

Ark Helenswood Academy

The Ridge, St Leonards-on-Sea, East Sussex TN37 7PS

Inspection dates

24–25 April 2018

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- Senior leaders, governors and members of the Ark Schools multi-academy trust have worked with dedication to rapidly improve the school. Together they are committed to the school's continued improvement.
- Middle leaders are effective in raising standards within their departments. They have been instrumental in improving the quality of teaching.
- Achievement has risen to match that of pupils nationally. Pupils, including disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities, make increasingly good progress across a range of subjects.
- Leaders have raised their expectations of pupils' behaviour. Most pupils meet these expectations. However, sometimes disruption affects pupils' learning. Levels of exclusion, although reducing, are currently too high.
- Teaching is good overall. It is especially strong in English. Where there are remaining pockets of underperformance, leaders are supporting improvements rapidly.
- Pupils appreciate the regular assessments which help them to understand how well they are doing and where further improvement is needed.
- Pupils' welfare has the highest priority. Pupils are safe and well cared for. Safeguarding is managed effectively. The majority of parents and carers agree.
- Pupils' attendance is improving rapidly but is currently too low, particularly that of disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities.
- The curriculum prioritises developing strong literacy skills. Through it, leaders are raising pupils' aspirations for the future. Pupils are well prepared for life in modern Britain. Careers information, advice and guidance are effective. All pupils go on to further education, employment or training.
- Standards in the sixth form are rising rapidly as a result of effective leadership and improved teaching.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that leaders' actions to improve attendance result in all groups of pupils attending school regularly.
- Ensure that the behaviour management policy is used consistently by all staff so that standards of behaviour continue to improve and levels of exclusion reduce.
- Continue to improve the quality of teaching and learning so that it is consistently strong throughout the school and standards of achievement continue to rise for all groups of pupils.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- The headteacher's and executive headteacher's clear thinking and determination have driven the school's rapid improvement. Governors, leaders, staff and the trust all want the best for pupils at Ark Helenswood Academy. Pupils recognise the ongoing improvement across the school.
- Middle leaders feel valued and well guided. Several reported that they have been very well prepared for their roles, for example through attending training with other leaders across the trust. Middle leaders have clear expectations for their teams. They monitor and support the work of staff well, including through providing staff training. As a result, the quality of teaching within departments and across the school is more consistently strong.
- Leaders at all levels have a thorough and accurate understanding of the strengths and areas for further development in the school. They work closely with the trust when making improvements to all aspects of the school. Such links provide useful ways of verifying standards and sharing good practice. This is especially working to raise the quality of teaching through utilising a broader range of expertise.
- Leaders are determined to improve pupils' life chances through raising the standards of achievement and behaviour in school. Most staff are very positive about the changes made. However, leaders recognise that some staff have found the process of changing their practice challenging. They are working effectively to balance raised expectations for the quality of teaching and behaviour management with workload implications. Similarly, although a small minority of the parents who responded to the online parent survey voiced concerns about the changed focus on raising standards of achievement, others made very positive comments, including praising the 'supportive staff' and the 'excellent advice' they receive.
- The curriculum has been revised to ensure that pupils have access to a broad range of subjects throughout the school. At key stage 3, the strong focus on further developing pupils' literacy and numeracy skills is making a strongly positive difference. Leaders are passionate in advocating this approach. As one said, 'Literacy and numeracy are about life chances. We're future-proofing pupils to be able to thrive in modern Britain.'
- Pupils are well prepared for their futures. Regular personal, social and health education allows pupils to discuss a broad range of issues, such as the dangers of smoking, how to develop resilience and the importance of healthy and safe relationships. Pupils have a strong understanding of the importance of fundamental British values such as democracy. They benefit from a variety of enrichment opportunities, including trips, visits and several popular clubs. Trips to businesses and universities are raising pupils' aspirations for the future.
- Dedicated pastoral leaders provide high levels of care and support. Pupils whose circumstances make them vulnerable are supported extremely well and are increasingly successful, including those who attend alternative provision.
- Leaders' use of additional pupil premium and Year 7 catch-up funding is very well thought through. Leaders' focus is on providing good-quality teaching in the classroom,

along with additional teaching which is targeted carefully at the areas pupils need to improve. As a result, pupils make rapid progress and standards are rising. Similarly, there is strong provision to meet the needs of pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities.

