Several pupils have won recognition at county and national levels as a result of their participation in the sports academies. In addition, teachers provide a range of lunchtime and after-school clubs which enrich pupils' learning.
- Leaders have developed strong provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and their understanding of British values. As a result, pupils know right from wrong, are tolerant of people who are different to themselves, and understand how British democracy works. Pupils are taught about, and have the opportunity to debate, threats to democracy such as extremism. In subjects such as English, history and drama, pupils develop a sense of empathy, while in science and art they develop a sense of awe and wonder at the world around them.
- Leaders recognise that their work is not yet complete. A small number of pupils, mainly boys with low prior attainment, do not work hard enough. Consequently, they do not make enough progress in their learning. Leaders are taking effective action to improve the attitudes to learning of this group of pupils so that their work, in particular their written work, is of an acceptable standard.

Governance of the school

- The governing body has skilfully steered the school through a turbulent time in its history and has a clear vision for its future. Until recently, an executive headteacher provided effective support and challenge to the principal. When this arrangement came to an end, governors wisely decided that the long-term future of the school would be best secured by joining a multi-academy trust (MAT). They have wasted no time in seeking out potential partners and hope to join a suitable MAT in the near future.
- Governors are committed to the school and carry out their statutory duties, including

for safeguarding, diligently. They monitor the school's expenditure of the pupil premium and Year 7 literacy and numeracy catch-up funding closely. They have overseen considerable improvements in outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and those who need to catch up. They monitor the school's performance management processes carefully, ensuring that teachers' targets are both rigorous and fair.

- Governors have a clear understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. They have become confident in challenging the principal and her senior team. For example, in a standards committee meeting, governors sought reassurance from leaders that there was sufficient focus on outcomes for vulnerable pupils. In order to strengthen further their ability to provide robust challenge to leaders, governors have recently reviewed their committee structure. They have also recruited new governors with particular skills in finance and education.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Pupils' welfare and well-being have a high priority in the school. Leaders have created a warm, nurturing climate in which pupils are safe. A parent who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, wrote, 'I will always be grateful for the kindness of the pastoral team and the empathy that they show towards both pupils and parents.'
- Arrangements for vetting the suitability of staff and volunteers are exemplary. All staff receive thorough training on safeguarding, including aspects such as the 'Prevent' duty and child sexual exploitation. Staff confirm that they understand their safeguarding responsibilities. They are vigilant and know what to do if they are concerned about a pupil.
- The school's designated leaders for safeguarding have undertaken appropriate training. They keep meticulous records of all child protection matters and act promptly to ensure that pupils who may be at risk of harm get the help they need. Leaders work closely with families and with social services and they are tenacious in following up child protection matters.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Teachers are passionate about their work and ambitious for their pupils' achievement. They have very high expectations of pupils and set them stretching targets. Pupils rise to the challenge, displaying an enthusiasm for learning and a desire to do the very best they can. The vast majority of pupils work hard in lessons and are resilient when tackling new material.
- Teachers' planning is effective in meeting pupils' needs. Teachers devise engaging tasks that excite pupils' curiosity. For example, pupils in Year 7 were engrossed in a science experiment about neutralisation, while in drama pupils enjoyed creating an improvised sketch on the theme of peer pressure.
- Teachers make skilful use of questioning to challenge pupils' thinking and encourage them to explain their ideas. As a result, pupils are able to apply analytical and

evaluation skills in a wide range of subjects. For example, a group of pupils were able to talk with insight about how they use 'counter-arguments' in their writing.

