

Alec Hunter Academy

Stubbs Lane, Braintree, Essex CM7 3NR

Inspection dates

13–14 July 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	Requires improvement
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- School leaders have established a culture where expectations of pupils and teachers are high and improvement is rapid.
- Significantly stronger leadership and management have resulted in improved teaching, learning and assessment.
- Middle leaders are keen and enthusiastic. They contribute effectively to improving the school by ensuring that their actions address whole-school priorities.
- Governors provide a good balance of support and challenge to school leaders. They ensure that leaders have identified the right areas for improvement.
- Pupils' behaviour is good. There are strong relationships between pupils and with adults in the school. These are contributing to improved rates of progress in many subjects.
- Pastoral leaders know the pupils well. Pupils and parents are positive about the support that the school provides, including the support for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.
- Leaders have effectively designed a curriculum that helps pupils succeed academically and personally. It prepares pupils well for the next stage of their education, training or employment, and for life in modern Britain.
- The school's work to keep pupils safe is effective.
- Most teachers plan activities that suitably challenge and interest pupils, enabling them to make good progress. In a small number of classes, where this is not the case, pupils lose focus and make less progress.
- Attendance has improved and is above the most recent national average. However, rates of absence for some disadvantaged pupils are too high and this hinders their progress.
- Weak teaching in the past means that pupils have not achieved as well as they should have done. Too few of the most able pupils have achieved the highest examination grades. Current pupils are making more rapid progress and are catching up with similar pupils nationally, particularly in Year 10.
- In classes where teachers do not meet leaders' expectations for providing feedback to pupils, errors in pupils' writing are not followed up. Pupils make less rapid progress as a result.
- Disadvantaged pupils are making improved progress from their starting points. However, leaders do not incisively analyse the impact of actions taken to further accelerate their progress so that they can make progress in line with other pupils nationally.
- Greater challenge from most teachers is accelerating the progress made by pupils in key stage 3. However, this degree of challenge and pace of change is not yet sufficient to ensure that these pupils can reach higher standards in their work by the end of key stage 4.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve outcomes by:
 - further accelerating the rates of progress made by pupils in key stage 3
 - ensuring that the achievement of disadvantaged pupils, including the most able disadvantaged pupils, improves even more rapidly, so that their attainment compares well with that of other pupils nationally
 - further accelerating the progress made by the most able pupils by ensuring that all teachers provide sufficient challenge for them, so that more attain the highest examination grades by the end of key stage 4
 - ensuring that all teachers meet leaders' expectations for providing pupils with careful guidance that helps them to improve their work.
- Improve leadership and management by:
 - analysing more precisely the impact of the different strategies and actions taken to improve the outcomes of disadvantaged pupils.
- Improve the attendance of those disadvantaged pupils who have high rates of absence.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- The headteacher, governors and the board of trustees have established a culture of high expectations of staff and pupils. Six core principles, of always giving your best, promoting high aspirations and self-belief, respect for oneself, others and the environment, valuing everyone as an individual of equal worth, celebrating successes and developing positive and productive partnerships, support this culture.
- Over the last academic year, the rate of change in the school has accelerated. This is due to the strengthening of leadership at all levels. Close collaboration and sharing of practice between leaders at Alec Hunter Academy, the chief executive of the Saffron Academy Trust and leaders from the lead school in the academy trust, has brought about this change.
- The trust and the local authority have provided effective support to the school. This carefully targeted support and guidance have strengthened leadership and resulted in improving outcomes for pupils across the school. The chief executive of the academy trust has ensured that the focus on improvement and holding school leaders to account has resulted in rapid improvements in the quality of teaching, learning and assessment.
- Leaders have accurately identified priorities for improvement and put appropriate actions in place. These are monitored to ensure that they are making a difference. Actions have successfully improved the quality of teaching in the school and are resulting in improved rates of progress and higher standards of attainment for pupils currently in the school.
- The curriculum is broad and balanced. Leaders have reflected on previous policies regarding the subject choices made by pupils in key stage 4. They have ensured that pupils are guided to courses that better match their aspirations and abilities. As a result, pupils have positive attitudes to learning and the achievement of pupils currently in the school is improving.
- Staff provide a wide variety of activities, clubs and visits so that pupils can pursue their sporting, artistic or creative interests. Pupils also have the opportunity to develop leadership skills through roles such as acting as prefects. Pupils perform these roles responsibly and maturely. During the course of the inspection, some pupils took responsibility for a martial arts event for local primary school children, hosted by the school. These activities, together with the 'learning for life' programme, assemblies and other opportunities identified across the curriculum, provide strong support for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.
- Parents view the school positively. One parent commented, 'Alec Hunter has given both my children a good, rounded education and an enriched curriculum, with opportunities for development both academically and towards adulthood.'
- One comment that typified a number of positive responses on Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, was 'My child enjoys school and is making good progress. She is taught well, is encouraged, receives recognition and feels cared for.'

