

Thistle Hill Academy

Aspen Drive, Minster-on-Sea, Sheerness, Kent ME12 3UD

Inspection dates

22–23 May 2018

| Overall effectiveness | Requires improvement |
|--|-----------------------------|
| Effectiveness of leadership and management | Requires improvement |
| Quality of teaching, learning and assessment | Requires improvement |
| Personal development, behaviour and welfare | Requires improvement |
| Outcomes for pupils | Requires improvement |
| Early years provision | Good |
| Overall effectiveness at previous inspection | Not previously inspected |

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement

- Since opening in 2015, the school has experienced continuing staff turbulence at all levels. The promising new senior leadership is not yet well established.
- The progress made by pupils across the school is variable. In 2017, outcomes at the end of key stage 1 were below those seen nationally in reading and writing. Outcomes were also below national average in reading in key stage 2.
- Leaders have not ensured that the quality of teaching is good. Teaching does not meet the needs of different groups of pupils effectively, including disadvantaged pupils, those who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities, and the most able.
- Teaching assistants do not provide consistently effective support. This slows pupils' learning.
- Despite some recent improvement, pupils' attendance, including that of disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities, remains just below national levels.
- Pupils' behaviour is not consistently good. Leaders have not yet secured the confidence of parents and carers, or staff, that pupils' behaviour is improving overall.
- Pupils' learning in subjects other than English and mathematics is limited. For example, opportunities for pupils to develop their spiritual, moral, social and cultural understanding are restricted.
- The Stour Academy Trust's local advisory board does not provide consistently effective challenge and support to school leaders.

The school has the following strengths

- Since January 2018, the trust's renewed efforts to drive improvement have shown credible success. Leaders' actions are already having a significant effect on the quality of teaching and pupils' progress.
- Children in the early years make good progress. As a result of good leadership and effective teaching, they are active and inquisitive, engage well with adults, and explore their learning enthusiastically.
- New provision for pupils who need intensive and individual support is increasingly effective. This specialist resource provision provides a safe and caring environment which promotes pupils' learning well.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Secure consistently effective teaching to ensure that pupils make strong progress across year groups and subjects by:
 - rapidly bringing staff up to speed with pupils' current knowledge and skills, enabling them to plan next steps in learning effectively
 - developing teaching assistants' effectiveness in supporting pupils' learning.
- Improve outcomes for all pupils in reading, writing and mathematics by:
 - narrowing the attainment gap further for disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities
 - ensuring that teaching consistently challenges pupils' learning, particularly for the most able.
- Strengthen leadership by ensuring that:
 - the local advisory board holds leaders to account sufficiently, through recruiting members with a broad range of experience and accessing high-quality training from the trust
 - pupils' attendance, including that of disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities, is brought in line with national averages
 - information on the impact of explicit actions to improve behaviour is shared fully with parents and staff.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Requires improvement

- Since first opening, the academy has not benefited from consistency in leadership and teaching. The quality of education provided, including pupils' progress, has suffered as a result. However, more recently, decisive action by the current trust has brought stable and effective leadership, leading to evident improvement, some of which is rapid.
- The new headteacher has quickly established a clear and accurate understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. In taking effective action to instigate improvement, she is ably supported by the deputy chief executive officer and two expert curriculum advisers from the trust. However, this effective leadership structure has only been in place for a short time, so has yet to secure sustained improvement.
- Teachers respond readily to senior leaders' accurate and systematic feedback, demonstrating their own strong commitment to the school's urgent need to improve. They act promptly on advice and guidance, making helpful changes to their practice as a result. Helpful training for teaching assistants has resulted in a more effective provision for pupils' well-being, but this has not yet achieved a significant improvement to the support adults provide for pupils' learning.
- The recently appointed special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) is developing a highly effective specialist and nurture provision, which has already secured notable early improvements to SEN pupils' engagement in learning. As a result, these pupils are already beginning to make better progress.
- Leaders' effective use of additional funding to recruit a parent support adviser has resulted in a reduction to both persistent absence and exclusions for disadvantaged pupils. These pupils are now beginning to attend more regularly as a result.
- The leadership of subjects other than English and mathematics is not well developed. As a result, pupils' learning in the wider curriculum is limited. Furthermore, pupils do not experience wide-ranging opportunities to practise or extend their reading, writing and mathematical skills in other subjects.
- Changes in leadership and staffing have undermined the confidence of many parents in the school. Leaders currently make themselves available to address any concerns promptly. Additionally, the introduction of special events, such as the termly 'fabulous finish', promotes parents' involvement in their children's learning. On one such occasion recently, parents joined their children to make fossils, scarecrows, dog biscuits and cat toys. Consequently, parental engagement with the school is gradually increasing.
- The promotion of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is limited. Subject leaders have recently begun to include specific opportunities to develop these skills. For example, pupils recently explored Chinese culture through reading 'The Firework-Maker's Daughter'. They also discussed the importance of symbolism to ancient Central American cultures when making Mayan masks. Pupils' understanding of fundamental British values is supported well through discussion linked to their topics.