- Teachers have established effective routines for learning that enable pupils to settle quickly to their work. They build strong relationships with their pupils. As a result, the climate for learning in the school is very positive. Pupils treat their teachers and each other with respect and listen courteously to their peers in class discussions.
- Teachers provide high levels of challenge in lessons. In English, pupils study challenging books and write at length about them from Year 7 onwards. In mathematics, teachers provide pupils with frequent opportunities to use and apply their skills to solve problems. In physical education, pupils concentrate hard when learning and applying new skills in a range of sports.
- Teachers are constantly on the alert for pupils' misconceptions, which they correct with timely and precise feedback. Pupils value this feedback and make effective use of it to improve their work.
- Teachers work closely with each other and with teachers from other local schools to ensure that their assessment of pupils' progress is accurate. They provide parents with helpful and clear information about how well their children are doing and about their attitudes to learning.
- A very small number of pupils, mainly boys with low prior attainment, do not pay enough attention or work hard enough in class. They complete less work than their peers and take less pride in it.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Pupils have exceptional opportunities to enrich their education, develop healthy lifestyles and widen their experience. For example, the sports academy provides opportunities for pupils to take up show jumping, golf and several other sports that might otherwise be out of their reach.
- Pupils are well prepared for life in modern Britain. Through a well-designed personal, social and health education programme, pupils learn about finance and how the country's voting system works. They also have the opportunity to debate and form ideas about topical events. The school held a mock referendum last year and will hold a mock general election later this year. Pupils understand and are tolerant of individuals and groups who are different to themselves. For example, pupils listened attentively and respectfully in an assembly on homophobia.
- Pupils benefit from frequent educational trips and visits, and perform in musical and dramatic events. For example, the school choir gives regular performances in the community and pupils enjoy taking part in the annual drama production.
- Pupils' welfare and well-being have a high priority in the school. The school provides highly effective support to vulnerable pupils. Pupils feel safe and know how to stay safe, including when using the internet. They know that bullying, including racist and

homophobic bullying, is wrong. Pupils say that bullying is rare but that teachers deal with it effectively when it does occur.

- A small number of pupils attend one of two local alternative providers for all or part of their week. The school works closely with the providers to monitor progress and attendance as well as to ensure that pupils are safe. These pupils follow appropriate courses and, for the most part, attend regularly and make strong progress in their learning.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- Pupils conduct themselves well in lessons and around the school site. They are polite to visitors and talk with pride about their school and their achievements.
- Pupils are punctual to lessons and display positive attitudes to their teachers and their studies. Pupils treat equipment and facilities with care, while inside and outside spaces are free from litter.
- The calm, orderly atmosphere that characterises the school has not come about by accident. Leaders and teachers have put in place clear boundaries that they enforce consistently and that pupils respect and understand. As a result, fixed-term exclusions have fallen sharply. On the very rare occasions when lessons are disrupted by inappropriate behaviour, teachers deal with it effectively.
- Attendance overall is close to the national average for secondary schools and continues to improve. Leaders analyse attendance figures carefully, identifying trends and patterns. They communicate promptly with the families of pupils whose attendance drops below 95%. Pupils who attend regularly receive awards in assembly and attendance rates are displayed prominently around the school.
- Leaders are aware that a small group of pupils who are in receipt of free school meals or who have special educational needs and/or disabilities have lower rates of attendance than other pupils. Leaders are taking effective action to reverse this. As a result, the proportion of pupils who are frequently absent has reduced significantly since the last inspection and continues to fall.

Outcomes for pupils

Good

- Published outcomes in 2016 showed a significant improvement in pupils' progress and attainment compared to the previous year. Across a range of subjects, including in mathematics and science, pupils achieved outcomes that were in line with national averages. Pupils' progress in languages was better than the national figures. In English, pupils with high prior attainment made broadly average progress, but those with low and middle prior attainment made less progress than pupils nationally with similar starting points.
- A very small number of pupils with medical or emotional needs were unable to take examinations in 2016. Leaders correctly point out that overall progress for those who entered for the examinations was in line with that of all pupils nationally.

