

St Mary's School and 6th Form College

Wrestwood Road, Bexhill-on-Sea, East Sussex, TN40 2LU

Inspection dates

12–13 February 2019

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an inadequate school

- Safeguarding arrangements are not effective. Pupils are at risk of harm because leaders at all levels are failing to fulfil their statutory duties.
- Governors and senior school leaders do not work effectively together. They do not take collective responsibility for the school's decline. There is a culture of blame and mistrust in the school.
- Decisions about appointments to senior posts have been misguided. Staff appointed to crucial roles do not have the necessary authority, expertise and accountability to carry out their duties effectively.
- Staff and leaders do not always act promptly when there are concerns about pupils' welfare. Concerns are not recorded accurately or followed up in time.
- Leaders and governors do not make sure that serious incidents are investigated properly and shared appropriately with those who need to know.
- Leaders have not ensured that pupils' attendance and rates of exclusion are tracked and recorded accurately.
- As a consequence of weak leadership, teaching and pupils' progress have declined since the last inspection and are no longer good.
- Pupils' behaviour is not understood thoroughly or managed effectively. Physical restraint is not always used safely. Exclusions are too high and do not help to improve pupils' behaviour or outcomes.
- The 16 to 19 study programmes are inadequate because weaknesses in safeguarding and leadership put older students' welfare at risk.
- Parents and carers have lost confidence in the school and its leadership, including governance. Some do not trust leaders to listen to their concerns and do not believe that their children are safe.

The school has the following strengths

- Some teaching enables pupils to make good progress. Staff are undoubtedly committed to pupils and continue to work as hard as they can despite unsettling change and insecure leadership.
- Pupils try hard, want to learn and are polite. They form strong bonds with each other and staff, while gaining independence.
- Vocational programmes in the sixth form prepare students well for adulthood.

Full report

In accordance with section 44(2) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires significant improvement, because it is performing significantly less well than it might in all the circumstances reasonably be expected to perform.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Urgently improve arrangements for safeguarding and child protection in the school, by:
 - ensuring that designated safeguarding leaders (DSLs) have the necessary skills, insight and seniority to carry out their duties effectively
 - insisting that all staff report concerns about pupils promptly and in sufficient detail
 - ensuring that DSLs systematically and frequently check patterns of concerns and communicate effectively with other agencies that protect children
 - implementing strict safer recruitment processes
 - reviewing the school's behaviour management systems, including the exclusion policy and use of restrictive physical intervention
 - ensuring that serious incidents are investigated thoroughly, findings shared and lessons learned
 - recording, tracking and analysing pupils' attendance and patterns of absence accurately.
- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and governance, by:
 - establishing open, positive and professional relationships between leaders and governors
 - making sure that all leaders fully understand their responsibilities, are accountable, share information and work together responsibly for the good of pupils
 - implementing and reviewing the curriculum on offer to different groups of pupils
 - strengthening the school's work on promoting pupils' spiritual, social, moral and cultural development.
- Improve the quality of teaching, assessment and pupils' progress, by:
 - ensuring that the most able pupils are challenged
 - developing the skills of teaching assistants and therapists, so that they have more impact on pupils' learning and progress
 - establishing a useful assessment system, based on what pupils are actually learning in the curriculum.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Inadequate

- Poor leadership at all levels has led to the school's decline since the last inspection. Leaders and governors know that things are not right in the school, but do not acknowledge that they are all accountable for failures in performance. Instead, leaders point to the actions of individuals as the reason for deteriorating standards and increased risks to pupils. Changes to leaders' responsibilities have been made without ensuring that they are properly equipped to carry out their duties. In short, a culture of blame has developed, and leadership is in disarray.
- Some parents have lost faith in the school's leadership and management. A few praise the care and attention that their children receive from class teachers and support staff. However, parents who contacted inspectors are worried about the lack of communication from governors and leaders. Many parents felt that they were not listened to. Over half of the parents who contributed to Parent View do not believe that the school is well led and managed. Inspectors were concerned about some of the worries voiced by parents. In some cases, parents were desperately relieved that the school was being inspected and their voices heard.
- Poor practice in the school has been overlooked by leaders and governors. For example, pupils' attendance is not recorded accurately or reviewed carefully. During the inspection, leaders found it difficult to provide an accurate figure for pupils' presence or absence in the school over time.
- Leaders have not made sure that pupils' behaviour is managed safely. Staff and leaders focus on reacting to incidents and managing situations, rather than planning to meet pupils' needs. Lessons are not learned from serious behaviour or safeguarding incidents.
- Leaders are too stretched. Too many aspects of the school's performance are 'works in progress'. For example, leaders have been developing changes to the curriculum. Staff's views have been sought on these changes, but not acted upon, because of other demands. Leaders know that the school's assessment system does not reflect what pupils are actually learning but have not been able to improve it.
- Pupils study core subjects such as English and mathematics, together with personal, social and health education (PSHE) and physical education. Within themed topics, pupils experience arts subjects, science, humanities and technology. The main focus is on developing pupils' communication and emotional well-being. Recent changes have introduced a therapy-based approach to teaching the curriculum. However, inspectors and leaders noted weaknesses in the input of the therapists as teachers. Not enough account has been taken of the most able pupils when planning the curriculum.
- The school's provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development is adequate, but not a strength. Not all staff really understand the central importance that the provision has in pupils' development and growth, particularly cultural and spiritual aspects. The social side of pupils' development is promoted most successfully, through the school's relatively strong emphasis on signing and communication. Pupils are encouraged to form bonds with each other and develop

