

# Francis Combe Academy

Horseshoe Lane, Garston, Watford, Hertfordshire WD25 7HW

## Inspection dates

26 to 27 March 2019

Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement
Effectiveness of leadership and management	<b>Good</b>
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	<b>Requires improvement</b>
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	<b>Good</b>
Outcomes for pupils	<b>Requires improvement</b>
16 to 19 study programmes	<b>Good</b>
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	<b>Good</b>

## Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

### This is a school that requires improvement

- Pupils do not make strong enough progress in science, humanities and modern foreign languages.
- Some middle leaders are relatively new in post and so they are still developing the skills they need to secure rapid improvement in their areas of responsibility.
- A legacy of weaker practice means that the quality of teaching remains variable across subjects.
- Limitations in their literacy skills is a barrier to learning for a significant group of pupils.
- Teachers' planning for learning does not ensure that the most able pupils and some pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) achieve their full potential.
- A few teachers do not apply the school's behaviour policy as intended. This means that, occasionally, inappropriate behaviour goes unchecked. Pupils find these inconsistencies frustrating.

### The school has the following strengths

- Leaders, including governors and the trust, have taken positive action to strengthen the curriculum and to accelerate improvements in the quality of teaching across key stages.
- Current pupils are making stronger progress in English, mathematics and science. Outcomes in physical education (PE), art and music are consistently strong.
- Safeguarding is effective. Pupils are well cared for. Support for their pastoral needs is readily available to them.
- Most pupils behave well. Attendance has improved since the previous inspection. There are also fewer incidents of temporary exclusion.
- Provision in the sixth form is a strength of the school. Students are well prepared for the next stage in their education, employment or training.
- Parents are typically positive about the quality of education that the school provides.

## Full report

### What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that outcomes for all pupils are at least in line with the national average and that rates of progress increase rapidly in underperforming subjects, particularly in modern foreign languages, humanities and science.
- Equip new leaders with the skills and confidence that they need to raise standards quickly in their areas of responsibility.
- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment for all pupil groups, including for the most able, disadvantaged pupils and for pupils with SEND, by ensuring that:
  - all the information available to teachers is used effectively to plan learning to meet pupils' needs, so that they make stronger progress from their different starting points
  - teachers check pupils' learning routinely in lessons and correct misconceptions quickly
  - the activities set are completed by all pupils and that tasks are adapted for those who already have the skills to move on with their work.
- Improve pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare by ensuring that all staff apply the school's behaviour policy consistently and that pupils understand why sanctions are needed.

## Inspection judgements

### Effectiveness of leadership and management

**Good**

- With the support of the trust, senior leaders have taken swift action to deal with the issues arising from previous staffing turbulence and a subsequent dip in pupils' progress in 2018. They have not been afraid to make difficult decisions to improve teaching quality. While overall teaching, learning and assessment and pupils' outcomes are not yet good, they are getting better.
- Senior leaders, including governors and the trust, have a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school. Recent changes in the structure of the governing body and the commissioning of a new standards committee have strengthened governors' capacity to challenge leaders to continue to improve.
- An unrelenting focus on checking that pupils attend school regularly is ensuring that pupils' attendance, across all groups, is at least in line with the national average. This represents a significant change since the previous inspection.
- The curriculum offers pupils a broad range of experiences. The extensive programme of extra-curricular activities includes a wealth of music, sports and creative opportunities.
- An increasing number of pupils have access to English Baccalaureate subjects when it is appropriate for them. Leaders' determination to improve pupils' literacy skills is a strong feature of the school's work. Appropriately, this is a leadership priority because a high proportion of pupils join the school with prior attainment that is below age-related expectations.
- A phonics programme has been introduced for Year 7 pupils who need extra help to catch up quickly. In-school assessment information shows that these pupils and pupils in Year 8 are making better progress now than in previous years.
- The school's 'word rich' strategy challenges all pupils to improve their vocabulary, spelling and English grammar. This is also making a positive difference to the effectiveness of pupils' use and understanding of subject-specific language. Other initiatives aim to extend the amount of time pupils spend reading. For example, a set 'class reader' has been introduced for pupils at key stage 3 to encourage them to read and to evaluate their books together.
- Leaders are very clear that to make strong progress pupils need to attend school regularly. Together with governors, their unrelenting focus on ensuring that this happens means that attendance for all pupil groups is now at least in line with the national average. This represents a significant improvement since the previous inspection. There also are fewer incidents of pupils who are temporarily excluded for inappropriate behaviour.
- Governors' checks make sure that leaders' spending of pupil premium and SEND funding is making a difference. While the progress gaps are beginning to close between groups, there is more work to do to ensure that disadvantaged pupils of all abilities make similar progress to other non-disadvantaged pupils nationally and that pupils with SEND achieve their full potential.

