

Aspire Academy

Commonside Road, Harlow, Essex CM18 7EZ

Inspection dates

13–14 June 2017

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	Requires improvement
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement

- Since the school opened as an alternative provision free school in 2014, leaders and governors have not ensured that pupils make enough progress.
- Significant gains made in promoting pupils' personal development have not been matched by improvements in their attendance, behaviour and achievement.
- The quality of teaching, and the impact this has on pupils' progress, varies too widely. Expectations of pupils are not always high enough. Not all teachers apply the school's procedures when marking pupils' work. Opportunities to strengthen pupils' literacy skills in lessons are not always taken.
- The outside area for children in the early years and pupils in the key stage 1 class is under-developed.
- Assessment procedures do not provide a clear, coherent overview of pupils' personal development and academic progress.
- Leaders' evaluation of the school's effectiveness is too generous. Improvement plans do not have enough measurable targets to hold staff to account for making improvements.
- Too many pupils are persistently absent or are excluded from school.
- Admissions criteria do not ensure that schools and local authorities always refer pupils to the school who can be reintegrated back into full-time learning.

The school has the following strengths

- Pupils' personal development is good. Staff are adept at welcoming pupils back into school, and helping them to re-engage in learning.
- Staff forge excellent relations with pupils. They show remarkable patience, perseverance and understanding when dealing with each pupil.
- Parents and carers praise the way leaders and staff engage with their children.
- Those who attend regularly and behave well have good opportunities to re-engage in learning, gain qualifications and enjoy school.
- Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, and other vulnerable pupils, receive good care, guidance and support.
- All safeguarding arrangements are secure.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by:
 - rigorously evaluating the quality of teaching to gain an thorough overview of the school's strengths and weaknesses
 - enlisting the support of external partners to validate these findings so that leaders have an accurate picture of what works well and what needs improving
 - raising teachers' expectations of what pupils are capable of attaining
 - applying the school's marking and feedback policy consistently
 - taking every opportunity in lessons to reinforce pupils' basic skills, including reading, spelling and the use of grammar
 - enhancing the outdoor learning environment for children in the early years and key stage 1 class.
- Raise achievement, particularly in key stages 3 and 4, by:
 - ensuring that all pupils attend school far more often than they currently do
 - reducing significantly the proportion of pupils who are excluded from school
 - implementing clear, coherent procedures that enable leaders to illustrate and analyse clearly the personal development and academic progress made by all pupils from their entry to exit from the school
 - ensuring that these procedures show how well disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities develop personally and achieve over time.
- Improve the quality of leadership and management by:
 - using the information gained from an accurate evaluation of the school's performance to inform sharp, succinct plans for improvement
 - ensuring that these plans include measurable targets and timescales to hold staff accountable for making improvements
 - revising admissions criteria so that local authorities and schools understand fully leaders' expectations of all pupils referred to the school to commit fully to improving their behaviour and attending regularly
 - ensuring that all required documents are on the school's website.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Requires improvement