social skills. They have good opportunities to learn about different cultures, through food tasting and annual festivals.

- Leaders have not made sure that the pupil premium funding is accounted for in sufficient detail. They are aware that their analysis of spending does not precisely demonstrate that the funding is making the necessary impact on disadvantaged pupils.
- Leaders have made some appropriate decisions about how the sports premium funding should be spent. For example, the purchase of a trampoline was designed to provide rebound therapy. However, the impact of this and other spending of the fund has not been evaluated. The focus has been on the purchase of equipment and not the development of staff's expertise.
- External support has not succeeded in preventing the school's decline. The school improvement partner has asked incisive questions about safeguarding, the curriculum and leadership. Governors acknowledge that these challenges are valid but have not acted upon them.
- Local authority officers do not have a productive relationship with the school. They are frustrated that information about the school is not clear or detailed enough and that offers of support have not been taken up. Leaders and governors have worked too much in isolation.

Governance of the school

- Governance is weak. Governors have not ensured that there is a good working relationship between themselves and school leaders. Communication between leaders and governors is poor. Governors do not trust school leaders to run the school effectively. In turn, school leaders regard governors' efforts to bring about improvement as interference and 'micro-management'. As a result, attempts to improve the school are viewed with suspicion and end in stalemate.
- Governors' oversight of the school's work is weak. Reports of their visits note superficial concerns, while not highlighting fundamental problems and shortfalls in the school's provision. Governors have not made sure that there is proper oversight of safeguarding, pupils' behaviour and allegations against staff.
- The use of pupil premium funding is not evaluated precisely enough. Governors have not held school leaders to account for the impact of this funding.
- Governors have sought to strengthen their impact by appointing consultants to provide advice and guidance. However, this strategy has been mismanaged by governors and misunderstood by leaders. The role of consultants is not clear and has led to more insecurity and less accountability from school leaders themselves.
- Parents are not confident about the governance of the school. Governors' recent meetings to reassure them have not been successful. Some parents do not trust that governors' words will turn into actions.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are not effective.

- Inspectors found extremely worrying concerns about pupils' safety and welfare that had not been recorded accurately, reported in a timely fashion or passed on to the appropriate agencies.
- Senior leaders responsible for safeguarding, including the DSLs, are not suitably experienced or skilled to carry out their statutory duties. There have been several changes of DSL role in the school in recent times, which has not helped to keep pupils safe.
- Some leaders, including the DSLs, do not have sufficient depth of understanding of vulnerable pupils and their mental health. Leaders talk of 'managing behaviour' without a clear understanding of the reasons for pupils' difficulties. Leaders do not have a strong understanding of the link between pupils' behaviour and safeguarding.
- The school's actions following serious safeguarding incidents are disorganised. Leaders themselves admit to 'fire-fighting' and being 'reactive'. Information about safeguarding and child protection is not shared with those who need to know. Inspectors were concerned that some leaders were either not aware of, or did not have accurate information about, serious incidents where pupils were at risk.
- Some staff do not use physical restraint safely. Inspectors found distressing examples of restraints being used that were not part of the school's agreed approach, potentially leading to physical and emotional harm. Leaders could not say with confidence that these incidents had been investigated or followed up properly.
- The school's records of checks made on staff are disorganised. Inspectors had to make further checks to ensure that all staff had the required clearance to work with children. Some staff started working in the school before their checks came through. These staff had to have a risk assessment and be escorted, which created additional workload for the already depleted staff.
- The local authority has expressed concerns about safeguarding arrangements in the school and has offered support. However, communication between the school and the local authority has not always been open and accurate. Local authority officers have been understandably frustrated by this.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- Teaching, learning and assessment have declined since the last inspection because of the impact of inadequate leadership and ineffective safeguarding. Nevertheless, because of teachers' commitment to pupils and their strong relationships, the provision for pupils in the classroom is not inadequate. Some teaching is good, although this is not consistent enough for all pupils.
- Teaching does not ensure that the most able pupils make the progress of which they are capable. Some tasks and sequences of learning are unnecessarily repetitive and do not move pupils on to more demanding material when they are easily capable.
- Leaders have introduced an integrated, therapeutic approach to teaching and learning. While this may be appropriate for some pupils, it is not always successful. A lot of lesson time is spent on exploring pupils' emotional states and readiness to learn,

irrespective of their level of need. In some cases, this is at the expense of more interesting and demanding learning, and pupils become bored and disaffected.