- Subject leaders are keen, enthusiastic and have an accurate view of the strengths and weaknesses of their areas of responsibility. They play an active role in contributing to improvement through implementing actions that relate to whole-school priorities. They check these actions to make sure that they are making a positive difference to the quality of pupils' learning and achievement.
- Leaders use alternative provision to support pupils at risk of permanent exclusion. They closely monitor pupils' attendance and progress through regular contact with the providers. These pupils complete their education and gain some qualifications because of this provision.
- Leaders' systems for the management of teachers' performance are clear and well considered. Teachers' targets link to whole-school priorities and the development needs of individual teachers. Despite recruitment difficulties, leaders do not hesitate to address underperformance by taking swift and appropriate action. Teachers, including trainees and those in their first year of teaching, are positive about the programme of training and development provided for them.
- The leadership of provision for pupils who have special educational needs/and or disabilities is good. Leaders use additional funds effectively to ensure that pupils receive precise support. Parents are appreciative of the help that their children receive and use the opportunities to attend the regular forums to discuss how they can assist their children further with their learning. As a result, most pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are making good progress from their individual starting points.
- Leaders are making increasingly effective use of the pupil premium funding and Year 7 catch-up funding. For example, one-to-one tuition and support with reading are helping Year 7 pupils catch up with their peers. However, leaders' evaluation of the actions taken to support disadvantaged pupils is not incisive enough to ensure that the progress of this group is as rapid as it should be.

Governance

- Governors have a clear understanding of the school's strengths and priorities for improvement. They carefully check the actions leaders take to improve pupils' achievement. Governors hold school leaders to account well and ask increasingly challenging questions in meetings. As a result, the school continues to improve.
- The trust provides a good balance of support and challenge to senior leaders. This has contributed to the increased pace of improvement in the school. For example, they have challenged senior leaders and governors to evaluate the use of additional funding with increasing precision.
- Governors have ensured that the management of the headteacher's performance links to improving achievement for pupils in the school. Targets set are realistic yet ambitious, reflecting the raised aspirations and expectations that are rapidly improving the school.

- Governors are fully aware of their responsibilities to keep children safe. They ensure that staff receive appropriate training and that safeguarding arrangements meet statutory requirements.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- The school's record of checks made on the suitability of staff to work with young people is accurately maintained and compliant. Policies related to safeguarding, including the child protection policy, are up to date and meet the requirements of statutory guidance.
- Staff receive appropriate training in all aspects of child protection, including the 'Prevent' duty to keep pupils safe from radicalisation. Staff know what to do if they have any concerns about the well-being of a pupil. Appropriate and prompt referrals are made to external agencies where necessary. Records of such referrals are accurately kept and monitored to ensure that follow-up actions are timely and effective.
- Pupils are taught how to keep themselves safe from a variety of risks, including safe use of the internet, social media and mobile technology. As a result, pupils have a high awareness of e-safety and have the confidence to report any concerns.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- School leaders have successfully improved the quality of teaching, learning and assessment since the previous inspection and it is now good. Leaders provide a well-regarded programme of regular training that meets individual teachers' development needs effectively and well. Consequently, where weaker teaching persists, teachers receive carefully considered support and guidance so that they can quickly improve.
- Most teachers use their subject knowledge and assessment information carefully to plan activities that interest pupils and effectively support their progress. Scrutiny of Year 10 assessments and pupils' work in books indicates that teaching is accelerating the progress that pupils make. This is in a range of subjects, including English, mathematics, science and the humanities.
- The great majority of teachers have high expectations of what pupils can achieve. They have positive relationships with pupils so that lessons flow smoothly and effectively. Consequently, pupils focus well on their activities and are keen to learn. Examples of this positive learning culture were seen during the inspection, particularly, though not exclusively, in mathematics, art and textiles lessons.
- There are opportunities for pupils to read, both in and out of lessons. All pupils in Years 7 and 8 use a commercial reading programme to develop their reading skills further. School records indicate that pupils who did not reach the expected standard by the end of key stage 2 are now making good progress through the additional tuition provided by the school. Pupils who read to an inspector successfully used appropriate strategies to tackle unfamiliar words.