Governance of the school

- Governance, provided by the local governing body and the trust, makes a very strong contribution to the overall leadership of the school. Together, they are determined that the school contributes strongly to the local community through improving the life chances of pupils. Governors know and understand the strengths and weaknesses of the school precisely. They have a broad range of useful skills, and work together with leaders very effectively. Governors have a systematic approach to challenging school leaders to improve the school. They check increasingly closely how well the school is performing and use the information they gather to further challenge and support school leaders. They assure themselves that safeguarding and other statutory requirements are met.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. There are suitable systems in place to keep pupils safe. Leaders undertake appropriate checks on the suitability of adults who work in the school. Adults receive robust and thorough training so that they know the signs that may indicate a pupil needs help and how to report any concerns. Leaders' work with outside agencies is effective.
- The strong safeguarding arrangements in place mean that most pupils feel well cared for and safe. Pupils know what to do and who to speak to if they have any concerns. They know how to stay safe online and in their community. They have a strong understanding of the dangers of 'sexting'.
- Leaders and governors make sure that the school site is safe. New fencing protects the site and adults supervise the school effectively at the start and end of the day to make sure pupils that are safe and orderly. Risk assessments to ensure that the on-site public sports centre is safe are thorough.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Ongoing improvements to the quality of teaching, learning and assessment have helped to improve the achievement of pupils. In particular, teachers use assessment extremely well to identify accurately what pupils can and cannot yet do. Pupils say that they value teachers' feedback as it helps them to understand clearly the progress they are making, and what to do to improve further.
- Where teaching is most effective, teachers have high expectations of what pupils can achieve. They use their strong subject knowledge to plan activities which enthuse pupils. Activities are adapted expertly to ensure that any gaps in knowledge are filled and pupils' understanding deepens. Teachers' thoughtful and challenging questions maximise pupils' learning. Teaching in English, and increasingly in humanities and science, is especially strong.

- Teachers' focus on developing pupils' literacy skills is helping to improve pupils' progress across a broad range of subjects, particularly at key stage 3. Pupils' work shows that they write with fluency. Teachers encourage a love of reading through regular opportunities for pupils to read in class and tutor times. Those who need extra support in reading receive it, particularly when they join school. This is helping to improve pupils' confidence and skill in reading so that they are better able to access the whole curriculum.
- Typically, relationships between staff and pupils, and between pupils themselves, are constructive, respectful and built on trust. Most pupils say that teachers help build their confidence and that they feel well supported by teachers. However, sometimes, where teaching is weaker or relationships are less positive, pupils' behaviour in lessons is not managed well enough. On such occasions, some pupils lack focus and behave poorly. While most pupils are able to ignore others' disruptions, in such situations, the pace of learning slows.
- Homework is used appropriately to build on pupils' understanding. Older pupils also appreciate additional revision sessions, which they use to strengthen their understanding of the topics they have studied. As a result, pupils say that they feel well prepared for assessments and examinations.
- There are pockets of weaker teaching, for example where expectations of pupils' progress or behaviour are not high enough or when activities are not planned well enough to be sufficiently interesting or challenging. Leaders' regular monitoring accurately identifies any areas where teaching needs to improve. Staff are supported well by colleagues and members of the multi-academy trust to refine their teaching skills.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Requires improvement

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Staff place a high priority on helping pupils to develop resilience so that they are able to voice their opinions and ideas with confidence. The vast majority of pupils take pride in their work. They understand the importance of becoming successful learners.
- There are opportunities for pupils to develop their leadership skills, for example through the school council or by becoming an anti-bullying ambassador. Pupils say they appreciate the opportunity to help make the school an even better place.
- Some parents expressed concerns about levels of bullying in school. In the past, leaders have had to help resolve issues of pupils falling out and using the internet to be unkind to others. Leaders have tackled this head-on, including through assemblies and tutor-time discussions. All pupils have signed their name on a school display as part of an anti-bullying pledge.
- As a result of leaders' effective work, bullying, including cyber bullying, is increasingly rare. As one pupil said, 'The school is helping us to realise that what goes on outside school can affect our learning inside, if we let it.'