- Pupils enter the school with attainment well below that found nationally and most make good progress over time. In 2016, the proportion of pupils achieving at least grade C in English and mathematics was considerably higher than in 2015, though still below the national average. Pupils with middle prior attainment reached standards that were close to national averages in a range of subjects, including English, mathematics and science. In 2016, the most able pupils also made broadly average progress across the curriculum. However, a small number of most-able disadvantaged pupils made less progress than other pupils nationally.
- Leaders and teachers have taken effective action to address areas of weakness in the 2016 outcomes. Pupils' work shows that in all year groups and across a range of subjects, they are making progress in line with, or above, their targets. Consequently, current pupils, in particular those in key stage 3, are making rapid progress in a range of subjects, including English, mathematics and science. There is now no discernible difference between rates of progress of disadvantaged pupils, those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and other pupils currently in the school. Most-able pupils currently in the school, including most-able disadvantaged pupils, make secure progress because their teachers provide consistently high levels of challenge.
- In English, current pupils make strong progress from their starting points because teaching has improved and the new subject leader has ensured that the curriculum is more challenging than previously. In all year groups, including in Year 11, pupils overall are on track to reach their targets. They use spelling, grammar and punctuation accurately. They write extended pieces and explore complex ideas about, for example, the techniques writers use to gain their effects.
- In a range of subjects, pupils develop key skills, knowledge and understanding well. In mathematics, pupils use and apply their mathematical skills with growing confidence, and so make rapid progress over time. In science, pupils achieve well because the work they do requires them to explain their knowledge, skills and understanding. As a result, pupils develop a secure understanding of scientific concepts as they move through the school. In history, pupils in key stage 3 are making progress in line with their targets because they can demonstrate the ability to analyse and evaluate historical sources and write at length about historical events.
- Leaders and teachers promote literacy well. Pupils enjoy reading. They read aloud fluently and can work out the meaning of words they do not recognise. Less confident readers are able to use their knowledge of phonics to sound out unfamiliar words. Pupils who enter the school with low levels of literacy receive increasingly effective support. The school promotes reading for pleasure in a variety of imaginative ways; for example, through a 'reading millionaires' scheme and a history reading club. Most pupils read at home regularly. Pupils receive awards for their reading in special assemblies that celebrate literacy.

- Pupils in the school are well prepared for their next steps in education. Attainment in English and mathematics improved sharply between 2015 and 2016. In 2016, all but three pupils went on to their chosen destination in further education or training. All pupils who are currently in Year 11 have a planned destination for the next academic

year.

- A small number of boys with low prior attainment do not make the same rates of progress as their peers. This is because they do not yet have the writing skills necessary to analyse and evaluate what they have learned, and so do not attain high scores in their work.
- A small number of pupils who have behavioural, emotional or medical needs attend alternative provision for all or part of their timetable with one of two local providers. These pupils attend well and are making good progress on courses well matched to their needs.

School details

Unique reference number	135305
Local authority	Kent
Inspection number	10032895

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

Type of school	Secondary comprehensive
School category	Academy sponsor-led
Age range of pupils	11 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	601
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	David McKivett
Principal	Nicki Mattin
Telephone number	01227 710392
Website	www.spiresacademy.com
Email address	office@spiresacademy.com
Date of previous inspection	13–15 May 2015

Information about this school

- The school meets requirements on the publication of specified information on its website.
- The school complies with Department for Education guidance on what academies should publish.
- The school is a smaller-than-average-sized secondary school.
- The majority of pupils at the school are of White British heritage.
- Pupils' attainment on entry to the school is well below the national average.
- The proportion of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is similar to that found nationally.
- The proportion of disadvantaged pupils supported by the pupil premium is higher than the national average.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum

expectations for pupils' attainment and progress.

- A small number of pupils in Years 9 to 11 attend alternative provision at two nearby centres, Nu-steps and The Canterbury Inclusion Service, for all or part of their education.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors visited 48 lessons; around a quarter of these observations were carried out jointly with a member of the senior leadership team.
- Inspectors also observed two assemblies and visited form tutor periods.
- A number of meetings took place with senior and middle leaders to discuss aspects of the school's work.
- The lead inspector met with the chair of the governing body and two members of the governing body.
- Pupils' views about the school were taken into account by meeting with groups of pupils and by analysing 15 responses to Ofsted's online pupil survey.
- Inspectors also considered the views of parents by analysing 165 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and 26 free-text responses.
- The views of members of staff were taken into account through analysis of 40 responses to the staff survey.
- Inspectors scrutinised documentation including the school's self-evaluation, minutes of the governing body and other documents provided by school leaders.
- Inspectors reviewed pupils' learning over time in their workbooks.
- Safeguarding procedures at the school were reviewed.
- An inspector spoke with representatives from the Canterbury Inclusion Service on the telephone to discuss the progress, attendance and safety of a small number of pupils from the school who attend for part of their education.
- The lead inspector visited Nu-Steps, an alternative education provider, with one of the school's vice-principals. Nu-Steps provides full-time education for 10 pupils from Spires Academy who remain on the school's roll. A small number of pupils also attend for one day a week to follow vocational courses.

Inspection team

Gary Holden, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Gerard Strong	Ofsted Inspector
Paula Sargent	Ofsted Inspector
Paul Murphy	Ofsted Inspector

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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. www.gov.uk/pupil-premium-information-for-schools-and-alternative-provision-settings.

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