For example, pupils in Year 2 recently debated the issue of equality for boys and girls during the Victorian period, investigating the rule of law at that time.

- Leaders' effective use of the sports premium is having a positive effect on pupils' health, well-being and social skills. Training by sports specialists is developing teachers' skills in delivering high-quality lessons. Additionally, pupils participate regularly in sporting tournaments, such as rugby, cricket and rounders, developing their friendships with other local pupils.

Governance of the school

- On taking over the school in 2017, the Stour Academy Trust took prompt action to improve the quality of education. Dissatisfied by the initial pace of improvement, the trust then redoubled its efforts and, most recently, took timely action to deploy an experienced leader from within the trust as headteacher. The school's improvement has accelerated markedly as a result.
- Trust leaders and directors have an accurate understanding of the improvement needed. Using this knowledge well, they successfully deploy expertise from other trust schools to develop staff skills at Thistle Hill. This approach is successfully developing the capacity of the school's own staff to continue improving teaching and pupils' progress.
- The local advisory board members fully embrace training opportunities provided by the trust. Regular visits to the school provide them with a clear picture of the school's priorities. Local governors' skills are developing rapidly as a result. However, the local board's capacity to provide effective challenge and support to leaders routinely is currently limited by their low membership numbers.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Leaders' thorough recruitment checks ensure the suitability of staff to work with children. The trust's regular, comprehensive safeguarding audits contribute to the effective monitoring of the school's systems for keeping children safe. The school's designated safeguarding leads are well trained and highly skilled. Leaders' referrals to appropriate outside agencies are thorough and detailed, successfully assisting their work with other agencies when supporting children and families.
- Safeguarding practices and procedures are well established and understood comprehensively by staff. All staff receive detailed safeguarding training when they join the school, together with regular updates to keep them informed of best practice. They are vigilant about any potential risks, including, for example, radicalisation or extremism. They use the school's systems well to report concerns, and follow up actions thoroughly with safeguarding leads to ensure that pupils are safe.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- Teaching is not consistently good throughout the school. Although the accuracy of teachers' assessment of pupils' progress is clearly improving, teaching does not yet match pupils' needs consistently well. At times, pupils find the work teachers set too

hard or too easy. Consequently, gaps in pupils' learning linked to previous weaknesses in teaching are not being diminished, and the most able pupils' learning is not extended equally well throughout the school.

- Teaching assistants' support for pupils' learning is not consistently effective. They focus too often on pupils' behaviour and well-being, rather than attending to their learning. As a result, the value of the assistance they provide is limited, including for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities.
- The teaching of reading and phonics is improving rapidly. The school's systematic approach to teaching phonics enables younger pupils to use their developing skills successfully to read new words. Older pupils are taught an increasing range of reading skills, which they use with confidence to understand new vocabulary and make sense of what they read. Furthermore, the use of well-chosen texts and stories engages pupils' interest and increases their enjoyment of reading.
- The quality of mathematics teaching is improving but remains variable. Some teaching makes effective use of the school's new approach, new mathematical concepts are explained clearly and pupils practise their skills and extend their understanding well. At times, teaching supports pupils well to explain their mathematical thinking, developing their reasoning skills effectively. However, this success is not yet well established across the school.
- Recently, teaching has begun to provide pupils with more opportunities to practise their reading, writing and mathematical skills across other subjects. For example, following a recent visit to a chocolate factory, pupils were able to apply mathematical skills successfully to measure and weigh ingredients to make their own chocolate recipes. However, these opportunities are not fully developed.
- Until recently, the development of pupils' knowledge and skills across the wider curriculum has been limited. Teachers are now beginning to provide richer opportunities to broaden pupils' experiences. Year 3 pupils recently built effective lifeboat models, following a visit from members of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution.
- The quality of additional support provided for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities varies widely. Teaching assistants are often passive, focusing on providing equipment rather than engaging pupils in thinking about their learning. More effective support was evident in some mathematics lessons, where teaching assistants modelled new concepts successfully. However, overall the support provided does not encourage pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities to make the progress of which they are capable.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Requires improvement

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good. The trust's values of respect, truth, compassion and friendship feature prominently around the school. Staff discuss these values regularly with pupils during assemblies and refer to them helpfully during lessons to encourage and reward pupils' efforts.