- The school's approach to communication is successful with many pupils and fosters a supportive atmosphere in and out of classrooms. However, for those pupils who can communicate successfully in a range of ways, the school's preferred approach is limiting progress.
- Teaching assistants and other adults in classrooms are not always deployed well to support learning. Their effectiveness is too variable. Teaching assistants do not always use their initiative with pupils. Some pupils have to wait too long to contribute.
- The school's approach to assessment requires improvement. The current system no longer assesses exactly what pupils are learning. Pupils' steps of progress are recorded, often in great detail. However, not enough use is made of this information to help pupils to progress.
- Teachers know their pupils well and care for them deeply. Pupils benefit from good relationships with their teachers and form strong bonds with them. Teachers are responsive to pupils' emotional needs and adapt their teaching when pupils become anxious or agitated.
- Teachers focus appropriately on improving pupils' literacy and numeracy. Visual reminders and sensory aids help pupils to remember spelling and sentence construction. Some pupils develop their handwriting well and enjoy producing more extended pieces and stories. Pupils have opportunities to apply their mathematical knowledge practically, practising reasoning skills and problem-solving.
- Pupils' independence and self-reliance are promoted well by staff. Teachers make sure that there are opportunities for pupils to help each other, fetch their own resources and organise themselves.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Inadequate

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is inadequate. This is because serious shortfalls in the school's arrangements for child protection put pupils at risk of harm.
- However, on a day-to-day basis, pupils' personal development, communication and independence are at the centre of staff's support. Most pupils make progress with their communication and develop more resilience.
- Pupils are personable, welcoming and interested in each other, staff and visitors. Although some do not find it easy to socialise and make sustained friendships, they are supported to work alongside their peers in pairs or small groups.
- Staff's well-established routines during lessons help to support pupils' security and happiness. Pupils know what to expect and are helped to cope with change.
- Pupils mostly enjoy lessons and want to learn. However, a few pupils become bored when the work is not interesting or hard enough.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils requires improvement.
- Most pupils conduct themselves well around the school. Pupils in the school have anxieties that affect their ability to manage their emotions and control their own behaviour. Pupils do not set out to disrupt the order of the school. However, their particular needs and mental health difficulties can lead to challenging behaviour.
- During the inspection, inspectors saw evidence of pupils being polite, considerate and calmly going about their business. They follow adults' guidance and instructions with good grace. Many pupils take care of each other. Others are interested in their peers and can demonstrate empathy.
- Most pupils are not capable of deliberately bullying each other. However, because pupils' behaviour is not always managed effectively, unkind words and conflicts can escalate into what pupils and parents perceive as bullying. Not enough is done to help pupils to empathise and manage aggressive feelings.
- Pupils' overall attendance is below that of national figures for secondary schools. Persistent absence is too high. Leaders do not check pupils' attendance carefully enough and are therefore not able to identify the impact of their work to improve pupils' attendance.
- Exclusion rates are too high. Some pupils have been issued with repeated exclusions. Other pupils have had lengthy fixed-term exclusions when staff have not been able to manage their behaviour, sometimes with a view to permanent exclusion. School leaders had to provide further evidence about exclusions after inspectors left the site because it was not to hand when required. These shortfalls point to a school that is not well equipped to manage pupils' social, emotional and mental health needs.

Outcomes for pupils

Requires improvement

- The most able pupils are not all making the progress of which they are capable because teachers' expectations of what they can achieve are too low.
- The school's assessment system is not enabling teachers to set meaningful targets for all pupils. As a result, some pupils underachieve.
- Ineffective leadership and weak management of some pupils' behaviour have led to a decline in pupils' progress. Uncertainty of leadership and the weaknesses in safeguarding and behaviour management are affecting pupils' outcomes
- Pupils make stronger progress in their personal targets than in their academic goals. Some individual support and therapy programmes help pupils to develop communication and manage their emotions and anxieties. Pupils acquire independence and confidence because of the secure routines and habits established in lessons.
- Pupils make good progress with their communication because of consistent approaches to signing and use of communication aids throughout the school. The school's focus on developing literacy and word-recognition is successful for many pupils. Their personal writing and understanding of story-telling develop well over time.

