

Dorchester Middle School

Queen's Avenue, Dorchester, Dorset DT1 2HS

Inspection dates

21–22 May 2019

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement

- Leaders and governors are too generous in their evaluation of how quickly the school is raising standards. The improvements that have been made have not had sufficient impact on the progress that pupils make.
- The quality of teaching is too variable. The school's policy on feedback to pupils about their work is not routinely followed. Therefore, pupils do not know clearly enough how well they are doing and how they can improve.
- Teachers do not use assessment information well enough to plan teaching for the full range of pupils' abilities.
- The most able pupils are not challenged to think deeply about their learning so that they reach the highest standards of which they are capable.
- Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are not supported well enough to access tasks at the appropriate level.
- Pupils are compliant but, where teachers' planning is weak, they lose focus and do not take responsibility for their learning.
- Where teachers' expectations are not high, pupils leave tasks unfinished or complete them in a cursory way. Pupils do not habitually take pride in the presentation of their work.
- Middle leaders are increasingly knowledgeable about the importance of their roles. However, they are not yet sufficiently skilled to support senior leaders to raise standards. They do not challenge strongly enough when teaching falls short of expectations.

The school has the following strengths

- Pupils behave well around the school. They are confident and articulate.
- The rate of attendance has improved and is now in line with national averages. The proportion of pupils who miss school regularly has also reduced.
- Pupils take part in a wide range of extra-curricular opportunities. Staff support pupils' social, moral, spiritual and cultural development well.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by ensuring that:
 - leaders evaluate their internal information carefully, so that there is a greater accuracy about the impact of actions to improve the quality of teaching and learning
 - leaders share effective practice within the school to reduce variations in the quality of teaching
 - trustees and governors challenge leaders stringently so that more rapid improvement is secured
 - middle leaders closely identify the gaps in pupils' subject knowledge and challenge more assertively when teaching is not strong enough.
- Improve the quality of teaching so that pupils make better progress by:
 - teachers consistently implementing the school's policy so that pupils know how to improve their work, and do so
 - raising the level of challenge and expectation in teaching so that pupils have greater opportunity to extend their knowledge and understanding
 - developing teachers' skills in using assessment information to plan and adapt their teaching so that it meets the needs of all pupils, especially pupils with SEND
 - providing sufficient and consistent challenge for the most able pupils so that they are well prepared for the next steps in their education and can excel
 - teachers consistently expect a high standard of work, including in the way it is organised and presented.
- Improve the quality of personal development and behaviour by:
 - ensuring that teaching triggers the interest of pupils and enthuses them to be more readily involved in their learning.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Requires improvement

- Senior leaders have a clear ambition for the standards that pupils can achieve. The school is emerging from a period of considerable transition. Leaders, together with governors, have identified accurately the areas that need to improve. They have detailed and well-devised plans to do so, but the impact of these is not convincing or sustained.
- Leaders have decisively challenged, and in some cases improved, practice which is not at the standard expected. However, this has meant that there is some disruption to staffing, which has a notable impact on the quality of teaching that pupils regularly receive. In addition, there remains too much teaching which is not strong enough. Therefore, leaders' evaluation of the impact that their actions are having is over-generous.
- Leaders have developed systems to track how well pupils are working towards meeting the standards expected for their ages. They are confident about the accuracy of this information through standardised assessment and agreeing standards with other schools. However, leaders and governors are too reliant on this overall assessment information, rather than substantiating it with the quality of learning evident in classroom practice. Leaders have a plenty of information, but it lacks coherence because systems are not yet fully embedded or integrated.
- Leaders have an overview of the provision in place for disadvantaged pupils and those pupils who arrive at the school with standards below those expected for their age. This has had an impact on improving pupils' attendance and their readiness to learn. However, the impact of individual academic interventions is not assessed independently or routinely extrapolated. Therefore, leaders cannot precisely identify the most effective use of additional funding.
- Leaders have commissioned external evaluation of the quality of their work. In addition, staff share ideas with partner schools about teaching approaches, such as in mathematics. Staff value this professional training. Nonetheless, this sharing of practice has not had enough impact in some subjects.
- Middle leaders feel well supported by senior leaders and have a clearer understanding of their role. A new leadership post has been created, and this has improved the cohesion of this team. Faculty leaders are beginning to consider the content and sequence of their curriculum so that it can build more effectively on pupils' prior learning and what they will go on to study at the end of Year 8.
- Subject leaders value the training that they have received and are supportive of senior leaders' initiatives. However, middle leaders' monitoring of the standards of teaching is not systematic, incisive or challenging enough. Middle leaders are not skilled enough in evaluating the quality and depth of pupils' learning to improve teaching, over time. More often, assertions about the quality of teaching are focused on teachers' compliance with the policy rather than on whether pupils are questioned and helped to think more deeply about what they are learning.
- Pastoral leaders provide strong care and nurture for pupils. This has had an impact on

improving attendance and reducing the need for exclusion. However, this is not aligned closely enough to improving pupils' academic performance.