- Pupils are safe and well looked after in school. Several pupils commented that teachers go out of their way to help them. All could name an adult that they would talk to if they had a concern and were confident that they would be listened to. Pupils are well informed about how to use social media safely and how to keep themselves safe online. Most parents agree that pupils are well cared for and happy in school.
- Extensive support is available for pupils who have social, emotional or mental health issues, including for those pupils who attend an alternative provision. Leaders' work with these pupils is successfully helping to improve pupils' self-esteem and increase their attendance.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils requires improvement.
- In the past, pupils' attendance was in the bottom 10% of schools nationally. Leaders have successfully highlighted the importance of regular attendance to both pupils and their parents, so that attendance is improving. The attendance of disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities is improving markedly in comparison with previous years. Those pupils who do not attend regularly are supported effectively by school leaders and specialist staff. However, leaders understand that their work is ongoing as attendance is still too low.
- Since joining the Ark multi-academy trust, the school has raised its expectations of what constitutes good behaviour. As a result, behaviour has improved, both in lessons and around the school. Records show that there is much less disruption to learning than in the past. Several pupils reflected that they are happy that leaders have raised expectations of how they should behave. Some told inspectors that they understand that leaders are less accepting of poor behaviour because they want pupils to be able to learn successfully.
- Around the school and in many lessons, behaviour is typically positive. The majority of pupils listen to teachers and follow their instructions promptly. Most respond well to the greater demands that teachers make of them. Rewards for positive behaviour are popular among pupils and are working effectively, particularly with younger pupils. However, where activities are not matched well enough to pupils' needs or where the behaviour policy is used inconsistently, disruption during lessons is sometimes evident.
- Leaders are determined to help pupils improve their behaviour. The introduction of on-site support through the 'Juniper Room', which helps pupils understand how to regulate their behaviour, is working well. There are also good and effective partnerships with local alternative provision for those pupils who need further intervention to improve their behaviour. As a result, behaviour is improving rapidly and levels of fixed-term exclusion and permanent exclusion have substantially lowered this year. However, levels of exclusion remain above average, indicating that behaviour is not yet consistently good.

Outcomes for pupils

Good

- Pupils arrive at the school with below-average starting points and with literacy skills which are typically lower than would be expected for their age. As a result of

improvements in the quality of teaching and more careful assessment practices, pupils in all year groups now make increasingly good progress, particularly in English.

- Since joining Ark Schools, standards by the end of Year 11 have risen. Last year, pupils made similar progress to others nationally by the end of key stage 4. This resulted in pupils attaining similar standards to pupils nationally across a broad range of subjects. Leaders' information about current Year 11 pupils indicates that they are making even better progress and are on track to reach higher standards than their predecessors.
- Disadvantaged pupils do not achieve as well as others nationally. However, their progress is now much more rapid, particularly in key stage 3. This better progress is diminishing the differences between their outcomes and those of other pupils nationally. Disadvantaged pupils' progress in English and mathematics is far stronger than in the past.
- Pupils achieve increasingly well from their different starting points. Pupils with average and high prior attainment achieve standards in line with others who have similar starting points nationally, particularly in English and modern foreign languages. This is because work is set at the right level of challenge for these pupils.
- Last year, pupils with low prior attainment did not make as much progress as others nationally who have similar starting points. However, more consistent and increased expectations of what these pupils can achieve, coupled with carefully structured additional support, are making a positive difference for current pupils.
- Pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities are supported well. Leaders have ensured that the curriculum and teaching match these pupils' needs closely so that they make strong progress.
- Outcomes in mathematics, science and humanities have historically been weaker than in other subjects. However, these subjects now show signs of significant improvement, particularly science and humanities. Where teaching is weaker or levels of challenge are not high enough, some pupils' progress slows. However, leaders' work to address this, including through utilising expertise from across the multi-academy trust, is starting to make a positive difference.
- Leaders have worked hard to raise pupils' aspirations for the future. Pupils benefit from a range of useful careers advice and guidance. They say that they feel well informed about the range of opportunities open to them at age 16 and age 18. As a result, pupils are very well prepared for their next stages. Impressively, last year, all pupils at the end of key stage 5 went on to further education, employment or training.

16 to 19 study programmes

Good

- The leadership of the sixth form is effective. Leaders have an accurate view of the strengths and relative weaknesses of the provision. In 2017, students' progress was below average for academic subjects and average for vocational subjects. However, standards are rising in most subjects because leaders have made swift and successful changes to combat previous lower-than-average standards. Consequently, the progress of current students is much improved and inspection evidence showed that these students are performing well.