- The very large majority of parents are positive about the teaching provided by the school. Parents say that they receive useful information about their child's progress and that pupils receive appropriate homework. Some parents expressed concerns about the number of changes of teacher that their children had experienced because of changes in staffing. Inspection evidence shows that school leaders have thoughtfully considered how they can overcome recruitment difficulties through work with the academy trust.
- The use of the school's marking and feedback policy varies. Where the policy is used well and consistently, pupils make improvements in their work and deepen their understanding. However, at times, this policy is not followed carefully enough. Teachers' comments lack precision and individual pupils are not able to make as much progress as they could. In some pupils' books, they continue to make the same mistakes as a result.
- Many teachers are providing greater levels of challenge to pupils in key stage 3. In English, for example, pupils are being challenged to read and analyse more complex texts and 19th-century poetry.
- In some classes, the element of challenge is still not enough for pupils to gain the knowledge, skills and understanding they require. This is because teachers do not consistently use assessment information to plan activities that make the most able pupils work hard enough or provide enough support for the least able. Consequently, some pupils could make even better progress so that they can reach the standards expected of them by the end of key stage 4.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good. Pupils agree that they feel safe and are safe in school. All staff and almost all parents agree that this is true. One parent simply commented, 'My child is happy and safe in school.'
- The school is an inclusive and caring environment. One comment received from a parent, that reflected a number of others, was 'Alec Hunter gives that feeling of warmth and is very welcoming.'
- Pupils across the school are tolerant and show respect to one another and to adults. There are few incidents of racist or derogatory language and those that do occur are dealt with effectively.
- Pupils take pride in their environment. There is very little litter around the school site.
- Pastoral leaders and support staff know their pupils very well. A wide variety of support is provided for the most vulnerable pupils, including counselling, anger management, assistance for pupils who have been self-harming and programmes to build self-esteem. Parents appreciate this extra help and guidance that their children receive. Pupils who responded to their online questionnaire appreciate the work that the school does to promote their emotional health and well-being.
- Pupils in all year groups access good-quality, independent careers information, advice and guidance. The programme provided includes 'Skills days' for each year group. On

these days, pupils develop their understanding of the world of work and the attributes that employers look for when people are applying for a job.

- Pupils in key stage 4 receive clear information and guidance relating to college and university options, apprenticeships and employment. All pupils participate in an individual careers interview. Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, together with disadvantaged pupils, are provided with additional interviews and help so that they understand the opportunities available to them.
- The school staff work hard to ensure that pupils have high aspirations and value their education. Throughout the school, leaders celebrate the qualifications, training and education gained by previous pupils. High-quality photographs of pupils demonstrate the value that leaders place on pupils' journeys from education into the world of work.
- Visiting speakers, including visits from former pupils, also stress to pupils the importance of educational achievement. Recently, a professional footballer informed pupils about the importance of developing communication skills during a visit to the school. This work is proving increasingly successful in raising pupils' aspirations.
- Leaders' considered use of alternative provision ensures that pupils at risk of permanent exclusion continue their education. Leaders ensure that they make regular checks on their attendance, welfare and progress.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- Pupils conduct themselves well during lessons and as they move around school. Pupils are friendly and socialise sensibly and maturely at break and lunchtime.
- Pupils know whom to approach if they need help. Although pupils say that bullying happens, they are generally very confident that it is dealt with effectively. School records indicate that the number of bullying incidents is low. Although a minority of responses on Parent View indicate that some parents feel that the school does not deal effectively with bullying, the large majority of responses disagree with this view.
- Expectations regarding behaviour are clear and followed consistently. There is generally a calm and positive atmosphere around all areas of the school during the school day.
- Pupils typically arrive on time for their lessons, appropriately equipped and ready to learn. They demonstrate positive attitudes to learning and enjoy speaking about their learning.
- When pupils consistently fall below the school's high expectations, school leaders use fixed-term exclusions appropriately. Currently, the number of fixed-term exclusions is reducing, though it still remains above the national average. School records show that the behaviour of a minority of pupils with challenging behaviour is improving.
- Most pupils attend regularly, because they have positive attitudes to learning and enjoy school. The percentage of pupils who are persistently absent is below the national average. However, despite the best efforts of school leaders, the rates of absence of disadvantaged pupils remain higher than for those for other groups in the school.