- There have been recent changes to the leadership of pupils with SEND. The specialist resource base caters well for the needs of pupils who have physical disabilities. 'The Hub' provides effective support for pupils who have social and emotional needs. Leaders have bolstered the support available for pupils' mental well-being. Pupils who use these facilities say that this has helped them to access their learning in their regular classes.
- However, the academic needs of pupils with SEND are not always well met in their regular classes. Leaders' monitoring of the effectiveness of teachers' planning is not regular enough and, as a result, deficiencies continue. Some parents and carers who replied to the 'Parent View' survey issued at the time of the inspection shared their concerns about the support their children receive.
- Leaders have redesigned the curriculum so that pupils follow a curriculum which includes a wide range of subjects and opportunities. Pupils value their learning in music and technology, for example. In the latter, pupils have a clear understanding of the design process and have worked with experts in the field, accessing more sophisticated equipment.
- In addition, many pupils, parents and carers speak highly of the extra-curricular opportunities available, such as through the 'Dorchester University' enrichment programme. Pupils respond positively when they are given leadership opportunities, such as in the 'Eco champions'.
- Leaders have recognised the need to improve communication with parents and carers. For example, the recently formed Parent, Teacher and Friends Association (PTFA) has organised events to involve parents in school life. The parents and carers involved are enthusiastic and positive about this work. However, there is still a significant minority of parents who express concerns about some aspects of the school's work, such as the quality of communication.

Governance of the school

- Governors and senior leaders work together to identify priorities and devise plans to achieve these. Governors have developed their committee structure to consider in more depth the quality of education that the school provides. They seek members with skills and experience to strengthen their expertise when vacancies arise. Though governors question leaders about standards, they share their over-optimistic view of the speed with which actions are improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment.
- Governors have carefully considered how they can gather first-hand information about the work of the school. They are beginning to visit the school more regularly and have been assigned areas of responsibility. The conclusions from these visits are shared more widely at full governing body meetings so that the main messages can be discussed.
- Governors are knowledgeable about their statutory duties and carry out these effectively. They have accessed relevant training, both generic and specifically suited to

their individual roles. Governors have received appropriate training for safeguarding and audit how well the school meets requirements in this regard.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Leaders have updated all the necessary policies and made all the statutory checks to ensure that staff are suitable to work with children. Staff have received the appropriate training and are aware of the signs to be watchful for. Leaders have introduced systems for staff to report concerns. All staff are aware of how to do this.
- Leaders work with external partners to support pupils who are potentially at risk. However, some of the necessary information is not always assembled in a single place. Therefore, some of the chronologies scrutinised during the inspection did not clearly record the actions that had been taken. This was corrected at the time of the inspection, and is an administrative oversight rather than a risk to pupils' well-being and safety.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- There is considerable variation in the quality of teaching. This is partly to do with staffing issues, but is mainly because teachers do not consistently follow leaders' expectations. Not all teachers understand the imperative to improve the quality of teaching more quickly. Too often, pupils do not know what they have done well and how they can improve the quality of their work. Pupils' misconceptions go largely unchecked, particularly in technical accuracy, and this limits pupils' progress.
- While some teachers make helpful suggestions about how work can be improved, pupils do not always respond and thus cannot benefit from this advice. Where pupils are asked to reflect on their work, this does not always show a demonstrable improvement in pupils' learning. This is because it is not routine practice and therefore pupils are not sufficiently skilled in how to do this effectively.
- Teachers' skills in using assessment to inform planning is underdeveloped. This means that some learning is not well matched to pupils' level of understanding. There is a lack of challenge for the most able pupils, who are sometimes not inspired or interested enough to work at higher levels. Some tasks are too limiting and do not support pupils to apply subject theories and terminology to prepare them for the next stages of their education.
- Teachers do not always make explicit what pupils need to do and how they will know if they have done so successfully. At times, the sequence of learning is fragmented, which means that pupils cannot easily build on what has gone before.
- Teachers' expectations can be too low. Where this is the case, pupils do not take pride in the presentation of their work or use their time productively. There is a lack of urgency and rigour, in many classes, to ensure that pupils complete tasks. Therefore, work is left unfinished and pupils do not always respond conscientiously to teachers' prompts to rectify this. In some cases, there is wide disparity in the quality of the same pupils' work because of the inconsistencies that exist. Pupils also recognise the

variations in subjects and teachers.

