

Guildford County School

Farnham Road, Guildford, Surrey GU2 4LU

Inspection dates

17–18 January 2017

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school

- The headteacher displays considerable strength of purpose and is single-minded in his pursuit of excellence. He has transformed the school since his appointment by raising the expectations of the whole school community.
- Pupils achieve very high standards and make excellent progress from their starting points. This is especially the case in mathematics, humanities and English.
- Governors are ambitious and challenging. They have successfully set the strategic direction of the school through their exacting support for leaders.
- Pupils are proud of their school and their achievements. They are active citizens who make significant contributions to their community within and outside of the school.
- Pupils enjoy the opportunities they have to study a wide variety of subjects and learn new skills outside the formal school day. This is especially the case with music, which plays a pivotal role in the school.
- Vulnerable pupils, including the disadvantaged and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, make good progress. They achieve as well or better than other pupils with similar starting points nationally, although their progress is not as rapid as others in the school.
- The leadership of teaching is very well developed so that staff are well supported to improve their practice. As a result, staff blossom, including those new to the profession.
- The teaching of the 16 to 19 study programmes is very successful. Students achieve very well so that there are increasing numbers moving on to attend top universities, including Oxford and Cambridge.
- Those pupils who experience anxiety or have social and emotional health needs are supported especially effectively. Leaders have taken swift action to ensure that additional resources are well targeted at the greatest level of need.
- Pupils and students make a very significant contribution to school life through the various councils and the house system.
- Leaders work very successfully across their local community, including providing bespoke support to a neighbouring junior school.
- Those few pupils who attended less well in the past are now attending more frequently. Overall attendance is now very high and well above the national average.
- Parents are extremely positive about their children's experience at the school, especially the respectful and courteous atmosphere.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities make as strong progress from their starting points as other pupils in the school.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Outstanding

- The headteacher is an infectious, passionate and enthusiastic leader who successfully communicates his vision for 'excellence for everyone'. He does not shirk from making difficult decisions to make changes, including challenging long-established staff and recruiting new talent. Parents describe the headteacher as leading the school with 'pace', as well as being 'visible and approachable'.
- Leaders have radically improved the quality of teaching across the school. The systems to manage staff performance are thorough and closely linked to pupils' achievements. Staff are open to new ideas, embrace change and respond well to the advice they receive from leaders. Staff new to the profession are supported exceptionally well and all staff surveyed are very positive about the quality of the support they receive to thrive in the classroom.
- Leaders have a forensic oversight of all aspects of their work in their pursuit of excellence. They regularly review school performance and their evaluation is unflinching and honest. As a result, leaders are very clear about any shortcomings and areas that require further attention. Consequently, leaders at all levels act quickly to address underachievement and provide support for pupils doing less well. For example, the progress of boys has improved considerably over the last three years to match and, in some cases, exceed the progress of girls.
- Leaders make very good use of the additional funding for pupils who are disadvantaged. There is an extensive range of closely targeted support, including additional teaching, small-group sessions, a breakfast club and enrichment activities. Disadvantaged pupils are very positive about the help they receive and are confident about their futures. As a result, these pupils now achieve as well as other non-disadvantaged pupils nationally, and the difference between their rates of progress and those of others in the school is diminishing.
- The curriculum is lively and interesting. The academic focus is enhanced by extensive additional enrichment opportunities. For example, all pupils learn a musical instrument in key stage 3 and can choose from four different languages in key stage 4. There is also a very extensive programme of after-school events and visits, including trips abroad and opportunities to take part in outdoor adventure activities at the weekends. Pupils especially enjoy taking part in the school choirs that are integral to life in the school.
- Leaders promote tolerance and other British values very successfully. Alongside a well-developed personal development programme, there are regular assemblies and talks from visiting speakers that support pupils' understanding of the diversity of modern Britain. Pupils who join the school from other countries describe in very glowing terms how they have been made to feel welcome. Vibrant displays showcase pupils' work that explores different cultures, for example a display highlighting the Mayan culture of Mexico.
- There is a strong commitment to developing a 'community ethos'. Leaders work closely with a neighbouring junior school to provide additional specialty subject support in science and computing. Pupils also regularly perform concerts for primary school

pupils, for residents in care homes and at events in the town centre. Leaders and pupils value the house system because it fosters a strong sense of community within the school, with some pupils describing their house as 'like a family'.