- The leadership team regularly reviews the quality of teaching and learning across subjects. The evaluations are used to identify good practice that can be shared and to identify further training needs for individuals and groups of teachers. However, some subject leaders are relatively new in post and are still developing the skills they need to bring about rapid improvement in their areas of responsibility.
- School leaders work hard to foster good working relationships with parents. Most parents are highly positive about the school's work. However, in their free-text comments to Ofsted, a few parents raised concerns about the previously high turnover of staff and the school's response to meet the specific learning needs of a small group of pupils.
- While the number of pupils on the school's roll is increasing, there has been a relatively high level of pupil movement since the previous inspection. Leaders keep suitable records about movements in and out of the school. The inspection evidence showed that pupils leave for a variety of reasons, with no particular pattern prevalent in any year group.

### **Governance of the school**

- Directors of the trust work closely together with governors in supporting and challenging the principal to improve the school's performance. The trust board has recently supported further changes to the structure of the local governing body.
- A standards committee has been established to ensure that the challenge to school leaders to continue to improve is stepped up. A trust member, who is also an education specialist, is assigned to the governor team. A new chair of governors was appointed in September 2018.
- Governors understand the school's strengths and what it needs to improve. They have an appropriate mix of skills and experience, but some governors are relatively new. As a team, they regularly review their training to make sure that they have the knowledge they need to be effective.
- A link governor is assigned to each priority area for improvement, with a key focus on ensuring that the strategies to improve the overall quality of teaching and outcomes for all pupil groups are working. This is helping them to contextualise the regular reports that they receive from middle and senior leaders about performance across the school.

### **Safeguarding**

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- The culture of safeguarding is strong. Staff are vigilant and mindful of their responsibilities to protect the pupils in their care. Safeguarding records, including about staff recruitment, are suitably maintained and meet requirements.
- Regular training ensures that the whole-school team understands the things that they need to look out for and the procedures to follow if they have a concern. Effective work with other organisations, including social services, health workers and the police, helps leaders to secure appropriate support for vulnerable pupils when required.
- A full programme of counselling, including art therapy, is available in the school.

- Governors play their part by checking that the necessary safeguarding actions are followed through systematically and that nothing is missed.

### Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

**Requires improvement**

- The quality of teaching, learning and assessment across the school varies too much. Staffing changes and difficulties in teacher recruitment and supply have contributed to this variability. Consequently, there is a legacy of weaker teaching in, and across, subjects. Although improving, teaching is not supporting all pupil groups to make strong progress.
- Leaders have established clear expectations of teaching practice across the school. However, teachers' own expectations of what pupils can achieve are not always high enough. This is especially so for the most able pupils and for some pupils with SEND, for example, in subjects such as geography, history and modern foreign languages. Teachers do not always reinforce the need for pupils to work hard in practising new skills or check to see that the work they have set is completed.
- Too often, teachers' planning focuses on covering the required topic, rather than securing pupils' depth of knowledge and skills. Consequently, misconceptions are sometimes overlooked, and explanations are not adapted quickly enough to fill gaps in pupils' understanding in the lesson.
- Teachers do not routinely make the best use of the information they hold to plan learning to meet the needs of pupils with SEND, and this limits the extent of this group's progress.
- More frequent checks over time are beginning to identify more broadly where knowledge and skills gaps exist that might prevent pupils from making the progress they should. Suitable plans are in place to begin to bridge these gaps.
- While the quality and standard of pupils' work vary widely between subjects and classes, improving teaching is leading to better progress, including for disadvantaged pupils, in English, mathematics and science.
- Support for the high proportion of Year 7 pupils who need to catch up with their reading is increasingly effective in raising standards and improving reluctant readers' confidence. Library staff are active in introducing a range of initiatives, including the recently introduced phonics programme. The strategies are targeted appropriately to increase pupils' use of the library and to extend their interest in reading.

