

Unity Academy Blackpool

Warbreck Hill Road, Blackpool, Lancashire FY2 0TS

Inspection dates

3–4 October 2017

Overall effectiveness	Good
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Good
Early years provision	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- Good, strong leadership has improved the school well since its previous inspection in June 2015. As a result, all key areas of the school's work are now good.
- The transformation that some parents have seen in their children has gone hand in hand with the successful way in which leaders have brought improvements in teaching and pupils' personal development.
- As at the time of the previous inspection, children in the early years got off to a good start. Leaders have sustained the good work that goes on with the youngest children.
- Children and pupils benefit from good teaching. Standards are rising across the school, including by the end of the early years, Year 6 and Year 11.
- Expectations that teachers have of their pupils are now much higher, although the most able pupils could still be given more challenge to achieve their very best.
- Pupils behave well across the school, particularly outside of lessons. They know how to keep safe. They show respect and believe in their school motto, 'In Unity we succeed'.
- Governors (known as the Academy Council) and the Fylde Coast Academies Trust (the trust) know the school well. They both offer good help, support and challenge. They can be proud of their part in the school's success.
- There is no complacency. Leaders know, for example, that pupils, including those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, could read more widely, have even more opportunities to write at length and have higher standards of handwriting.
- Leaders want to celebrate the ever-increasing success of the school through developing stronger links with parents, particularly when their children start life at the school.
- The success leaders have brought about demonstrates strong capacity for further improvement.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Strengthen further the good quality teaching so that pupils make even better progress in their learning by:
 - providing them with more opportunities to practise their reading skills across the curriculum
 - providing further opportunities for pupils to work independently, including writing at length in the primary phase
 - revising the approach to teaching handwriting in the primary phase so that what is produced is of high quality and is put into practice across the curriculum
 - ensuring that the most able pupils are consistently challenged in their learning.
- Enhance the good, strong leadership of the school by strengthening relationships with parents further.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- 'In Unity we succeed.' This is not just a motto; it is believed and runs through the heart of the school. Pupils, staff and governors who spoke to inspectors and who responded to the online survey are proud to be a part of this school. Leaders clearly have the confidence of staff. Consequently, there is a strong, ambitious culture that underpins all aspects of the school's work. This, coupled with the improvements made, indicates leaders have strong capacity to sustain and enhance further the school's strengths.
- While only a small number of parents responded to the online survey, nearly all who did so or contacted inspectors praised leaders and staff for the commitment shown to their children. This too is a strong indicator of a school which is 'on the up'.
- Leaders across the school have a good grasp of the strengths and areas to develop. As a result, self-evaluation is accurate. Furthermore, leaders know what to do to improve provision further. Plans are focused on the right priorities and make clear intended outcomes for pupils. In science, for example, leaders' determination and support from the trust in improving teaching is leading to higher aspirations for what pupils should achieve in their GCSE examinations.
- The principal has moved seamlessly from his previous role of vice-principal at the school to its most senior leader. Leaders hold each other and staff to account well through an atmosphere of support and challenge. That said, the principal and his leaders have not been afraid to make tough decisions in the best interests of the pupils.
- Arrangements for managing and enhancing the performance of staff are rigorous and focused on school priorities. Staff spoken to report that training is of good quality. All staff who responded to the online survey reported that leaders' use of professional development encourages, challenges and supports improvement. The impact of this work is evident in the improvements made since the previous inspection in teaching quality and pupils' learning and personal development.
- The school's curriculum is broad and balanced and equips pupils well for their next stages of education, training or employment. Senior leaders' decision, for example, to create leadership teams spanning two key stages has helped maintain the good transition where work completed in one year is not repeated later. Results of the success of this thinking include the significant improvement over time in the proportion of 16-year-olds going on to meaningful activity when they leave the school.
- The positive impact of the curriculum is also seen in the increased interest that pupils have in their learning through taught and extra-curricular opportunities. Not only is the curriculum, coupled with improvements in teaching, leading to pupils making better progress, it is equipping them well for life in modern Britain and the wider world. Pupils in Year 4, for example, consider carefully the fairness of children their own age having to go to work and lacking basic amenities while those in different parts of the world enjoy what may be considered luxuries. Such mature thinking, evident from the youngest children in Reception to the young adults in Year 11, highlights well the school's success in promoting pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development well.

