

The Durham Free School

Bradford Crescent, Durham, County Durham, DH1 1HN

Inspection dates 26–27 November 2014

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Not previously inspected
	This inspection:	Inadequate 4
Leadership and management	Inadequate	4
Behaviour and safety of pupils	Inadequate	4
Quality of teaching	Inadequate	4
Achievement of pupils	Inadequate	4

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires special measures.

- Students' achievement is weak. They do not produce work of enough quality or quantity in order to acquire key skills, gain new knowledge or develop their understanding as quickly as they should. Standards are low and progress is inadequate.
- Leaders, including governors, do not have high enough expectations of students or teachers. Consequently, students' low aspirations of what they can achieve and how they behave are not challenged.
- Governors place too much emphasis on religious credentials when they are recruiting key staff and not enough on seeking candidates with excellent leadership and teaching skills.
- Teaching is inadequate over time. It is not consistently strong enough to make sure students make sufficient progress and achieve well in all subjects.
- Teachers' assessment of students' work is inaccurate and marking is weak. Teachers' expectations of students' work are too low: they fail to challenge poor presentation or pick up on basic errors.
- Leaders are failing to prepare students for life in modern Britain. Some students hold discriminatory views of other people who have different faiths, values or beliefs from themselves.
- The behaviour of some students leads to unsafe situations, particularly on the school buses. Students call each other unpleasant names and there are many instances of bullying. Exclusion rates are high and students' attendance is low.
- Leaders have been ineffective in helping students to modify their behaviour and so the school's work to safeguard students is inadequate.
- Leaders, including governors, have inaccurate views of the quality of teaching and students' achievement. As a result, the impact of leaders and governors on improving teaching and students' achievement is inadequate. The targets for students' achievement are too low.

The school has the following strengths

- Students enjoy a wide range of interesting activities at the end of each day. This broadens their experience and adds enjoyment to the school day.
- Leaders have used pupil premium funding effectively to improve disadvantaged students' reading skills.
- The acting headteacher and deputy headteacher stepped up during the headteacher's absence and they are developing a clearer vision for the school's future.

Information about this inspection

- This inspection was undertaken at the direction of the Secretary of State for Education. Under section 8(1) of the Education Act 2005 the Chief Inspector, if requested by the Secretary of State to inspect a school, must inspect and report on that school. Using the Chief Inspector’s discretionary powers under section 9 of the Education Act 2005 (as amended) this inspection was treated as if it were an inspection conducted under section 5.
- Her Majesty’s Inspectors (HMI) observed 10 parts of lessons. One was observed jointly with the acting headteacher.
- Students’ work in books was scrutinised; some were analysed jointly with the acting headteacher.
- Discussions were held with the acting headteacher, deputy headteacher and members of the governing body.
- HMI spoke to students in lessons, at break and during lunchtimes. They also spoke formally to two groups of students on the first day of the inspection.
- The inspection team observed the school’s work and looked at a range of documentation, including the school’s plans for the future and on-going reviews of those plans. They also looked at behaviour logs, racist incident records, bus incident logs and the school’s safeguarding arrangements, including the safer recruitment procedures.
- There were not enough responses to the online questionnaire, Parent View for HMI to consider. The results of the school’s own survey of parents’ views were considered.

Inspection team

Joan Hewitt, Lead inspector

Her Majesty’s Inspector

Margaret Farrow

Her Majesty’s Inspector

Full report

In accordance with section 44 of the Education Act 2005 (as amended), Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires special measures because it is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the school are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school.