### Personal development, behaviour and welfare

**Good**

#### Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Pupils say they feel safe in school and that they are well supported by pastoral staff. Teachers know their pupils well and build typically positive working relationships with them.
- Around the school, most pupils are smart in their uniforms, polite and confident to speak about their learning. Some pupils take on pupil leadership roles and contribute to

the school's policy development. Others model good practice as 'Expert Students'.

- The importance leaders place on the school's 'Respect' agenda, which encourages pupils to celebrate individual differences, is clearly communicated in corridor displays around the building. Typically, pupils understand these values and can explain how they are observed in school and in day-to-day life.
- A comprehensive programme of tutorials and assemblies underpins pupils' understanding of British values, for example the rule of law and democracy. Further development of the tutorial programme aims to secure greater consistency in the quality of tutorials across the school and to continue to improve staff confidence in undertaking the tutor role.
- Pupils receive appropriate, impartial careers information advice and guidance. This helps to prepare them well for the next stage in their education, employment and/or training.
- A few pupils attend part-time alternative provision which provides specialist support to meet their needs. The school makes regular checks on these pupils' progress and attendance to ensure that support plans are working and to identify any further action needed.

## Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- At breaktimes and lunchtimes, inspectors generally saw pupils getting on well together, enjoying outdoor spaces and socialising in small groups in the school's restaurant.
- While most pupils behave appropriately in lessons, leaders know that a few pupils can disrupt the learning of others at times. The school's behaviour support unit, the 'DEN', provides daily support and interventions targeted to individual needs. Consequently, the incidence of fixed-term exclusions and call outs for senior leadership support has reduced significantly since the previous inspection. However, there are still too many disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND represented in the group of pupils who are temporarily excluded.
- The pupils with whom inspectors spoke said that bullying was rare and that, if it happens, staff take suitable action to deal with their concerns. However, a few pupils said they felt that it took too long to resolve some of the issues they raised.
- The attendance rates for all groups of pupils have improved since the previous inspection because of leaders' relentless focus on this important aspect of the school's work.
- Most pupils told inspectors that they felt behaviour has also improved since the previous inspection. However, some expressed frustration when they said teachers were not always consistent in applying the school's policy on sanctions and rewards.

### Outcomes for pupils

### Requires improvement

- The progress of Year 11 pupils who left the school in 2018 was below the national average at the end of key stage 4 in a range of subjects.

- A legacy of weaker teaching and the need for an over-reliance on temporary teachers in some subjects resulted in significant underperformance last year. The most able pupils, including the most able disadvantaged pupils, did not make the progress they should across subjects and by the end of the key stage.
- The difference in outcomes between disadvantaged pupils in the school and other pupils nationally, and between boys' and girls' progress, is beginning to diminish. However, the gains made closely correlate to the quality of teaching and so continue to form a mixed picture.
- Pupils with SEND are appropriately provided for within the 'Biome' space, which supports targeted interventions. The progress of this group of pupils across subjects is more variable. This is because the activities planned are not matched consistently well to their individual needs. The extent to which teachers use the information in individual learning plans and pupils' profiles is uneven.
- While some pupils at key stage 4 still have considerable gaps in their knowledge that teachers are working to close, more generally pupils' books are showing signs of improvement across most subjects. This is especially evident in Years 7 and 8.
- Pupils' progress is improving in subjects such as English and mathematics because pupils know more and can use what they already know to help them to gain new knowledge and skills.
- Most pupils make strong progress in PE, mathematics, art, music, religious education and child care. There are early signs that pupils' progress is beginning to improve in English and science, but pupils make insufficient progress in geography and history.
- The whole-school focus on securing pupils' literacy skills, including improving their reading, is proving effective in supporting the high proportion of pupils who join the school with skills that are below age-related expectations. Leaders have appropriately identified this shortfall as a key feature of pupils' weaker progress in the past. Over time, pupils are increasingly confident in their use of subject-specific vocabulary and in understanding what they need to do to improve their work.
- The school offers a programme of horticulture in its 'Eco Garden', which is sponsored by a national employer. In this nurturing environment, key stage 3 pupils who are struggling in other lessons because of identified barriers to learning make strong progress in developing their skills in planting, growing and selling produce, plants and flowers. They work hard to design, make and sell other products, for example basket-weave items for the garden and attractive wooden dog kennels.
- A few pupils follow part-time, alternative bespoke courses away from the school site. These programmes are typically successful in engaging pupils in learning because they are matched appropriately to their needs and interests. As a result, they make stronger progress than they would otherwise have done on a full-time programme in school.