- Pupils reported that occasionally, when teachers do not provide tasks that match their abilities, learning is sometimes disturbed and progress is less rapid because pupils lose focus or do not need to work hard enough.

Outcomes for pupils

Requires improvement

- In 2016, pupils did not achieve as well as they should have by the end of key stage 4. The proportion of pupils who made good progress over their time at the school was below the national average. As a result, the number of pupils who reached the highest examination grades was low in 2016, and the achievement of disadvantaged pupils was well below that of other pupils nationally.
- However, the school's own analyses of 2016 results indicate some improvements, compared with previous years, as a result of gradually overcoming a legacy of weak teaching. Attainment in a number of subjects, including English, increased. Although it is no longer an official measure, the proportion of pupils who attained five A* to C grades including English and mathematics also increased.
- The school's own assessment information indicates that, in this academic year, more pupils are on track to make better progress by the end of key stage 4. Inspection evidence suggests that this is also the case for pupils currently in both Years 9 and 10. From observations and checking pupils' work, inspectors agree that progress is more rapid for most pupils in a range of subjects including English, mathematics and science. School leaders recognise where progress needs to accelerate further and have firm plans in place to address this.
- Pupils in key stage 3 are making better progress than in previous years, due to an improved quality of teaching. However, these pupils are still not making enough accelerated progress from their starting points so that more of them reach the higher standards required by the end of key stage 4.
- Most pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are making good progress from their individual starting points. This is because the support provided meets their needs, ensuring that they are able to overcome emotional or behavioural difficulties that act as barriers to their learning.
- Historically, the most able pupils have not made the progress that they should have, and so have not achieved as well as similar pupils nationally. Leaders have ensured that, in most classes, teachers provide greater levels of challenge to these pupils to push them towards the highest standards. This has rapidly increased the progress for this group although, occasionally, some teachers still do not expect enough of these pupils.
- In previous years, disadvantaged pupils have not made the progress that they should have, particularly in English. Inspection evidence indicates that disadvantaged pupils currently at the school, including the most able disadvantaged pupils, are making more rapid progress across a range of subjects. This is due to the targeted support that these pupils receive and teachers' clear focus on their progress. However, the difference in progress of these pupils with other pupils nationally remains wide. More work is still required to ensure that the proportion of disadvantaged pupils who reach the required standard by the end of key stage 4 increases further.

School details

Unique reference number	139402
Local authority	Essex
Inspection number	10031400

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Academy sponsor-led
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	827
Appropriate authority	Academy trust
Chair	Mark Hayes
Headteacher	Trevor Lawn
Telephone number	01376 321 813
Website	www.alechunter.org
Email address	admin@alechunter.com
Date of previous inspection	18–19 March 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.
- Alec Hunter Academy is a smaller than average-sized secondary school. It is part of the Saffron Academy Trust.
- The very large majority of pupils are from White British backgrounds. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds is small.
- The proportion of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities or who have an education, health and care plan is broadly average.

- The proportion of disadvantaged pupils who attend the school is broadly average. The proportion of disadvantaged pupils attending the school is higher in key stage 3 than in key stage 4.
- The school makes use of the Heybridge Alternative Provision School and The New Approach Programme from Colchester Institute to provide education for a small number of pupils.
- The school receives support from the academy trust, which also brokers some support from the local authority.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for pupils' progress.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors gathered a range of evidence about the progress that pupils make over time and the quality of teaching and learning in the school. There were no Year 11 pupils being taught in school at the time of the inspection. Inspectors observed learning in other year groups over a range of subjects, including some jointly with school leaders. Inspectors visited three form tutor periods.
- Inspectors scrutinised pupils' work and assessments, and spoke to pupils about their work in lessons.
- Inspectors looked at a range of the school's documents, including assessment information, evaluation of the school's performance and information relating to the quality of teaching. Inspectors also considered the school's policies and procedures, including those relating to safeguarding.
- Inspectors held meetings with groups of pupils from key stages 3 and 4 and spoke to pupils in lessons and when observing them at informal times, such as lunchtime.
- Meetings were held with governors, the chief executive officer and other members of the academy trust, senior and middle leaders, and a group of newly qualified teachers and trainee teachers. The lead inspector met with two representatives of the local authority.
- Inspectors considered the 140 responses to Parent View, including free-text responses and two letters to the lead inspector. Parents' responses to the school's own questionnaire were also considered. The views of 56 staff and 19 pupils who responded to online questionnaires were taken into account.

Inspection team

Paul Wilson, lead inspector	Ofsted Inspector
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Alison Dominey	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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