- There are examples pupils with SEND being well supported by additional adults and making strong progress as a result, such as when making felt toys in textiles. However, this is not typically the case. Where pupils with SEND are not supported successfully, they can become dispirited or complete little because the task is too difficult. Therefore, these pupils, overall, do not make enough progress from their starting points.
- Where teaching is well planned, as was seen in some English, science and history sessions, teachers use their subject knowledge well to develop pupils' understanding of subject terminology and concepts. For example, in history, pupils enjoyed considering the reasons why the Aztecs settled where they did. Pupils were able to draw on their knowledge of other ancient civilisations to help them to form their conclusions. In examples such as this, teachers use questioning effectively to help pupils consolidate their understanding and extend their thinking.
- The classroom environment is typically conducive to learning and, because of improved attendance, pupils are more regularly present. In some classes, there is a vibrant and positive atmosphere. However, teachers do not always use this climate to ensure that effective learning is taking place. Pupils recognise that, where teachers do not insist on behaviour expectations, pupils can lose focus and distract the learning of others.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Pupils are confident and self-assured. They talk enthusiastically about some of the activities they have been involved in. They explain what they have learned in lessons in a considered manner. They understand how to keep themselves safe in their everyday lives and understand the risks posed by smoking, drugs and alcohol. They are less confident when talking about how to protect themselves from those who might try to influence them with extreme views.
- Pupils are knowledgeable about how to protect themselves when online and know not to share personal information. They spoke about what they would do if they came across an inappropriate site. Leaders have been proactive in ensuring that pupils are aware of their responsibilities when using social media networking sites.
- Pupils consider the school to be a safe and welcoming environment. Leaders have effective transition plans in place before pupils move to the school, and older pupils 'buddy' with younger pupils when they arrive. Pupils respect each other, and are polite and considerate. They have a well-developed sense of their social responsibilities, which is shown by their work to raise money for various charities. Staff are responsive to pupils' ideas to make the school more environmentally aware.
- Pupils recognise the difference between falling out and bullying, and say that the latter is not prevalent. This is reflected in the records of the school, which show very few incidents, including cases of racist or derogatory language. The majority of pupils say that they have a trusted adult to whom they can speak if they have a concern.

- Pupils consider a range of activities to develop their social, moral, spiritual and cultural development (SMSC). Pupils, for example, consider concepts such as creativity and understand different faiths and religions. They know what democracy is and exercised their right to vote judiciously when voting for the youth parliament.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- Leaders have made changes to the way that behaviour expectations are managed. They carefully log incidents and have a strategic overview of patterns of behaviour. Leaders take preventative actions when required.
- A minority of parents, carers and staff expressed concerns at the way that behaviour incidents are managed. Inspectors did not witness any wilful disruption or significant behaviour issues during the inspection. The relationships observed throughout the inspection were typically polite and respectful. However, where teachers' planning is weak, pupils' concentration wanes and they are not enthused or self-motivated by what they are doing.
- Staff support pupils who find the behaviour expectations difficult to manage and, as a result, the use of fixed-term exclusions is low. There have been no permanent exclusions for the last three years.
- The actions taken by leaders have improved attendance so it is now in line with national averages. Similarly, persistent absence has reduced and is also in line with national figures. This includes for disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND. Leaders have worked hard with pupils and their families, where absence is an issue, to build trust and emphasise expectations.

Outcomes for pupils

Requires improvement

- Pupils arrive in Year 5 with levels of attainment that are below national averages. From these starting points, pupils do not make enough progress in reading, writing and mathematics by the end of key stage 2. Standardised assessments indicate that pupils make stronger progress towards their targets as they move through the school. However, the variation in the quality of teaching means that not all pupils achieve the very best of which they are capable before they move to the next phase of their education.
- The disappointing outcomes in both 2017 and 2018 at the end of Year 6 prompted leaders to focus sharply on the quality of teaching for pupils in Year 5. In addition, Year 6 pupils who require additional support are identified, and pupils say that they value this. Teachers' assessment of current pupils indicates an improvement in the proportion of pupils who are meeting age-related expectations by the end of key stage 2.
- Leaders have identified that pupils' skill in reading, particularly for inference, is an area of weakness. Leaders have therefore developed a reading scheme to support pupils to access more challenging texts and refine their skills. The start-of-day routines, for instance, help younger pupils to read regularly and for enjoyment. Those pupils who

require additional support have bespoke literacy interventions, which have improved their proficiency.