- Additional funding allocated to the school by the government is used effectively. As this school is an all-through school, the funding it receives includes the pupil premium, PE and sport premium for primary schools, Year 7 literacy and numeracy catch-up premium, and special educational needs funding. Gaps in learning and attendance between disadvantaged pupils and their non-disadvantaged peers, for example, are closing. Pupils with special needs, overall, are also making good progress.
- Leaders are not resting on their laurels. They know that involving parents has been a significant challenge. The small number responding to the inspection survey is testament to this challenge. Efforts have been made. Nevertheless, more is needed to be done to involve parents in the life of the school.
- Leaders are also aware that while resources used by teachers in their lessons often stimulate pupils' learning, they need to check how effectively they all – duplicated sheets for example – meet the needs of pupils.

Governance of the school

- The Academy Council and the trust help, support and challenge leaders well. They share the principal's and leadership's team passion and moral purpose to improve the school further so that not only does Unity benefit but the whole community in and around Blackpool grows in strength too.
- The ability of the Academy Council to carry out its responsibilities most effectively is the result of two key facets. First, the trust has ensured that governors in this school have the skills and abilities needed to assist leaders in their work. Most appropriate, given this school's provision for pupils from age four to 16, is the expertise that governors bring in primary, secondary and post-16 education. Second, members' willingness and ability to ask searching questions and demand answers helps the principal and his team to lead the school successfully. Minutes of meetings, for example, show how governors follow up discussions from one meeting to another in order to gain more clarity and understanding.
- The school, including governance, also benefit from the trust's strong oversight. The appointment of the former principal as executive principal of this school and two other schools within the trust has ensured that his knowledge, experience and insight have not been lost. Like the principal, his part in bringing about the school's improvement cannot be underestimated.
- The trust's ability to share and target resource has enabled this school to receive help and support where it is needed most, for example in the teaching of science and the strategic leadership of special educational needs. The trust has also utilised skills from Unity through, for example, a primary phase leader supporting another primary school within the trust.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- A strong culture of safeguarding permeates the school. This is reflected in the clear, unanimous view of all staff who responded to the inspection questionnaire and most of the small number of parents who responded: that pupils are safe. Pupils reiterate these

positive views. Younger and older, they spoke knowledgeably about how to keep themselves safe and whom to go to if they had concerns. While they reported that some bullying goes on occasionally, it is dealt with quickly and effectively. Pupils' attitudes are positive and respectful.

- A much higher than average proportion of pupils enter or leave the school at times other than the start of a new school year. When pupils leave, they are tracked and not removed from roll until destinations are known and verified. When they arrive, they are welcomed warmly.
- Staff and governors have undertaken appropriate training to ensure that this culture of safeguarding remains strong. Checks made and records kept are all appropriate.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Improved teaching has been pivotal in improving progress. Pupils report that their teachers are enthusiastic about the subjects they teach. Inspectors agree. Furthermore, teachers are equally enthusiastic about the success of their pupils. The result is that, be it pupils in Year 11 expanding their understanding of vectors in mathematics, Year 9 pupils composing music based on 'the blues', younger peers in Year 5 extending their historical knowledge of life in a 19th-century gaol, or pupils in Year 1 writing about characters from the book, 'The black hat', pupils enjoy their learning. Furthermore, pupils are actively involved in making decisions independently or in groups. Progress is good across a range of subjects. The most able pupils across the school, while they make good progress, could be challenged further to extend their learning.
- Teachers across the school make learning interesting for pupils. Overall, resources used are stimulating. Primary pupils, for example, could see the benefits of attending an all-through school because they use Bunsen burners in science. Sometimes, on occasions, pupils, including those with special educational needs, complete their tasks using duplicated sheets that do not extend their learning. These do not prevent pupils from making progress. Nonetheless, leaders agree that a more considered use would help pupils to work more independently and have more opportunities for extended writing.
- Relationships between teachers and pupils in lessons are good and based on mutual respect. In the main, pupils listen well to instructions and the contributions of their peers. Where learning is, on occasion, interrupted because of a lack of attention of an individual, teachers and support staff deal with this firmly and sensitively so that good working relationships are restored.
- Teachers and support staff use questions effectively to test out what pupils know, can do and understand. This reflects teachers' application of the school's feedback policy which focuses on enabling pupils to think deeper about what they have been learning. One pupil, for example, extended her understanding of why females played an important part of life during the First World War by becoming police officers. Sometimes, though, questioning during lessons accepts one-word responses when fuller answers would help teachers move pupils on more quickly in their learning.
- The teaching of reading is effective and many pupils are confident readers. However, leaders know that pupils could routinely read more widely and often across the curriculum.

