

Inspection of a good school: Links Academy

1 Hixberry Lane, St Albans, Hertfordshire AL4 0TZ

Inspection dates:

24 and 25 May 2023

Outcome

Links Academy continues to be a good school. There is enough evidence of improved performance to suggest that the school could be judged outstanding if we were to carry out a graded (section 5) inspection now. The school's next inspection will be a graded inspection.

What is it like to attend this school?

Joining Links Academy gives pupils a very positive new start and hope for the future. Pupils who attend Links Academy have, typically, had very challenging educational journeys before joining the school. Most pupils have been suspended on multiple occasions. Some have been permanently excluded from mainstream schools. Many pupils attended school rarely, if at all.

Pupils know that staff have high expectations of them. They know that everyone wants them to do well during their time at the school. Pupils rise to these expectations. They gradually begin to believe in their own abilities. Pupils who remain until the end of Year 11 leave school with the qualifications they need for their next steps. Younger pupils move back to their mainstream schools successfully.

Pupils enjoy school and the opportunities it gives them. They develop strong, trusting relationships with staff. These relationships help pupils to feel safe and comfortable at school. Pupils know that staff are highly alert and notice undesirable behaviour quickly. This means that there is very little opportunity for bullying to take place and none for it to flourish. Pupils learn to moderate their behaviour so that they, and other pupils, are able learn without being disturbed.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

The school's curriculum meets pupils' needs particularly well. It enables primary and key stage 3 pupils to keep pace with their peers in their mainstream schools. This helps pupils to successfully move back to their original school when the time is right.

All pupils in key stage 4 study English, mathematics and science as core subjects. They choose further study from a range of options, both academic and vocational. Pupils leave the school with GCSEs in the core subjects, and other valuable qualifications.

Reading is a central part of the English curriculum. Most pupils can read fluently when they join the school. Occasionally, pupils come to the school at earlier stages of learning to read. Leaders have ensured that appropriate measures are in place to help these pupils catch up quickly.

Leaders have identified the most important skills and knowledge for pupils to learn. Learning is planned in small steps and in an appropriate order. Staff constantly check pupils' understanding. They adapt their teaching methods and approaches to meet pupils' individual needs. Staff are resourceful and skilled at 'thinking on their feet'.

Relationships between staff and pupils are notably strong. Most pupils have lost trust in the education system by the time they join the school. Leaders and staff are highly effective in rebuilding that trust. They recognise the enormous challenges many pupils face but they do not allow those issues to become excuses for poor outcomes. As a result, pupils achieve exceptionally well from their starting points.

Leaders have high expectations of how pupils should behave. These expectations are very well understood. Staff interact with pupils in a calm, polite and respectful way. This helps pupils to learn how to behave in the school environment. Issues like swearing and violence are not tolerated. When pupils occasionally struggle to meet these expectations, leaders have strong arrangements in place to ensure their learning is not disrupted further.

Pupils are well prepared for their next steps when they leave the school. For example, when primary pupils leave the support base, they are supported in their classroom by Links Academy staff while they get used to being back in their mainstream school. The outreach team works with both primary- and secondary-age pupils. This work is highly valued by local schools.

The school has a strong careers, advice and guidance programme. Pupils move on to college courses and apprenticeships that are well matched to their abilities and interests. Past pupils have gone on to complete university courses and have successful careers. The school has changed the course of many young people's lives in recent years.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Many pupils are exposed to extreme safeguarding risks outside school. Leaders protect pupils well from these risks. The personal, social and health education curriculum is appropriately focused on helping pupils to learn how to keep themselves safe. For example, specialist tutors do preventative work with pupils on knife crime and sexual consent. Leaders ensure that staff are well trained to identify and report safeguarding concerns. Leaders are tenacious in following up on concerns that are reported to them.

They have put robust processes in place to ensure that only suitable people are employed to work with pupils.

Background

When we have judged a school to be good, we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains good. This is called an ungraded inspection, and it is carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. We do not give graded judgements on an ungraded inspection. However, if we find evidence that a school would now receive a higher or lower grade, then the next inspection will be a graded inspection, which is carried out under section 5 of the Act. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the ungraded inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour or the quality of education, we will deem the ungraded inspection a graded inspection immediately.

This is the first ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be good in October 2016.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

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.

School details

Unique reference number	139197
Local authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	10210965
Type of school	Pupil referral unit
School category	Academy alternative provision converter
Age range of pupils	11 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	45
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Maire Lynch
Headteacher	David Allen
Website	linksacademystalbans.co.uk
Dates of previous inspection	5 and 6 October 2016, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The school provides education for secondary-age pupils who have been permanently excluded from mainstream school or who are at risk of being permanently excluded. Most pupils are registered both at Links Academy and their mainstream school.
- All pupils have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) related to their social, emotional and mental health needs. A small proportion of pupils have an education, health and care plan.
- The school operates on two sites in St Albans. The main site is in Hixberry Lane and the second site is in Woollam Crescent.
- The school operates a pupil support base on the Woollam Crescent site. The base provides on-site education for up to six primary-age pupils with SEND related to their social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs. Places are decided by a panel of local headteachers. Pupils attend the support base, full time, for two terms before returning to their mainstream school.
- The school provides outreach support to mainstream schools throughout the local area. Outreach workers support pupils with SEMH, in both primary and secondary schools.

- The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 7 to 13 with information and engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.
- The school does not use alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors spoke with the headteacher, the head of school and other leaders, and a group of five trustees, including the chair of the board of trustees.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: English, mathematics, design technology and hair and beauty studies. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with subject leaders, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- Inspectors visited the school's second site, including the primary support base. The lead inspector met with staff responsible for both the outreach service and the primary support base and reviewed related documents.
- To check the effectiveness of safeguarding, inspectors met with the school's designated safeguarding leads, checked the school's single central record of pre-appointment checks, looked at safeguarding records and spoke with pupils and staff.
- There were too few responses to Ofsted Parent View for results to be available. Inspectors took account of the six free-text comments that were received and 26 responses to a recent survey of parents' views carried out by the school. Inspectors spoke with staff and pupils throughout the inspection to gather their views.

Inspection team

Wendy Varney, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Linda Bartlett

Ofsted Inspector

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