

Inspection of Venerable Bede Church of England Academy

Tunstall Bank, Sunderland, Tyne and Wear SR2 0SX

Inspection dates:	21 and 22 January 2025
The quality of education	Inadequate
Behaviour and attitudes	Requires improvement
Personal development	Requires improvement
Leadership and management	Requires improvement
Previous inspection grade	Good

The head of school is Tracey Burgess. This school is part of Northern Lights Learning Trust, which means other people in the trust also have responsibility for running the school. The trust is run by the chief executive officer, Jo Heaton, and overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by Katie Hammond.

What is it like to attend this school?

This school has undergone considerable positive change of late. Several leaders are new to their posts. Serious concerns about pupils' behaviour, attitudes to learning and attendance are being successfully addressed. Some pupils now attend school more regularly and have an increasingly positive approach to their studies. However, much work is still required to ensure that pupils receive an acceptable quality of education.

The school is ambitious for everyone who attends to share its vision to 'Soar to the heights together'. Staff are proud to work at the school and share good relationships with pupils. Significant staff absence in the past has impacted negatively on the school's journey of improvement. Pupils are now taught by specialist staff who know them well. Most pupils have an adult they would ask for help. Bullying has reduced at the school. Pupils mostly conduct themselves in an orderly way.

The school places an emphasis on making careful choices and respecting others. Pupils are taught about other faiths, how British society functions and the importance of staying healthy. However, some of these important messages are not well understood by pupils. There are many enrichment opportunities on offer. Some pupils make good use of these to develop their talents and interests.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

The way in which the curriculum has been taught over time has been too variable. Pupils do not remember much of what they have been taught in the past. Significant gaps in pupils' skills and knowledge negatively impact on their achievement in external tests and assessments. Published outcomes in 2024 were poor.

The way that staff check pupils' understanding does not precisely identify what pupils can, and cannot, do. Staff still do not carefully adapt new learning based on what they know about pupils. This means that pupils do not learn the curriculum as well as they might. Recently the school has improved the way it tracks and predicts pupils' achievement. This is beginning to inform the identification of support and intervention for pupils who need it most.

Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) receive additional support at the school. Professional development for staff ensures that pupils' varying needs are understood. Adjustments to meet these needs in lessons are of a variable quality. This means that some pupils with SEND do not learn the curriculum as well as they should.

The school provides additional support for pupils at an early stage of learning to read. The specific strategy needed for each pupil is well set out. This is helping pupils who receive this support to develop their fluency. However, reading and literacy are less well embedded across the school. In some subjects, important vocabulary is not emphasised by staff nor used confidently by pupils. This limits the quality of discussion in lessons and written responses in pupils' books. Some pupils cannot read, write and communicate as well as might be expected for their age.

Pupils' behaviour and attendance is improving over time. Inspectors visited lessons where pupils were calm and focused. However, sometimes pupils are not engaged in their learning and staff do not tackle this effectively. Some pupils do not appreciate the importance of attending school regularly. Leaders are working tirelessly to improve pupils' attitudes to their education. There are positive signs of success in this aspect of the school's work.

Pupils are taught about life in modern Britain through the school's personal, social and health education programme. However, as in other subjects, they do not retain this knowledge consistently or demonstrate an effective understanding of the protected characteristics, democracy or a range of world faiths, for example. The school provides many opportunities for pupils to explore future careers. Pupils undertake work experience, hear from local business professionals and receive impartial careers advice.