- The teaching of writing is also effective. Teachers provide exciting topics to capture pupils' enthusiasm for writing. Pupils' spelling skills are improving. The teaching of handwriting, however, in the primary phase is a weaker aspect.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good. The views of pupils are important to leaders and acted on.
- Pupils are confident and keen to do well for themselves and the school community. As they reported to inspectors, they are 'encouraged to be themselves' and to act in the best interests of everyone. They do this, for example, through the school's house system by earning merits and awards for good behaviour, work and attendance. Pupils know that teachers' work to help them become more and more resilient is helping them in their learning. They are, for example, punctual and prepared for lessons.
- Pupils are taught to recognise dangers that would affect negatively their physical, social and emotional well-being and their ability to learn as well as they are able, misuse of the internet for example. They know what constitutes bullying and that they must report it if it happens to them or they see it happening to others. Pupils who spoke to inspectors were, for example, indignant that anyone should be mistreated because of the colour of their skin or their sexuality. Nearly all the parents who responded to the inspection survey and/or spoke to inspectors were of the view that the academy deals effectively with bullying. Inspectors agree.
- Pupils receive good guidance about the choices they need to make to secure a successful future. This has resulted in the right options being selected in key stage 4 and increasingly greater proportions of pupils going on to education, employment or training.
- The few pupils from the school who use the alternative provision do so successfully. Their personal development and welfare is catered for well. This is because liaison between school leaders and leaders of the provision is strong, checking regularly that pupil attendance is regular. All pupils from Year 11 in the provision in 2016/17 went on to education, employment or training with qualifications appropriate to their aspirations.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good in this bright, welcoming school.
- Pupils' attitudes to learning and conduct in and around school are good. They respect the school environment and give help and support to one another. Older primary pupils, for example, were observed helping younger ones to find places at lunchtime, quite unprompted by adults. Older pupils act as corridor monitors with sensitive, firm authority. Pupils move around the school in an orderly manner. Consequently, there is no time wasted during transitions between lessons and from break to lessons.
- Where, on occasion, attitudes fall below the standards expected, staff deal with this effectively so that pupils realise that such attitudes make a difference to themselves and to others.

- Overall attendance is improving, particularly at the onset of this academic year. Leaders' strategies to improve attendance through its work with families and pupils is proving to be successful. Disadvantaged pupils, for example, are attending more regularly. As a result, the difference between their attendance and that of their peers has narrowed. Furthermore, persistent absenteeism is improving. Pupils see the benefits of attending Unity Academy.

Outcomes for pupils

Good

- Pupils make good progress across the school in a range of subjects. Starting points are typically below average and sometimes low.
- A high proportion of pupils leave or join the school after the early years. Inspectors focused on the progress of those who had been at the school throughout their school when looking at key stage 1. Work in books shows that these pupils, overall, make good progress in reading, writing and mathematics. The same is also true of those pupils who joined the school in Year 1 or later.
- While test and examination results for 2017 are not yet validated, early indications are promising, with around 70% of Year 2 of pupils attaining the expected standard in reading, 67% in writing and 72% in mathematics. In Year 6 in 2017, early indications are that pupils achieved positive progress scores to reach much-improved standards in reading, writing and mathematics compared to the previous year. However, because of the number of re-marks requested by school leaders, it is not possible to comment yet on GCSE outcomes.
- The most recent validated results (2016) show that pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, made better progress at the end of Year 6 and at GCSE than they had done in previous years. Provisional standards attained by Year 6 disadvantaged pupils in 2017, like those of their non-disadvantaged peers, are much improved.
- Current disadvantaged pupils are making good progress. This demonstrates leaders' effective use of pupil premium funding. While additional funding, such as pupil premium and Year 7 literacy and numeracy catch-up, has been used effectively to target individuals and groups, the key reason why the progress of all pupils is strengthening is improved teaching. Overall, the most able pupils make good progress. However, as leaders acknowledge, these pupils, including the most able disadvantaged, are not routinely challenged to achieve the best grades possible.
- Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities currently at the school generally make good progress. Occasionally, progress slows when these pupils have resources too similar to those of other pupils and their needs are not met fully, particularly in key stage 1.
- Across the curriculum, in history, geography, music, physical education (PE) and dance for example, current pupils show good subject knowledge and development of a wide range of skills. In Year 7 PE, previous specialist teaching in the primary phase brought about through additional government funding is built on well so that, for example, basketball skills are developed and enhanced. Such good progress is typical across the school in different subjects and bodes well for GCSE and vocational outcomes for current Year 11 pupils.