## 16 to 19 study programmes

**Good**

- The sixth form is effectively led and managed. The overall leadership of the provision has been strengthened further this year.
- Most students follow academic courses. They benefit from teaching that is more

consistently strong this year than in key stages 3 and 4. Typically, students have positive attitudes to learning. They use their study time appropriately, they behave well and they attend school regularly.

- Teachers have secure subject knowledge and work hard to establish effective working relationships with their students. Consequently, they have a good understanding of the specific learning needs of individuals and plan appropriately to meet them.
- The sixth-form leader and teachers are ambitious and promote high aspirations of what students can achieve. Typically, effective teaching, monitoring and targeted support helps them to keep students on track.
- While some variations remain between subjects, outcomes overall in the sixth form show an improving trend in the current year. Students value the personalised guidance that they receive from their teachers.
- The school meets the requirements of the 16 to 19 study programmes. Leaders ensure that opportunities for students' personal development and work-related learning form part of the curriculum. Those students without a good pass in GCSE English and/or mathematics are supported to resit examinations and most of them improve their grades.
- Sixth-form students are typically confident and professional in the way that they conduct themselves in school. Many of them take on wider roles, acting as mentors and 'reading buddies' for younger pupils. Effective careers' information advice and guidance helps to prepare students for their next steps in education and/or training.
- As in other areas of the school, safeguarding is effective in the sixth form. Students are suitably prepared for managing risk and looking after their own welfare. Additional support and interventions are available for any student in need of extra help, for example through the school's welfare officer and the specifically assigned sixth-form teaching assistant.



## School details

Unique reference number	135876
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	10086774

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 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in 16 to 19 study programmes	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1152
Of which, number on roll in 16 to 19 study programmes	130
Appropriate authority	The board of trustees
Chair	Andrew Sheach
Principal	Deborah Warwick
Telephone number	01923 672 964
Website	<a href="http://www.franciscombeacademy.org.uk">www.franciscombeacademy.org.uk</a>
Email address	<a href="mailto:info@fcacademy.org.uk">info@fcacademy.org.uk</a>
Date of previous inspection	3 to 4 November 2015

## Information about this school

- The school became part of the Meller Educational Trust in September 2016. It is larger than the average-sized secondary school.
- The local governing body maintains operational oversight of the school's work, reporting directly to the board of governors.
- Most pupils are of White British heritage, but the proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups is increasing.
- The proportion of disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND is above the national average, but the proportion of pupils with an education, health and care plan is below

the national average.

- The school uses part-time, off-site alternative provision for a small number of pupils at the Chessbrook Education Support Centre.

## Information about this inspection

- Meetings were held with teachers, subject leads, senior leaders and governors, including the chair of governors and the chief executive of The Meller Educational Trust.
- Inspectors spoke with pupils about their work in lessons and in small groups. They also spoke informally with them around the school as they arrived and at breaktimes and lunchtimes.
- A range of documentation was looked at, including the school's self-evaluation and improvement plan, assessment information, attendance, behaviour and safeguarding records.
- Inspectors took account of 80 staff survey responses, 103 responses to the Ofsted online questionnaire, Parent View, and the comments in 102 free-text responses. They also looked at 130 pupils' survey responses.
- Inspectors observed teaching and learning across a wide range of subjects. Some of these lessons were observed jointly with school leaders.

## Inspection team

Christine Dick, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Sean Powell	Ofsted Inspector
John Constable	Ofsted Inspector
Daniel Leonard	Ofsted Inspector

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