Those responsible for governance are realistic about the challenges the school faces. They are mindful of the impact on staff well-being when significant improvement is required. Steps have been taken to increase capacity at the school and reduce staff absence. This is beginning to have a positive impact on all aspects of the school's work.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- The school's curriculum has not been well implemented over time. This is, in part, due to high levels of staff absence. However, it is also due to some staff not checking what pupils know and can do before setting new learning. As a result, pupils do not have a secure understanding of what they have been taught. The school should ensure that they identify the strategies that are most effective for securing pupils' knowledge and that these are implemented consistently across the school.
- Pupils do not have a secure understanding of important subject-specific vocabulary and terminology. Staff do not focus on this important information in some lessons. Some pupils cannot read, write and communicate as well as they should be able to. The school should ensure that staff emphasise important vocabulary and guide pupils to use it confidently in their written and verbal responses.
- Over time, pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, have not gained the skills and knowledge they require to succeed in external tests and assessments. Therefore, pupils are not well prepared for their next steps in education, employment or training. The school should ensure they have effective systems to assess gaps in pupils' knowledge and skills and implement precise support, intervention and teaching strategies that will most benefit pupils' outcomes.

- Some pupils do not attend school regularly enough or meet the school's high expectations for conduct. This is because the positive ethos and culture created by the school is not embedded among a significant minority of pupils. The school should ensure that the importance of regular attendance and a positive attitude to learning are continually emphasised and that areas of concern are continually addressed.
- Pupils do not have a secure understanding of the school's personal, social and health education curriculum. In particular, knowledge of parliamentary democracy, a wide range of world faiths and the protected characteristics are not embedded among pupils. This limits how well prepared they are to live in, and contribute to, modern British society.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, '[disadvantaged pupils](#)' is used to mean pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND); pupils who meet the [definition of children in need of help and protection](#); pupils receiving statutory local authority support from a social worker; and pupils who otherwise meet the criteria used for deciding the school's [pupil premium funding](#) (this includes pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years, looked after children (children in local authority care) and/or children who left care through adoption or another formal route).

School details

Unique reference number	139184
Local authority	Sunderland
Inspection number	10371347
Type of school	Secondary Comprehensive
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	11 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	844
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Katie Hammond
CEO of the trust	Jo Heaton
Headteacher	Tracey Burgess (head of school)
Website	www.venerablebede.co.uk
Dates of previous inspection	4 and 5 November 2021 under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The school joined Northern Lights Learning Trust in February 2023.
- Since the previous inspection, the head of school and several other senior leaders taken up their roles.
- The school has a religious character and is part of the Diocese of Durham in the Church of England. It received a diocesan inspection under section 48 of the Education Act 2005 in October 2024.
- The school uses six providers of alternative education. Three are registered with the Department for Education. Three are not registered with the Department for Education.
- The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 8 to 13 with information and engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.

Information about this inspection

The inspectors carried out this graded inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. During a graded inspection, we grade the school for each of our key judgements (quality of education; behaviour and attitudes; personal development; and leadership and management) and for any relevant provision judgement (early years and/or sixth form provision). Schools receiving a graded inspection from September 2024 will not be given an overall effectiveness grade.

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

- Inspections are a point-in-time evaluation about the quality of a school's education provision.
- Inspectors discussed any continued impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors met with the head of school and other senior leaders. The lead inspector also spoke with members of the trust, local governing body and a representative of the diocese.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in the following subjects: art, design and technology, science, history and English. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with subject leaders, visited a sample of lessons, spoke with some pupils and teachers and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- Inspectors met with leaders responsible for careers education at the school.
- Inspectors met with early career teachers and those who mentor them.
- Inspectors met with the leaders responsible for literacy across the school and observed a range of reading interventions taking place.
- Inspectors examined the school's behaviour records and spoke with providers of alternative education.
- Inspectors met with the special educational needs coordinator. They looked at a range of documentation, including education, health and care plans and individual learning plans. Inspectors also checked how pupils with SEND are supported in lessons.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, the inspectors: reviewed the single central record; took account of the views of leaders, staff and pupils; and considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils' interests first.
- Inspectors observed pupils' behaviour in a range of situations, including in corridors, at breaktimes, at lunchtimes and in lessons. They also spoke to pupils about behaviour, bullying and what it is like to attend the school.

- Inspectors considered the responses from parents and carers to the online parent survey, Ofsted Parent View. This included the comments submitted via the free-text facility. Inspectors also considered responses to Ofsted's online pupil and staff surveys.

Inspection team

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