- Parents are overwhelmingly positive about leadership across the school. They are also unanimous about the high standards of teaching and the rapid progress that pupils make. There are very strong relationships between parents and leaders, with one parent commenting that, 'I am encouraged daily by the kindness and compassion of the staff.'
- Leaders are managing a complex building programme very successfully. Despite significant structural work taking place, there is minimal disruption to learning. Pupils value the school and through the student and learning councils have made recommendations that have been subsequently acted on, to make improvements such as the provision of water fountains.
- The school complies with Department for Education (DfE) guidance on what academies should publish. Leaders make good use of the website to communicate with parents. There is a wealth of useful information and regular updates on events and the achievements of pupils. There is also an active parent group, 'Friends of GCS', which, alongside the alumni, raises funds for special projects such as sports equipment.

Governance of the school

- Governors are very dedicated to the school and eager to raise standards still further. There is a strong understanding of the different roles of the directors of the academy trust and the governing body. The well-established working practices of the governing body ensure that there is regular and deep scrutiny of the work of leaders. Governors also map adeptly the skills of the members of each committee, to ensure that there is extensive expertise to challenge leaders effectively. Consequently, records show that a wide range of governors ask searching questions.
- The governors visit the school regularly to assess the impact of leaders' work, including regular evaluations of safeguarding practices. They are scrupulous in ensuring that additional funding is spent effectively. For example, governors could identify the most successful strategies to support disadvantaged pupils and describe in detail the difference that this funding makes.
- Training is used exceptionally well to improve governors' understanding of the latest changes to their statutory duties. Governors have used their professional expertise particularly adroitly to support leaders, for example with advice over developing coaching in the school. They are rightly focused on developing the capacity of leaders and ensuring that there is sufficient depth of talent should vacancies arise.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Leaders and governors work closely together to ensure that all pupils are safe in school. There are appropriate checks made on all staff who join the school. Leaders and governors have undertaken the appropriate training to ensure that statutory requirements are met.

- There is valuable training for all staff annually, as well as regular updates at staff meetings. As a result, staff including those new to the profession, have a good knowledge of potential risks in the school and the wider community.
- Staff are very clear about what to do if they are worried about a child. Leaders keep very thorough records of concerns and are dogged in following up referrals made. Recent case files highlight how staff respond swiftly to concerns raised and support families who need extra help.
- Parents are very confident that their children are safe. They comment extremely favourably about the quality of care for individual pupils, especially those who have social and emotional health concerns. Pupils state emphatically that the school is a safe environment and that they are totally confident that adults will help them if required.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Outstanding

- Teachers are highly committed to the school. They all share the same aspirations as the headteacher to achieve excellent outcomes for their pupils. As a result, they regularly share what works well with colleagues in 'exhibition' lessons. This open approach helps enable staff to deliver consistently very strong practice.
- Teachers use their subject knowledge very effectively to plan learning that excites and engages pupils. For example, in geography, pupils were completely engrossed in exploring where the most dangerous place to live on earth is.
- The most able pupils are challenged very effectively with skilful questioning or additional tasks so that they gain well-rounded understanding of important ideas. In English, pupils confidently share their views when evaluating key concepts. For example, teachers skilfully encourage pupils to develop sophisticated responses about the nature of tolerance and racism in Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice'.
- Those pupils who need extra help are well supported by additional adults and, when appropriate, by specialist teaching. There is a very well developed programme to support pupils who lack confidence in reading. This programme has a very high success rate and across the school pupils make the most of focused time to regularly read appropriate texts for their ability.
- In mathematics, pupils are taught very well. They can explain their thinking and show their reasoning when tackling problems. For example, teachers present pupils with incomplete or incorrect responses to shape problems that pupils must then clarify and correct. As a result, an increasing number of pupils are taking additional and more-challenging mathematics qualifications in key stage 4 as well as continuing to study mathematics in key stage 5.
- Teachers plan carefully and take account of pupils' different starting points, ensuring that activities are difficult and challenging. They use assessment information adroitly to pitch lessons correctly, and if a pupil is stuck then they are quick to address misconceptions or offer support. Those pupils who are disadvantaged also receive extra help but on occasion they do not make as rapid progress as other pupils in the school.
- Teachers know their pupils well. They prioritise those few pupils who do not make rapid progress, for example by spending additional time in the lesson on feedback for

these pupils. They use the school's assessment policies very effectively so that pupils receive excellent advice and guidance about the work they have completed. As a result, pupils are confident that they will reach the challenging targets set for them.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Outstanding