- Leaders acknowledge that their work on appropriate employment and education beyond school is at an early stage of development. Some older pupils are helped to be on the right track for the next stage of their education. However, leaders rightly want to make their guidance more systematic, particularly for those pupils who are most able.

16 to 19 study programmes

Inadequate

- The 16 to 19 study programmes are inadequate because the school's ineffective safeguarding arrangements have the potential to put older students at risk. Inadequate leadership across the school has had a negative impact on the sixth-form provision and slowed its development since the last inspection.
- However, some aspects of the 16 to 19 study programmes are stronger than seen elsewhere in the school. Careful planning of individual programmes is leading to faster progress and better preparation for the next stage of students' education. Students are supported well with developing their literacy and numeracy. Students benefit from some accredited programmes that lead to useful qualifications. Where possible, all students succeed in going on to employment, further education and supported living.
- The sixth-form provision is resourced well with real-life activities, environments and vocational activities for students to pursue. For example, students benefit from having an authentic 'job' as receptionist in the vocational centre. At the same time, students take responsibility for setting and working through their own communication targets.
- Other students and staff run the on-site shop, café, print shop, bank and car wash facilities. These practical opportunities help to prepare students well for the next stage in their education and life. One student told an inspector that his work in the sixth form made him feel 'grown up'.
- A rich programme of work experience helps to challenge students and extend their learning. Leaders and staff work closely with suitable local businesses to help find appropriate work placements.
- Students' independence is rightly a priority and an emerging strength in the sixth form. Nevertheless, leaders are wisely considering how they can further improve the curriculum to be even more age-appropriate and challenging for older students.
- Students in the sixth form begin to develop a strong sense of personal safety and risk. They are able to talk about keeping safe online and when out in the community.
- School leaders are aware that work on careers advice and guidance is still at an early stage. This was an area for improvement at the last inspection but remains a priority.

School details

Unique reference number	133653
Local authority	East Sussex
Inspection number	10089296

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	Special
School category	Non-maintained special
Age range of pupils	7 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in 16 to 19 study programmes	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	62
Of which, number on roll in 16 to 19 study programmes	28
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mary Briggs
Headteacher	Rory Fox
Telephone number	01424 730 740
Website	www.stmarysbexhill.org
Email address	smunn@stmarysbexhill.org
Date of previous inspection	16–17 January 2018

Information about this school

- St Mary's School and Sixth Form College is a non-maintained special school, catering for 62 pupils aged seven to 19, with additional provision for learners up to the age of 25. The school also has residential provision. The school and residential provision is part of the Talking Trust.
- Nearly all pupils have education, health and care plans. Pupils are admitted to the school with a range of speech, communication and language needs. Some have additional complex needs, including autism spectrum conditions and social, emotional and mental health needs.

- A number of different local authorities place pupils at the school.
- The school does not have any religious affiliation.
- Since the last inspection, there have been many changes to leadership in the school. Some key leaders have left the school. Some have had long periods of absence, with not all returning to their posts. Since the last inspection, there have been four changes of headship to the school, some of which were interim appointments. The current headteacher was appointed in January 2019. He was absent during the inspection.

Information about this inspection

- The inspection was carried out following a number of complaints made to Ofsted which raised serious concerns. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector decided that an inspection should take place to follow up the whole-school issues that were raised. Inspectors sought to establish whether leadership was effective and whether pupils were safe.
- The inspection was carried out with no notice. A social care monitoring inspection of the residential provision was carried out at the same time.
- The headteacher was absent from the school during the inspection.
- Inspectors met with senior leaders, governors and staff. They reviewed information about safeguarding and child protection, including checks made on staff and records of concerns about pupils. A meeting was held to discuss pupils' behaviour.
- An inspector met with a group of staff.
- Inspectors observed teaching and learning in all phases and classes across the school. They reviewed information about pupils' progress and scrutinised pupils' work in books and folders. Inspectors also reviewed pupils' education, health and care plans.
- Records of pupils' attendance, exclusions and those taken off roll were checked.
- Information about the curriculum, pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and the 16 to 19 study programmes was considered.
- Inspectors met with two members of the governing body, including the chair of governors. They also considered minutes of governors' meetings and other documentation provided by the chair.
- Inspectors observed pupils at lunch and breaktimes. They spoke to pupils in and out of lessons.
- Six parents contacted inspectors and Ofsted directly by telephone and email during the inspection to share their views of the school. Inspectors considered the views of 25 parents who contributed to Parent View.
- An inspector spoke to a representative of the local authority and took account of reports of visits.

Inspection team

Janet Pearce, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Maxine McDonald-Taylor

Her Majesty's Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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