- Two areas of the school's work are relatively weaker. First, while reading for enjoyment and skill development is promoted, leaders recognise that they need to do more to get pupils to routinely read more widely in other subjects. This is not to say that reading is not taught well; on the contrary, ever-increasing proportions of pupils are meeting the required standard in their phonics test in Year 1. Second, specific sessions to teach handwriting skills in the primary phase are not leading to consistently good handwriting across the curriculum. While handwriting is legible, good starts are not always maintained.

Early years provision

Good

- The good-quality provision and outcomes reported at the previous inspection have been sustained.
- Teaching is good and teachers and support staff make learning interesting and fun. Resources are used imaginatively. For example, children had real bones to handle when learning about the book 'Funny bones'. Such practical learning, evident in all areas of the curriculum both inside and outside the classroom, prepares children well for life in Year 1 and beyond.
- It is little wonder that, with the good teaching adults provide, progress is good. The proportion of children attaining a good level of development has risen markedly, from well below average in 2015 to broadly average in 2016 and 2017.
- Leadership is effective and leaders of the early years liaise well with other providers and seek to involve parents throughout the year in their child's learning. Any additional funds are used well. The needs of children are identified correctly and appropriate plans put into place for those children who find things difficult, in their speech and language for example.
- Leaders know the early years' strengths and areas to develop well. They know, for example, that children who are capable of independent learning are not always challenged to do so. Leaders' keen understanding of the needs of this age range ensures that the capacity to improve the provision further is strong.
- Children are safe in this early years setting. The welfare requirements are met. Children understand the routines and follow them. Their behaviour is good and they develop social skills well. All in all, they get off to a good start at the school.

School details

Unique reference number	139675
Local authority	Blackpool
Inspection number	10025883

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

Type of school	All-through
School category	Academy sponsor-led
Age range of pupils	4 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	940
Appropriate authority	Academy trust
Chair	Mark Gutteridge
Principal	Stephen Cooke
Telephone number	01253 478129
Website	www.unity.blackpool.org.uk
Email address	admin@unity.blackpool.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	3–4 June 2015

Information about this school

- The school meets requirements on the publication of specified information on its website.
- The school complies with Department for Education guidance on what academies should publish.
- The principal of the school, formerly the vice-principal, was appointed in April 2017. The former principal is now the executive headteacher of this school and two other schools in the trust.
- The school makes use of The Blackpool Alternative School for its alternative provision arrangements.
- The trust brokers a range of support within its schools, including, in this school, support in science.
- The government's current floor standards were met in 2016 at both key stages 2 and 4. The school is not deemed to be coasting.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors met with school leaders, staff, governors and representatives of the trust to discuss:
 - the progress made since the previous inspection
 - the progress made by children and pupils
 - the quality of teaching
 - how well children and pupils behave and how their personal development is promoted
 - how well a culture of safeguarding is promoted
 - the professional development and performance management of staff
 - leaders' view of the effectiveness of the school and priorities for the future.
- Inspectors met with 12 pupils representing Years 1 to 3, 13 representing Years 4 to 6, 10 representing Years 7 and 8, and 12 representing Years 9 to 11. Discussions focused on pupils' view of the school, how good behaviour is, how safe they feel, and how well they are prepared for their next steps.
- Inspectors visited a wide range of classes and subjects, visiting each year group to observe learning and look at work in pupils' books. At least half of these visits were conducted jointly with school leaders. A small number of pupils read to inspectors.
- Inspectors took into account views expressed in the online inspection survey. Sixteen parents, 12 Year 11 pupils and 68 staff responded. Three parents spoke with inspectors directly. One parent contacted Ofsted following the inspection. Inspectors scrutinised a range of documentation, including that relating to assessment information, school improvement planning, behaviour records, the school's own questionnaires to parents, the single central record and other safeguarding procedures and practices.

Inspection team

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Jackie Cahalin	Ofsted Inspector
Ann-Marie Dimeck	Ofsted Inspector

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