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding.
- Teachers and other staff model extremely high standards. There are many opportunities for pupils to take on leadership roles, including a student learning council which suggests to senior leaders ways to improve school policies.
- Pupils have a very thorough understanding of the risks associated with social media and the perils of being active online. In addition, they are highly knowledgeable about the dangers of sexting and how to stay safe outside the school gates, for example when walking home alone.
- Pupils report that bullying only takes place very rarely and that when it occurs it is swiftly dealt with by teachers. They appreciate the help they receive from their tutors and support staff if they experience difficulties at school or at home. Pupils are especially positive about the strategies they learn to combat anxiety, such as yoga and 'mindfulness' techniques.
- Pupils show a very well developed understanding and tolerance for others who are different from them, including those with a different sexual orientation. All pupils are unanimous in their praise for the respectful and warm atmosphere in the school.
- There are excellent programmes to promote aspiration, including visits to leading universities and from inspirational speakers from the world of work. However, a few pupils in key stage 4 report that they would welcome more information on careers at an earlier stage.
- Pupils stay in school well beyond the school day to take part in additional activities because they feel welcome. The vast majority of pupils attend school regularly. Those pupils who in the past attended less well, including those who are disadvantaged or who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, now come to school much more frequently.
- Many pupils take part in drama and music productions and these help build pupils' confidence. There is a good mix of sporting and other activities promoted through the house system, which encourages pupils of all ages to mix together. Pupils appreciate these opportunities to foster friendships that continue throughout their time in school.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding.
- Pupils take great care and pride over their work. They are very enthusiastic about their learning and were keen to talk about their work during the inspection. They talk self-confidently but politely about their positive experiences in school.

- Pupils are very clear about school rules and what counts as unacceptable behaviour. They move calmly and quietly around the site, despite the considerable inconvenience of the building works.
- There are very few exclusions for poor behaviour. Overall exclusions have dropped from close to the national average three years ago to well below this benchmark.
- There is a considerate and courteous atmosphere, with pupils from different year groups mixing freely. Those pupils from different cultures and countries report that they were welcomed warmly when they arrived mid-year. Pupils and staff enjoy very positive relationships, built on mutual respect and affection. Non-teaching staff, including those in the canteen, enjoy coming to work and stay for many years.
- Pupils are keen to answer questions, listen respectfully to others and are confident in challenging each other's views. They understand that failure is a key aspect of learning and therefore strive to learn from their mistakes.

Outcomes for pupils

Outstanding

- Pupils make excellent progress across a wide range of subjects. In 2016, pupils made especially strong progress in English, mathematics and humanities. Overall, the achievement of pupils was well above the national average and in the top 15% in the country. Current performance information and inspectors' scrutiny of work shows that pupils in the school continue to perform strongly. Where performance in a minority of subjects is weaker, leaders take urgent action to improve standards.
- The progress of disadvantaged pupils has increased significantly over the last three years. In 2016, these pupils made similar rates of progress to other pupils nationally in a wide range of subjects. The difference between the performance of these pupils and other pupils in the school has diminished because leaders have comprehensive systems in place to check systematically how well these pupils are learning. Where differences occur, such as with pupils currently in Year 9, leaders take rapid action to ensure that teaching and intervention are focused on those pupils who need additional help. Leaders acknowledge that there remains more work to do so that disadvantaged pupils make as strong progress as other pupils in the school.
- Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities achieve well. In 2016, pupils who received additional support made very good progress compared with similar pupils with the same starting points nationally. Pupils perform well because of the high standard of the intervention and guidance they receive from additional adults in class and specialist teachers.
- The most able pupils' progress is well above the national average. Their attainment, including the percentage achieving A* and A grades, is also above the national average in the majority of subjects, including English and mathematics. Leaders identified the previous performance of these pupils as a priority and have taken urgent action to address this. As a result, the overwhelming majority of these pupils achieve the highest grades and are very well prepared to pursue further academic qualifications.
- The school's approach to reading is highly effective. There is good support for those pupils who need extra attention when they join the school. As a result, these pupils make accelerated progress from their starting points. Pupils report that they read

widely and often and teachers use challenging texts frequently in class, for example when exploring the Tudor crisis in history.