- Leaders have put their efforts into establishing new alternative provision for pupils who have missed long periods of their education because they have been excluded from mainstream schools. They have succeeded in getting the school's ethos and culture right so that pupils feel safe and valued and are ready to learn again. Despite leaders' sustained efforts to improve attendance, a significant proportion of pupils are persistently absent from school. A small minority of pupils continue to display challenging behaviour.
- Difficulties in recruiting and retaining teachers have undermined leaders' efforts to secure good teaching. This has limited the progress made by pupils. Although a significant proportion of pupils re-engage in learning and enjoy school, overall outcomes remain low.
- The principal, ably supported by her senior team, leads the school effectively. She feels that the school is 'good in all areas'. This is not supported by inspection findings, or by the school's own assessments, which lack rigour. Currently, leaders are unable to show fully how well all pupils are doing.
- Improvement plans do not have measurable targets to hold staff accountable for securing improvement.
- An experienced and effective senior leader oversees the provision and care for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities well. She also coordinates intensive support for the school's most vulnerable pupils. Pupils are known well. Good liaison with their parents and carers ensures that they are kept safe and their needs are met.
- Good arrangements are in place to re-integrate into mainstream education those who respond positively to their short stay in the school. One parent who used Ofsted's free-text service commented, 'This school has changed my son's life completely. He arrived from his previous school suffering high anxiety. He is now due to leave Aspire Academy for mainstream school having been coached by the amazing staff in the Primary team. He is now a confident, engaged and happy boy excited about going back to mainstream school. This is truly an amazing place.'
- The curriculum consolidates what pupils already know and can do, stimulates their interest and re-engages them in learning. Most pupils join at times other than at the start of the school year. In key stages 1 and 2, staff test pupils on entry to find out gaps in their knowledge, skills and understanding, and try to fill them. Similar tests are done in key stages 3 and 4 so that pupils can build on their prior learning and continue to study GCSE and vocational qualifications.
- The curriculum is enriched by a range of activities during and after school, and a programme of off-site visits. One parent praised the opportunity her son had had to train as a young firefighter with the Essex Fire Service, and the positive impact this had on his confidence and social skills. Effective careers guidance ensures that older pupils engage in work experience and study vocational courses at the local college.
- Pupils' moral, social and cultural development is promoted effectively. Inspectors found

less evidence of how their spiritual education is developed. Staff praise and encourage pupils daily to develop their social skills, build pride and promote self-esteem. Weekly personal, social and health education lessons enable them to reflect on their own feelings and the lives of others.

Governance of the school

- Minutes of meetings show that governors know the school's, and their own, strengths and weaknesses. They recognise their limitations in moving the school forward at the required rate. Plans to add capacity to improve things further by joining a larger academy trust later this year are under way.
- Governors acknowledge that the school admits too many pupils with chronic persistent absence. This prevents the school from achieving fully its aims of re-engaging pupils in learning and returning them to mainstream or other specialist provision.
- Governors meet their main statutory duties but do not check that all required documents are on the school's website.
- Governors oversee effectively the use of additional funding to support pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Most of this funding is used to provide one-to-one and, at times, two-to-one support for pupils requiring intensive support in lessons and during breaks and lunchtimes.
- The physical education (PE) and sport premium is used effectively. PE lessons are taught by a specialist teacher who also coordinates after-school football fixtures for boys and girls. However, the impact of this additional funding is not reported in sufficient detail on the school's website.
- Governors ensure that additional funding is used effectively to support disadvantaged pupils. Most of the pupil premium has been spent on training staff to develop a nurture curriculum and to provide play therapy and personal counselling. Funding is also used well to ensure that pupils have a clean school uniform and sports kit, and eat healthily at breakfast club, breaks and lunchtimes. This adds significantly to their confidence and self-esteem.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Keeping pupils safe and protecting them from harm are top priorities. All necessary checks are made when appointing new staff, and records are meticulously maintained. Robust procedures are in place to protect pupils at risk of harm. Child protection matters are handled systematically. Links with local support agencies, including social care and the police, are firmly established.
- The site is safe; all rooms have pass keys, and the school entrance and perimeter are secure.
- Leaders ensure that safeguarding training for all staff, including training in the 'Prevent' duty, is kept up to date.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- Inspectors found that the quality of teaching varies widely, and some of it is not good enough. Leaders have not used widely enough the expertise of other providers to help them check the validity of their lesson observations or their scrutiny of pupils' work.
- Low expectations of pupils by some staff are reflected in the quality and quantity of work in pupils' books. Too much of it is untidy, left incomplete and is not marked in line with the school's marking policy.
- Teachers do not take opportunities in lessons to promote pupils' reading skills, explore new vocabulary and correct pupils' spelling and grammar. Marking often fails to correct basic errors. Consequently, pupils continue to make the same spelling mistakes, or forget to use capital letters, apostrophes and full stops. When reading aloud, not all pupils show that they have the phonics skills needed to decode new words or phrases.
- In mathematics, some tasks in key stages 3 and 4 are too basic. Teachers rely too heavily on worksheets with lists of calculations that pupils can easily do. Pupils are not given practical resources to use to help them understand basic concepts such as symmetry.
- Some teachers use past papers and tests effectively to assess pupils' knowledge and understanding. Others carry out regular detailed assessments of the quality of pupils' work. This information is collated centrally, but it is largely meaningless as it does not reflect the progress made by pupils.
- Most teachers manage challenging behaviour effectively. They forge good relations with pupils, based on mutual respect for one another. They show endless patience, tolerance and understanding, even when pupils fail to cooperate. They foster respect and challenge bad language. Pupils value this, saying that, 'Staff are good at handling us when we're angry and know what to do with us; they know your mood and give you time out to reflect.'
- Where teaching is most effective, teachers have high expectations of pupils. They tailor learning so that it matches the needs of each individual. Pupils know what to do to meet their success criteria. Teachers plan learning that is active and enjoyable. Teachers and co-workers work collaboratively to provide one-to-one support for pupils which aids their learning and progress.
- Primary-age pupils benefit from good-quality, personalised learning and support in very small classes. Active learning tasks such as sorting and role play keep pupils busy and meaningfully engaged. Behaviour is managed well so that classrooms are calm and purposeful. Pupils know that if they get upset they can take themselves out of the classroom to calm down and re-enter when they are ready to learn again.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Requires improvement