- Leaders have worked extensively with other schools to develop their approach to the teaching of mathematics. There is an emerging approach which is shared across the school. Where this is used well, pupils are encouraged to use their mathematical fluency to consider more complex problem-solving and reasoning tasks. However, there is still too much variation in the teaching of mathematics, because work is not always astutely tailored to pupils' level of understanding.
- Writing remains a key priority, and leaders have identified the need for pupils to have greater opportunity to write at length. Where teaching is effective, pupils' writing portfolios show mastery of sentence construction and a precise use of language. However, for some pupils, handwriting skills remain a significant barrier, in terms of both clarity and stamina. There is no clear plan evident for how this will be overcome.
- Disadvantaged pupils are supported well in terms of their pastoral needs and are increasingly ready to learn. Where planning is effective, there is no discernible difference in the quality of their work and that of their peers. However, where teaching is weaker, activities are not well matched to pupils' needs and therefore their progress slows.
- The support for pupils with SEND is not effective enough. Teachers do not consistently use the information they have about pupils' needs to inform their planning. Consequently, work is often pitched at too high a level, which means that pupils cannot access the tasks set. Therefore, such pupils do not make the progress they should.
- The most able pupils are not challenged well enough. Such pupils are capable of much more than is currently expected by some teachers. Pupils can, and should, make stronger progress. They do not, because they often sit and wait patiently for the next task.
- Leaders track the performance of pupils in all subjects across the curriculum. Leaders share this information with both governors and middle leaders to highlight the areas of strength and those that require improvement. However, middle leaders' monitoring is not sufficiently developed to use this information, alongside a wider range of evidence, to elicit the subject-specific skills that pupils need to improve.

School details

Unique reference number	138186
Local authority	Dorset
Inspection number	10091028

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

Type of school	Middle deemed secondary
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	9 to 13
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	614
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair	Jan Dunne
Headteacher	Caroline Dearden
Telephone number	0130 526 5651
Website	www.dorchestermid.dorset.sch.uk
Email address	office@dmsschool.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	15 November 2018

Information about this school

- The school received a short inspection in November 2018. Although the school was judged still to be good, the inspector identified some priorities for improvement.
- Dorchester Middle School became a single academy trust on 1 June 2012. The school is part of a loose federation of schools known as the Dorchester Area Schools Partnership.
- The school is a middle deemed secondary school catering for pupils from Year 5 to Year 8. It is smaller than the average-sized secondary school.
- Most pupils are of White British heritage. The proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language is below the national average.
- There is a specialist resource base on site, which is led and managed by the school. It caters for pupils with physical disabilities. The proportion of pupils with SEND, including those supported by an education, health and care plan, is above the national average.
- The proportion of disadvantaged pupils is below the national average.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed learning across a range of subjects and age groups and scrutinised pupils' written work. Observations were conducted jointly with members of the leadership team.
- Meetings were held with members of the leadership team and representatives from the governing body. In addition, inspectors met with curriculum leaders, pastoral leaders and a group of staff.
- Inspectors met with pupils, including disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND, both formally and informally, to discuss their views about their experience of school.
- Inspectors looked at the school's documentation, including the evaluation of the school's effectiveness and priorities for future improvement. Inspectors reviewed progress, behaviour and attendance information relating to current pupils, and governors' records.
- School policies relating to safeguarding, pupils' behaviour, the use of additional funding, including the pupil premium and the curriculum were scrutinised.
- Inspectors considered the 152 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, including 52 free text responses, 134 responses to the pupil survey and 31 responses to the staff survey. The lead inspector met with a member of the Parent, Teacher and Friends Association (PTFA).

Inspection team

Sarah McGinnis, lead inspector	Her Majesty's Inspector
Julie Nash	Ofsted Inspector
Jacqui Goodall	Ofsted Inspector
Judith O'Hare	Ofsted Inspector
Sarah O'Donnell	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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