16 to 19 study programmes

Outstanding

- The leadership of the sixth form is highly effective. Leaders are self-critical and reflective so that their evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the provision is strong. Leaders have taken rapid action to address underperformance, including making tough decisions about removing less successful and less popular courses from the curriculum.
- Students at all levels, including those with low starting points, are well catered for. The curriculum has a rich mix of academic courses as well as a foundation pathway. The proportion of students who make good progress from their starting points has been well above the national average for a number of years and current information shows that this trend is set to continue.
- Leaders ensure that students receive very good advice about their futures. As a result, an increasing number of students are going on to the most prestigious universities, including Oxford and Cambridge. There is also an increase in the number of disadvantaged students who successfully transfer to further education and employment.
- Teaching in the sixth form is outstanding because teachers have high expectations of what students can achieve. For example, in psychology, students describe paradigm shifts very thoughtfully using Einstein's theory of relativity. Teachers use assessment very effectively to support students who sometimes make less progress than expected. As a result, leaders provide extra help swiftly and communicate well with parents and carers so that students recover quickly and get back on track.
- Students experience a wide range of enrichment activities as well as significant opportunities to develop their leadership experience. They report very positively on the influence they have in shaping the school's daily activities. Students also organise charity, sporting and social events which play a key role in bringing the whole school community together. Younger pupils talk animatedly about the difference students make to them, for example as reading buddies or house captains.
- The attendance in the sixth form is high and pupils are punctual to school and lessons. They are well prepared for life in modern Britain because leaders insist that all pupils receive advice on e-safety, driving awareness and maintaining their personal health. Pupils report very favourably about the emotional and social support they receive, including how to manage the stress of examinations and deadlines.

School details

Unique reference number	139193
Local authority	Surrey
Inspection number	10026742

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 comprehensive
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	11 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in 16 to 19 study programmes	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	1,049
Of which, number on roll in 16 to 19 study programmes	239
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Janette Owen
Headteacher	Jack Mayhew
Telephone number	01483 504089
Website	www.guildfordcounty.co.uk
Email address	info@guildfordcounty.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this school

- Guildford County Academy is a larger-than-average secondary school and is located in the centre of the city.
- The school converted to an academy in January 2013. The headteacher took up his post in September 2013 following the retirement of the previous headteacher.
- The proportion of pupils who are disadvantaged and eligible for pupil premium funding is well below the national average.

- The proportion of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is well below the national average.
- The majority of pupils are from White British backgrounds, although a higher proportion than nationally have a first language believed not to be English.
- The school meets the requirements of the publication of specified information on its website.
- The school complies with DfE guidance on what academies should publish.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors met with the headteacher, senior leaders and staff. The lead inspector also met with the chair of governors and staff new to the profession.
- Inspectors visited 34 lessons and 19 part lessons, to observe pupils learning across every age group and subject, accompanied by senior leaders,
- Inspectors looked at work in pupils' books and discussed pupils' attainment and progress with leaders.
- Inspectors spoke to pupils informally and formally, meeting with groups of pupils from every year group. They also heard pupils sing at lunchtime in the boys choir as well as the senior choir.
- Parents' views were taken into account through the school's recent questionnaire and the 217 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View.
- Inspectors also took account of 67 survey responses submitted by staff.
- Inspectors checked records and documentation relating to safeguarding, behaviour, minutes of meetings, staff appraisals and monitoring, and improvement planning.
- Inspectors reviewed the checks made on staff about their suitability to work with children.

Inspection team

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James Rouse	Ofsted Inspector
Jeremy Single	Ofsted Inspector
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Krista Dawkins	Ofsted Inspector
Patricia Goodhead, lead inspector	Ofsted Inspector
Suzanne Richards	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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