Information about this school

- The school opened in September 2013 to students in Year 7 and this year expanded to include students in Years 7 and 8.
- The school is much smaller than other secondary schools.
- About a sixth of students are disabled or have special educational needs which is higher than the proportion found nationally.
- The school receives pupil premium funding, additional government funding to enhance the education of disadvantaged students, for nearly half the students in the school, an above average proportion.
- There are very few students from minority ethnic backgrounds and no students speak English as an additional language.
- The school draws students from a range of communities across Durham. Many students travel to school on buses.
- At the time of the inspection the headteacher was on a long-term absence. The deputy headteacher (academic) was appointed as acting headteacher six weeks before the inspection.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Urgently improve the effectiveness of leadership, including governance, by:
 - reviewing the school's approach to recruitment so there is a strong emphasis on attracting candidates with highly effective leadership and teaching skills
 - reviewing the curriculum so that there are appropriate opportunities to teach students about sex and relationships and to promote respect for different faiths, beliefs and values so that they are fully ready to function as young citizens of modern Britain
 - establishing a culture of high expectations of what students should achieve
 - ensuring that governors seek out relevant and accurate information to enable them to play a full part in the long-term improvement of the school and to hold leaders closely to account for the school's performance and students' safety
 - establishing robust systems accurately to check on and evaluate the school's work and ensure that the outcomes are consistently used by all leaders and managers to make rapid improvements.
- Improve the proportion of teaching that is consistently good or better, by:
 - making sure teachers have high expectations about the quality and quantity of work which students of all abilities are capable of completing
 - ensuring teachers make accurate checks on students' progress and use this information to plan work at the right level for students of different abilities, particularly the most and least able
 - providing learning activities which engage and maintain students' interest so that attitudes to learning rapidly improve
 - improving teachers' marking so that it consistently highlights what students have done well and precisely what they need to do next
 - insisting students' handwriting and presentation are of consistently high quality
 - improving teachers' use of questions to check students' understanding and give them opportunities to offer extended and thoughtful answers
 - using teaching assistants and other adults, who support in the classroom, more effectively to help improve students' progress.

- Ensure that all groups of students make at least good progress, particularly in English, mathematics and science, by:
 - providing plenty of opportunities for students to develop the quality of their writing and their ability to write at length in English and other subjects
 - providing plenty of opportunities for students to develop their problem-solving skills in mathematics
 - setting ambitious targets for students’ achievement and making sure students understand what these mean as well as what is required to reach them.

- Take swift action to improve students’ behaviour so that it is consistently good or better, by:
 - establishing an agreed view and high expectations of what constitutes good behaviour and conduct, in and out of the classroom and on buses, that is shared and supported by all staff and students
 - checking that staff and students stick to the agreement and are held accountable for a rapid improvement in behaviour
 - training teachers so that they have the skills to deal effectively with persistent poor behaviour, including instances of bullying, unpleasant name-calling and prejudiced views
 - reviewing transport arrangements and supervision so that behaviour on the buses improves rapidly
 - reducing the rate of internal and external exclusions
 - improving students’ attendance
 - ensuring students take responsibility for their own behaviour and contribute to creating a harmonious school environment.

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 pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Inspection judgements

The leadership and management are inadequate

- Leaders have failed to establish a positive ethos in which students can flourish. There is a culture of low expectations because leaders make too much allowance for students' circumstances rather than what they are capable of achieving. Leaders have not ensured students are safe, especially on the buses. Leaders have not been successful in using the school's Christian ethos to develop students' ambitions to do the best they can. The acting headteacher and deputy headteacher are beginning to develop a better approach, for example by reviewing the religious studies curriculum, but this is very recent and there is little demonstrable impact.
- The curriculum does not help students to understand fundamental British values or prepare them well for life in modern Britain. For example, until very recently the religious studies curriculum was too narrow and did not give students enough opportunities to learn about different faiths and beliefs. Consequently, students' understanding of different faiths and beliefs is sketchy with some holding prejudiced views which are not challenged. This has had a negative impact on the school's work to foster good relationships between students and tackle discrimination. Students do enjoy 'lesson 6' when they have the opportunity to try out a range of activities including different sports or learning to play a musical instrument.
- The promotion of student's spiritual, moral, social and cultural understanding is weak. This is shown in students' lack of understanding and respect for cultures other than their own and the school is not doing enough to improve matters. Students' social development is also poor, with many demonstrating a limited ability to recognise the needs of others or appreciate that other students can have opinions which differ from their own. Some struggle to moderate their behaviour or take responsibility for their own conduct.
- Leaders regularly monitor the quality of teaching and work in students' books but this has not been effective in securing sorely needed improvements in students' achievement. This is because leaders have judged the quality of teaching purely on snapshot lesson observations without linking this evidence to the work in students' books. Leaders have a rosy view of the quality of teaching which is not borne out in the work students produce nor in the progress they make over time.
- Students' targets lack ambition and leaders have been satisfied with too little progress. Analysis of students' work and the school's tracking data shows that, until recently, leaders were inaccurate in their assessment of students' learning and progress. They have too readily accepted low standards and poor progress. The acting headteacher and deputy headteacher are starting to improve this but there is still a long way to go.
- Leaders have an inaccurate view of students' achievement. This is because they have not taken enough account of the work students do day to day. Instead they have used specific pieces of work which do not always accurately show if students' learning is secure. The work in students' books shows that teachers' assessments are too generous, often basing judgements on short pieces of work with little evidence of the skills being judged. Consequently the school's tracking of students' progress is inaccurate and fails to provide a robust picture of students' achievement.
- The governing body arranged for external consultants to support leaders in improving teaching and assessment. However, potentially helpful reports by these consultants have not been used effectively to focus staff's efforts on making improvements in the right areas. As a result weaknesses, such as teachers not providing tasks to challenge the most able or to support less-able students, remain an entrenched feature.
- Leaders record incidents of bullying and poor behaviour. They follow up incidents and make sure actions are logged. However, they do not use this information effectively to spot patterns and trends. Plans to help individual students with specific behaviour needs are not consistently successful. As a result, students are not well supported in modifying their behaviour but punished repeatedly for similar offences.
- The school has enjoyed some success in using the pupil premium funding to help disadvantaged students improve their reading. External testing confirms almost all students' reading ages have improved. But, because the school's tracking system is based on inaccurate assessments, leaders do not have a complete picture of how well disadvantaged students are doing in all subject areas.
- A survey carried out by the school shows parents think highly of the school but inspection evidence shows leaders have failed to provide students with an acceptable standard of education.
- Inspectors strongly recommend that the school does not seek to appoint newly qualified teachers.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - Recruitment of leaders and teachers has focused too much on candidates' religious credentials and not enough attention has been given to their talents or track record as a teacher. Consequently, leaders do not always have the skills or experience needed to ensure high student achievement and excellent