- Students enter the sixth form with broadly average attainment. They choose from a wide range of academic and some vocational subjects. Leaders have sharpened the support they provide so that students study courses which are well matched to their starting points and aspirations. As a result, retention on courses is high.
- The school has an effective programme of careers advice and guidance for students in the sixth form. This includes advice on apprenticeships and university applications, as well as strong links with local businesses. Although, last year, students did not have the opportunity to take up work experience places, this has been remedied so that, this year, students have the opportunity to develop employability skills in a range of workplaces. Leaders are rightly proud that all students who left in 2016 and 2017 went on to sustained destinations, including an above-average proportion to Russell Group universities.
- Leaders have worked very effectively to improve academic achievement by raising teachers' and students' expectations and setting ambitious targets. Leaders monitor the quality of teaching well, supporting teachers to sharpen their practice so that teaching in the sixth form is now good. Teachers use their strong subject knowledge to enthuse students and provide them with activities which deepen their knowledge and understanding. Students report that they enjoy their lessons and are keen to do well.
- Leaders track students' progress more regularly than in the past, allowing them to intervene swiftly to support any student in danger of falling behind. Students value this help, with one saying, 'I chose to come to this sixth form because teachers know you as an individual and will always offer one-to-one support.'
- The few students in the sixth form who have not yet achieved English and mathematics at grade C or above at GCSE are supported well. The vast majority achieve these qualifications. Current preparations to provide a 'foundation year' for those students who may need additional help before undertaking further study are well considered.
- The attendance of students in the sixth form is improving as a result of raised expectations and tightened procedures relating to students' independent study time. Students recognise that these measures are helping them to achieve improved outcomes in their subjects.
- Students experience a small range of beneficial enrichment activities, such as tutoring younger pupils and visiting universities. They are taught well how to keep themselves safe, with programmes on driving awareness, sex and relationships and being aware of the dangers of radicalisation. They understand the need to be careful about what their online profile says about them as they prepare to apply for university and work placements.

School details

Unique reference number	139996
Local authority	East Sussex
Inspection number	10032891

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

Type of school	Secondary comprehensive
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	11 to 18
Gender of pupils	Girls
Gender of pupils in 16 to 19 study programmes	Girls
Number of pupils on the school roll	727
Of which, number on roll in 16 to 19 study programmes	55
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair	David Hinton
Principal	Tracy Dohel
Telephone number	01424 753 040
Website	http://arkhelenswood.org/
Email address	info@arkhelenswood.org
Date of previous inspection	8–9 July 2015

Information about this school

- Ark Helenswood Academy is a smaller-than-average girls' school. Years 7 to 10 attend lessons on the main school site. Year 11 pupils attend lessons on a separate site close by. The sixth form is shared with the neighbouring boys' school, Ark William Parker Academy. Pupils in the sixth form attend lessons on both Helenswood and William Parker sites.
- The school is run by Ark Schools, a multi-academy trust. The trust delegates aspects of governance to the local governing body. The current principal was appointed in September 2016. An executive principal was appointed to the school in September 2017 and provides support for the school for one day per week.

- The vast majority of pupils are of White British heritage.
- Approximately a third of pupils are eligible for support from the pupil premium funding, which is higher than the national average. Some pupils in Year 7 are eligible for catch-up funding.
- The proportion of pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities is broadly average.
- The school currently uses two alternative providers, Sussex Coast College and College Central, for a small number of pupils.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress.

Information about this inspection

- Meetings were held with senior leaders and governors, including those from the multi-academy trust, and with a range of staff. Inspectors considered the 67 responses to the confidential staff survey and spoke with several staff.
- Inspectors observed 44 lessons and conducted an additional five learning walks across a range of years, groups and subjects. Some lessons were jointly observed with leaders.
- A range of pupils' work was scrutinised in lessons and during a meeting with leaders.
- Inspectors evaluated key documents, including the school's strategic planning documents, minutes of meetings, attendance and behaviour records and records relating to pupils' safety and academic progress.
- Inspectors observed pupils' behaviour at breaktimes and lunchtimes, around the school and in lessons and tutor times.
- Inspectors spoke to pupils informally and formally, as well as taking into account the 40 responses to confidential questionnaires received from pupils and the school's own pupil surveys.
- Inspectors took account of the 46 responses from parents on Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire for parents. They also considered the school's own parental survey responses, including several letters sent in by parents.
- An inspector held telephone conversations with the two providers of alternative provision.
- When forming a judgement on the sixth form, inspectors considered the impact of provision for students on roll at Ark Helenswood Academy only (girls). Provision for boys was considered during the October 2017 inspection of Ark William Parker Academy.

Inspection team

Catherine Old, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Paul Murphy	Ofsted Inspector
Stuart Edwards	Ofsted Inspector
Colin Lankester	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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