- Pupils are typically positive about their learning. They are eager to take on new challenges, and express pride in their increasing achievements.
- Pupils are helpful and polite, showing respect for adults and each other. They understand the school's rules and routines, which support them well to regulate their behaviour. Consequently, disruption to lessons is rare. Additionally, pupils speak positively about the behaviour of others. They express confidence in the support they receive from staff, trusting them to resolve any potential bullying issues swiftly.
- Pupils understand the need to keep themselves safe, including when online. They speak confidently about the support they receive from 'cyber crew' pupils, who helpfully promote online safety around the school.
- The school's specialist support for individual pupils' emotional welfare is highly effective. Specialist staff plan activities carefully. Pupils who access the specialist resource and nurture provision are supported well to reintegrate with their classes, increasing their access to learning.
- Teachers offer a range of engaging after-school clubs to widen pupils' experiences. Pupils are enthusiastic about the opportunities to develop their skills in ballet, judo, arts and crafts, cricket, handball and choir. They enjoy school trips, such as to the Kent Life Farm, allowing them to explore the local area more fully.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils requires improvement.
- Leaders monitor pupils' behaviour carefully, so they step in promptly if problems occur. Leaders' provision of motivating playground equipment has increased pupils' engagement at breaktimes and reduced inappropriate conduct. However, some pupils continue to struggle to regulate their own behaviour at social times.
- Although the school emphasises the importance of good attendance, school figures remain just below national averages. The parent support adviser provides an effective link with parents, to identify any reasons for low attendance. Timely referrals are now made to outside agencies, ensuring rapid support to overcome any issues. Although persistent absence has reduced considerably recently, so that overall attendance figures are no longer in decline, improvement in pupils' attendance is not yet firmly established.
- The pastoral team has forged strong links with the families of pupils at risk of exclusion, providing a link to school for them to raise concerns and receive support where needed. As a result, exclusions have recently reduced dramatically.
- The school's specialist support is increasingly effective. Pupils, including those in the nurture provision, develop strong relationships with adults, supporting their social, emotional and behavioural well-being. The environment is calm and purposeful, supporting pupils well to make changes in their behaviour and engage purposefully in learning.

Outcomes for pupils

Requires improvement

- In 2017, pupils' outcomes in reading were below national averages in both key stages 1 and 2, as were outcomes in the national phonics screening check in Year 1. Additionally, the proportion of pupils achieving the higher standards was below the national average in reading, writing and mathematics for both age groups.
- Recently, evidence of stronger pupil progress is emerging across the school. However, inconsistencies remain, with variability across classes and year groups, particularly for the most able pupils.
- Pupils' progress in mathematics has been inconsistent over time. Recent changes to teaching are already boosting progress for some pupils, but this improvement is not consistent across all year groups, including for the most able pupils.
- As a result of recent improvements in teaching, pupils' progress in phonics and reading is accelerating throughout the school. This is particularly evident in key stage 1, where younger pupils have benefited from a more consistent approach to phonics teaching.
- Key stage 1 pupils make increasingly effective use of their phonics learning when they read and write. In key stage 2, while pupils strive to use increasingly sophisticated vocabulary in their writing, incorrect spellings remain frequent because of gaps in their earlier learning. This limits key stage 2 pupils' writing success, particularly for the most able.
- Until recently, disadvantaged pupils did not make the progress required to catch up with their peers. In key stage 1 these pupils now make progress in phonics and reading which is similar to others. Linked to their improving attendance, these pupils are beginning to engage more successfully in learning throughout the school.
- Pupils' learning in subjects other than English and mathematics has been limited previously. The broader range of recent topics, such as historical studies about the Victorians and geographical studies on the rainforest, are increasing pupils' knowledge and skills in the wider curriculum. However, the current impact on pupils' outcomes is not consistently good.

Early years provision

Good

- The headteacher provides strong leadership in the early years. She monitors progress closely through frequent observations of children's learning. Her accurate evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the early years environment has resulted in positive steps to extend learning into outdoor areas.
- The trust supports staff well to continually develop their practice. For example, early years staff across the trust meet regularly to check the accuracy of their assessments. Trust advisers deliver focused staff training, based on the needs of the children. For example, recent workshops for phonics have increased the confidence of teaching staff in delivering high-quality lessons. As a result, children's phonic knowledge is improving well.
- The proportion of children achieving a good level of development last year was above national averages. Leaders' current assessment information shows strong progress from starting points this year. In particular, the school has successfully narrowed the

gap between the progress of disadvantaged children and their peers. As a result, the children are well prepared for the next stage of their education.