teaching.

- Governors have ensured that the appropriate checks are made on the suitability of staff to work with children. The school's safeguarding procedures are also effective in identifying students at risk and seeking support from agencies such as social services and the local authority's designated officer for child protection. However, safeguarding overall is inadequate because leaders have failed to ensure students are safe from unpleasant or bullying behaviour in class, around the school or on the buses.
- The governing body does not have enough robust information to hold leaders to account for the school's performance or the quality of teaching. Governors have been convinced that students are performing well and teaching is good. Minutes of meetings indicate governors are too focused on operational and administrative matters rather than developing coherent challenge and support for the school.
- Governors have not ensured the equalities policy spells out how the school will meet the needs of students and staff with protected characteristics identified in the Equalities Act 2010. The information and evaluations governors receive about the range of behaviour incidents that are recorded or the number of fixed period exclusions are not sufficiently robust. This means they have little understanding about the high proportion of incidents of poor behaviour or the impact of any actions taken by school leaders to reduce such incidents.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are inadequate

Behaviour

- The behaviour of students is inadequate.
- Students are supervised closely at all times during the day. They come to school smartly dressed and with the right equipment. However, inspection evidence from records of students' behaviour, the racist incident and exclusion logs and discussions with students indicate that there are too many instances, including on the school buses, where the behaviour of students is poor.
- Some students spoke of derogatory name calling, silliness or physical altercations in class and on the school buses. The school's behaviour records, while showing a number of serious bullying incidents, also highlight that these behaviours are relatively common.
- Behaviour management has, until very recently, had too much focus on sanction rather than reward. The consequence of this has been that some students have not taken responsibility for their behaviour. Actions to tackle misbehaviour such as internal isolation, verbal warnings and sanctions have not made a demonstrable difference to the frequency of behaviour incidents with some students experiencing multiple internal or fixed-term exclusions.
- Students' attitudes to learning are often poor. Many students are uninterested or quietly compliant, showing little enthusiasm for learning. For example, in one design technology lesson a few students quietly chatted to one another, a couple doodled and one played with a box on the table while the teacher was talking. None of this was recognised or challenged by the teacher or the other adult in the room. This sloppy attitude is reflected in some students' books. Untidy and messy work is not routinely checked or challenged by all teachers. Where teaching is livelier and engaging, for example in history and English, students are enthused and work well together.
- Attendance rates are too low and falling and the number of fixed-term exclusions is too high. Last year nearly 18 per cent of students were subject to fixed-term exclusions. Current tracking information indicates that this rate is not reducing.
- During the inspection students moved around the school sensibly and appropriately and students say this is typically the case. Some students say lunchtimes are boring because there is nothing to do as there is no space to play games, kick a ball, nor is any equipment made available for them to use.

Safety

- The school's work to keep students safe and secure is inadequate. Inspection findings raised several concerns.
- Sex and relationships education is inadequate and consequently students are not prepared for risks to their safety and well-being. Students do have a sound understanding of risks from the internet including how to keep safe from cyber bullying. However, they have a limited awareness about other forms of bullying and they are ill-equipped to deal with these kinds of problems when they arise. Students have a sound grasp of risks associated with alcohol or drugs.
- Recorded incidents on school buses indicate that, at times, students are not fully safe when travelling to and from school because of the unacceptable behaviour of a minority of students. There are incidents, for example, of students spraying after-shave into other students' faces, crawling around under seats and

failing to use safety belts.