Personal development and welfare are good

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- The 'meet and greet' at the start of each school day sets the tone for learning and

behaviour. On arrival, staff check pupils' emotional well-being and that they have the right uniform and equipment. Pupils hand in their mobile phones to ensure that they are not distracted and remain safe during the school day. Pupils then join staff for breakfast. Office staff monitor pupils' journeys to school and promptly contact home if pupils fail to arrive.

- Pupils respond positively to the high-quality learning environment provided for them. They are looked after well by all staff, including the caretaker and catering team, who know pupils well and go out of their way to help them. Older pupils told inspectors that the school's key strength was the social and emotional support and counselling provided for them when they first joined. This enabled them to settle quickly, feel safe and build relationships.
- The impact of this high-quality care and support is summed up in the comments of one parent, who said, 'I have seen a big change in my son since starting at Aspire Academy. The staff have been so supportive throughout I cannot thank them enough. For the first time in secondary school my son is emotionally guided and supported, and his self-belief has improved enormously.'
- A range of additional support helps to promote pupils' wider understanding of personal matters and how to keep safe. Visitors teach pupils about the dangers of knife crime and gangs, and the risks attached to alcohol and drugs. During the inspection, older girls met to discuss the risks of unhealthy relationships and the importance of consent. Meeting in this non-judgemental and trusting environment encouraged the girls to speak openly about the concerns they have.
- Primary-age pupils are well cared for. Breakfast alongside staff and their classmates promotes good social interaction and develops their communication skills. The welcoming environment ensures that pupils are fully prepared for the school day. Parents value this care, with one commenting, 'The staff have taken time to get to know my child and they understand him so well. They always have time to listen to him and show great understanding when he has had a problem at home that affects his behaviour. Aspire have really helped him feel more comfortable and now he actually wants to go to school.'

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils requires improvement.
- Inspectors found the school to be calm and orderly. Throughout the inspection, pupils' conduct was good. However, the school's own records show that this is not always the case. The proportion of pupils temporarily excluded from school due to poor behaviour is too high.
- Pupils told inspectors that bullying does happen at times. When it does, they feel they can approach any member of staff, who will help them to resolve it.
- Overall attendance has risen steadily since opening. The school meets its aims partly by getting some pupils back into school and ensuring that they remain in education and gain qualifications. Leaders are able to provide good case studies of pupils arriving with no or very low attendance at their previous school who now attend regularly. They have had little impact on raising the attendance of a significant minority of pupils who

rarely attend school. Overall attendance is low and the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent is far too high.