- Teachers successfully plan learning to engage children's interests. For example, children expressed great excitement about their current dinosaur project. They were captivated by the dinosaur story, taking part in actions and repeating known phrases. Teachers capitalise on this enthusiasm to develop a wide range of attributes, including personal development.
- Teachers extend children's learning effectively through careful questioning. They model language successfully, encouraging children to develop their vocabulary through sharing ideas orally. As a result, the children then move on confidently to writing their ideas, using their phonic skills successfully to sound out words and build sentences.
- Teaching assistants provide strong support for children's welfare, but their impact on children's learning is less evident. They do not develop opportunities during lessons to extend children's knowledge and skills.
- Relationships between adults and children are warm and caring. Children are keen to engage and eager to please. Teachers have successfully embedded school routines, allowing children to settle quickly and confidently into class. Children play well together, sharing equipment and cooperating to achieve shared goals. They persevere with tasks, demonstrating strong attitudes to learning.
- Early years staff receive the same comprehensive safeguarding training as the rest of the school. The strong bonds they have developed with children allow them to notice any changes quickly. Staff are confident with the school's reporting system and act swiftly to register concerns. The site manager undertakes regular checks to ensure that the environment is clean and safe for children.
- Parents of children in the early years are well informed about their children's progress. Teachers share each child's 'unique story' regularly with parents, encouraging them to contribute to their children's learning at home. The 'unique story' provides an informative report to parents on their children's feelings about their learning, as well as how well they are achieving. Parents value opportunities to attend regular sessions during the school day to work alongside their children and explore a range of activities.

School details

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| Unique reference number | 140393 |
| Local authority | Kent |
| Inspection number | 10046584 |

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

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| Type of school | Primary |
| School category | Academy sponsor-led |
| Age range of pupils | 4 to 11 |
| Gender of pupils | Mixed |
| Number of pupils on the school roll | 309 |
| Appropriate authority | The board of trustees |
| Chair | Fiona Trigwell |
| Headteacher | Annette Bevan |
| Telephone number | 01795 899 119 |
| Website | http://thistlehill.greenschoolsonline.co.uk |
| Email address | office.thistlehill@stouracademytrust.org.uk |
| Date of previous inspection | Not previously inspected |

Information about this school

- Thistle Hill Academy opened in 2015 and transferred to join the Stour Academy Trust in January 2017. The board of directors is responsible for governing and exercising all the powers of the trust. Directors delegate functions to the local advisory board, but remain accountable and responsible.
- Thistle Hill Academy has experienced significant changes in leadership and staffing over the past 16 months, together with a rapid growth in pupil numbers. Directors appointed an experienced trust team to provide the school with intensive support in January 2018. The new headteacher and deputy chief executive officer took over in April 2018.
- Thistle Hill Academy is larger than the average-sized primary school. The school has two classes from Reception to Year 2, three classes across Years 3 and 4 and single classes in Years 5 and 6.
- The school has a specialist resource provision for pupils who have social, emotional and mental-health SEN. The provision currently supports four pupils.

- The proportion of disadvantaged pupils is higher than the national average.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors, together with members of the school’s leadership team, observed pupils’ learning in all classes.
- Discussions were held with the chief executive officer of the trust, the chair of the board of directors and members of the local advisory board. Inspectors also met with the headteacher and deputy chief executive officer of the trust, the trust’s SENCo, and members of the trust’s teaching and learning advisory team.
- Inspectors looked at pupils’ work across a wide range of subjects, both during lessons and in a separate work scrutiny with school and trust leaders.
- Inspectors reviewed a wide range of school documents, including the school’s development plan, leaders’ evaluation of the school’s effectiveness, minutes of trust meetings, policies, information on pupils’ progress, information to parents, external visitor reports and curriculum plans.
- Meetings were held with pupils to discuss their behaviour and safety, their learning across the curriculum and wider activities. Inspectors listened to pupils read. They observed behaviour during breaktimes and lunchtimes, and at the beginning and end of the school day.
- Inspectors took account of 55 responses to Ofsted’s online survey, Parent View, and 46 additional free-text messages. They also considered the 21 staff responses. Inspectors spoke to parents at the start of the school day and during an open-afternoon activity.
- Inspectors checked the school’s safeguarding policies and procedures, including records of checks on the suitability of staff. They had discussions with the safeguarding team, and spoke to trust leaders, staff and governors about their safeguarding responsibilities. Attendance and behaviour records were also checked.

Inspection team

| | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| Ali Dakin, lead inspector | Her Majesty’s Inspector |
| Teresa Davies | Ofsted Inspector |
| Rosemary Keen | Ofsted Inspector |

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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