- Staff receive regular appropriate training on safeguarding and spotting signs of potential risk to students. The designated safeguarding lead is diligent in identifying and securing support from other agencies when students are at risk or are facing significant challenges in their lives.
- Concerns raised by some pupils during the inspection are being examined by the appropriate authority.

The quality of teaching is inadequate

- Too often teachers do not expect students to work hard enough or to produce an acceptable quantity of work. The most-able students are not challenged through their work and are let off the hook far too easily while less-able students struggle to complete tasks. As a result, the impact of teaching over time on students' achievement is inadequate.
- Lessons frequently fail to capture students' interests and so at times they fidget or sit with their heads in their hands looking glum. Where teaching captures students' interests they come to life, animated and eager to be involved. For example, Year 7 students enjoyed learning about European countries because they had the opportunity to think about things for themselves and work together to solve problems. Sadly, this sort of teaching is not common. A more typical example occurred in a science lesson during which one boy explained to the inspector that he was not working because he did not have the equipment but the teacher would not listen.
- Teachers' questioning skills are underdeveloped. Teachers tend to take answers only from those students who have their hand up and this allows other students to take a back seat and not concentrate properly. When students do answer, they offer short replies and teachers do not consistently probe and insist on more thoughtful responses.
- Teachers' marking in books is inconsistent. There are some good examples, particularly in English and history where teachers offer helpful comments about what the student has done well and what they need to do next to improve their work. However, too often teachers make remarks such as, 'well done' or 'good work' which are not helpful to students in showing how work can be improved. There are also times when teachers tick work that is unacceptably short, which contains errors and is untidily presented.
- Good writing is not routinely developed by teachers. Students do not get enough opportunity to write at length, and they are sometimes held back by teachers' use of worksheets which do not give them enough space to write extended answers. Reading is more successfully promoted by teachers because they make sure students have a range of interesting texts to read, although outside of class this is somewhat undermined by the limited selection of books in the school's library.
- Teachers' assessments are not always accurate. There are few attempts to use recent assessments when subsequent lessons are planned to make sure students start their next piece of work at the right level. In mathematics, students spend too much time doing work at the same level of difficulty with no regard for different abilities in the class. This prevents many from deepening their understanding because they are not given the opportunity to solve more sophisticated problems and really master new skills.
- A few classrooms have lively displays for students to refer to but there is a paucity of students' work on show. Where work is on the walls it is often full of errors or untidy. The main corridor is sterile and uninspiring. No effort has been made to enliven this area with students' work.
- Adults who are deployed in the classrooms are not used effectively to support students' learning. Too often they sit passively, listening to the teacher rather than helping students.

The achievement of pupils is inadequate

- Students enter the school with broadly average standards. At this early stage in the school's life there are no external tests to compare students' achievement with that of other students nationally. However, students' work in books indicates that standards for all groups, including disabled students and those with special educational needs are too low and that they make inadequate progress.
- Students' progress in English has started to pick up after a slow start because teaching was initially weak. Writing skills are not improving fast enough however, particularly for the most-able students, because they are not expected to write at length or frequently enough. The teaching of reading is better because focused intervention and support are helping to improve students' reading skills and test results show that this is having a positive effect. Progress in mathematics is significantly weaker and progress in science has declined sharply this term.
- The tracking of students' progress is flawed because some assessments on which it is based are not

accurate. This poses substantial difficulties for school leaders or teachers to know with confidence how different groups of students are doing. Work in students' books show that disabled students and those with special educational needs do not have the right kind of support to help them make enough progress.

- Students know their targets but they do not understand how these relate to their current and future learning so are of little value. Targets for the most-able students also lack ambition.
- Students' work and the quality of teaching demonstrate that disabled students and those with special educational needs, most-able students and those of low ability make the same inadequate progress as other groups. The same is true for those students who are supported by the pupil premium funding.

What inspection judgements mean

School	Grade	Judgement	Description
	Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
	Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
	Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
	Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>

School details

Unique reference number	140005
Local authority	Not applicable
Inspection number	455401

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	Secondary
School category	Academy free school
Age range of pupils	11–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	94
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	John Denning
Acting Headteacher	Julian Eisner
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected
Telephone number	0191 384 7505
Email address	info@durhamfreeschool.org

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