Outcomes for pupils

Requires improvement

- A significant proportion of pupils underachieve because they do not turn up for school often enough. This is compounded further by the high proportion of pupils given fixed-term exclusions for poor behaviour, often up to five days, which means that they miss significant chunks of their education. The challenge faced by school leaders to reintegrate these pupils into full-time learning and improve outcomes for them presents a formidable barrier to raising achievement in the school.
- Leaders have some information about previous results and current attainment, but do not record detailed information about pupils' overall progress from their entry to exit from the school. Much of the information held is inaccurate.
- In most classes, the majority of pupils have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Well over half of them are eligible for pupil premium funding. Leaders do monitor their progress to gauge the impact that additional funding has for these key groups.
- Primary-age pupils make good progress in writing because teachers focus on developing these skills. Books show that pupils in Years 5 and 6 practise these skills by completing an extended piece of writing each half term. Leaders can point to some pupils who enter the school as non-writers but within two terms are writing competently. Pupils make good progress in reading because they are encouraged to read in school each day. Daily phonics lessons help to develop pupils' basic literacy further.
- A large proportion of pupils who join the school in Years 10 and 11 have missed long periods of their schooling. Leaders have focused on ensuring that they are suitably prepared for examinations at the end of key stage 4. This year, most Year 11 pupils were entered for GCSE and other vocational examinations.

Early years provision

Requires improvement

- Pupils have access to a safe outdoor area, but this is under-developed. Staff have worked hard to improve this area by adding toys and equipment and developing a mini-garden which children are very proud of. However, children do not have sufficient space or equipment to promote their physical development fully.
- One child in Reception and three others in Years 1 and 2 are taught together in the same class. One-to-one support from adults ensures that children's personal needs are fully met. In this nurturing, caring environment, children settle quickly, learn routines and begin to enjoy school life again.
- Teachers achieve a good balance of staff-led learning and child-initiated play. Children love dressing-up as super-heroes and engaging in role play. Their classroom is a rich, stimulating environment. Children are proud of their work displayed on the walls.
- Children's books show that they are making at least expected progress. Teachers apply

the school's marking policy to monitor and record children's progress against the personal targets set for them.

- Effective leadership of the early years ensures that challenging behaviour is managed well and that children receive the support they need to re-engage fully in learning.

School details

Unique reference number	140970
Local authority	Essex
Inspection number	10031349

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

Type of school	All-through
School category	Academy alternative provision
Age range of pupils	4 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	103
Appropriate authority	The Academy trust
Chair	Vic Goddard
Principal	Deb Garfield
Telephone number	01279 444101
Website	www.aspire-academy.org
Email address	dgarfield@aspire-academy.org
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this school

- The school does not meet requirements on the publication of information on its website.
- The school does not comply with Department for Education guidance on what academies should publish about the content of the curriculum in each academic year for every subject, its exclusion arrangements, the barriers to educational achievement faced by pupil premium pupils, or key stage 2 test results.
- The school opened as a free school in 2014 to provide alternative provision for pupils permanently excluded from mainstream schools
- The large majority of pupils are White British. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds is below average.
- The proportion of pupils eligible for the pupil premium is above average.
- All pupils have special educational needs and/or disabilities. A higher than average

proportion of them have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan.

- The government's floor standards are not appropriate for this alternative provision.
- The school does not receive Year 7 catch-up funding.
- A small minority of pupils have work experience placements arranged for them at a range of local businesses, or study vocational courses at Harlow College.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed pupils at work in all three primary classes. They observed pupils at work in key stages 3 and 4 in English, mathematics, information technology, geography, PE and art. They carried out a learning walk of primary classrooms to observe pupils' learning and behaviour.
- They held meetings with senior leaders, three members of the academy trust, two representatives of the local authority, a careers adviser and two groups of pupils, and spoke informally with parents and carers.
- Inspectors observed the school's work. They looked at the safeguarding and child protection policy and procedures, self-evaluation and improvement planning, minutes of governing body meetings, records of pupils' behaviour and attendance, and other information provided by school leaders.
- Inspectors scrutinised pupils' work in books in Years 6, 10 and 11. They considered 13 free-text responses sent by parents, 13 responses to Ofsted's Parent View survey, and 13 responses by pupils and 30 responses by staff to Ofsted's questionnaires.

Inspection team

John Mitcheson, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Janet Tomkins

Ofsted Inspector

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