

Mark College

Independent school standard inspection report

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Reporting inspector	Mick Megee
Social Care Inspector	Paul Clark

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Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by Ofsted under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002, as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005, the purpose of which is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.^{1, 2}

The inspection of boarding provision was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 having regard to the national minimum standards for residential special schools, in order to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and the government of the quality and standard of the service provided.³

Information about the school

Mark College is a residential special school near Highbridge in Somerset which provides education for students with specific learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, language disorder and dyspraxia. It was established in 1986 and is approved to admit up to 88 students. Currently 71 students are on roll aged between 11 and 19 years. Almost half have a statement of special educational needs and a small number attend as day students. They come from areas throughout the United Kingdom and several are from overseas. Most places are privately funded, with just under half being funded by students' local authorities. Since the last inspection, provision has been extended to include education for post-16 students. The school is in the ownership of The Priory Group, which owns several other establishments providing education for children with special educational needs. The school was last inspected in 2007. A new principal and vice-principal were appointed in September 2010. The last social care inspection took place in March 2010.

The school seeks to raise students' self-esteem through promoting their academic and sporting achievement. Staff employ structured approaches specifically designed for helping students to overcome their learning difficulties and to experience success.

Evaluation of the school

Mark College provides a good quality of education that meets its aims, maintaining its good standards from the previous inspection. Students make good progress because the quality of the curriculum, teaching and assessment is good. Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good and their behaviour is outstanding. The provision for the welfare, health and safety of students is good. The boarding provision is of good quality. All required safeguarding arrangements are securely in place. The school meets all but one of the regulations.

¹ www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2002/ukpga_20020032_en_14#pt10-ch1-pb4-l1g162

² www.opsi.gov.uk/ACTS/acts2005/ukpga_20050018_en_15#sch8

³ www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2000/ukpga_20000014_en_1

Quality of education

The school provides a good curriculum for its students that effectively interweaves social, vocational and academic features. Most teachers successfully adapt the curriculum so that students' individual needs, capabilities and interests are recognised and addressed. Students have access to the subjects of the National Curriculum. However, there is too little curriculum time allocated to music and a modern foreign language. This prevents students who have a statement of special educational needs that specifies the full National Curriculum from achieving highly in those subjects. Students may choose from a good range of academic and vocational qualifications in Key Stage 4 and post-16. Teachers provide students with good support to overcome their literacy and numeracy difficulties in all subjects. The school has developed detailed curriculum policies and schemes of work that ensure that the students have a continuous and coherent experience of education. The school's personal, social and health education (PSHE) programme underpins all teaching and learning both in and out of the classroom, with good support from residential and therapeutic staff.

The curriculum has a strong emphasis on sports and leisure activities, and all students undertake intensive physical exercise at least three times a week. The facilities for physical education are outstanding. The purpose-built sports centre houses badminton courts and volleyball courts. There is a weight-training gym and a nine-hole golf course opposite the school. There are extensive playing fields so that most field sports are available, including cricket, football and rugby, together with athletics and tennis on two hard courts. The few students who show a dislike for traditional sports are given good alternative opportunities for exercise through, for example, walking and golf or by attending a local outdoor pursuits centre. The curriculum is enriched by a good range of extra-curricular activities including art, drama clubs, dry skiing, orienteering, theatre trips, water sports and environmental activities. There are good residential opportunities through ski trips and rugby tours. The school has an excellent link with a local college that provides half of the timetable for sixth form students, thus allowing students opportunities to socialise and learn alongside their mainstream peers.

The high ratio of staff to students within small classes (with no more than nine students to a class, and usually just three or four) makes a significant contribution to the good quality of teaching, assessment and learning. This gives the staff the ability to come to know the students very well, forestall quickly any emerging difficulties and help them to recover their self-confidence. Most lesson plans set out explicit individual lesson objectives and teaching strategies to meet the differing learning needs of the students. Staff assess progress at the end of each lesson in order to have a sound basis for planning subsequent steps in learning. However, the school does not sufficiently ensure that students are fully aware of their individual learning targets. Consequently, they do not have a clear understanding of how to move their own learning forward and how to know that they have been successful. Relationships between adults and students, and between students themselves, are helpful and positive and students rediscover quickly their enjoyment of learning.

When students join the school, they undergo a six-week assessment period. During this time, staff gain a good understanding of students' academic starting points from which they can measure progress. Most teachers use this information well in their planning and all maintain detailed records of each student's progress. The school carries out formal assessments of progress three times a year through the new tutor system and provides comprehensive reports to parents, carers and local authorities. Students are beginning to be involved in assessing their own efforts. The school's records show that students are making good progress from their individual starting points in all subjects. Students achieve most strongly in science. This is because of the enthusiastic teaching by separate biology, chemistry and physics specialists and because of the emphasis on practical and experimental aspects. Teachers' marking gives students praise and encouragement, although there is often insufficient written commentary on how the work could be improved further.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of students

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good overall because teachers and social care staff successfully nurture the individual qualities of each young person through constant encouragement and good quality care. Students show their enjoyment of school through their outstanding behaviour and attendance, and through their very good attitudes towards their learning. Students say they are happy at school and they are keen and motivated to learn. There is an effective system of rewards which students clearly understand. The school has a policy of avoiding sanctions if at all possible. Students understand this and respond positively to the school's approach. Students take responsibility for a number of areas of school life, including acting as school council representatives, as prefects and as mentors to younger students.

The questionnaires from parents overwhelmingly support the work of the school. One parent, typical of many, stated, 'My son has improved out of all recognition since starting three years ago. I cannot recommend this school strongly enough. Mark College has been "the best thing since sliced bread".' Students are proud of their school and develop well as mature young people with a strong sense of right and wrong. Students' spiritual development is nurtured well through assemblies, tutor periods and religious education lessons. Social development for students is enhanced through attendance at a local mainstream college and through the good variety of additional activities available, especially in sport. Boarding and education staff collaborate very effectively to reinforce and enhance personal and academic outcomes for students.

Cultural development, though sound, is not as strong as other aspects of personal development. The school has recognised this and is developing a programme to further promote the students' understanding of living in a multicultural society. Two students have been involved in the 'Auschwitz Project' where they have gained further insight into the Jewish way of life. Students' knowledge of British institutions

and current affairs is developed well through the school's integrated PSHE programme. They recently took part in a question-and-answer session with their local Member of Parliament. Older students are prepared well for their next stage of education by having mock interviews, developing their curriculum vitae and receiving careers advice. They are well prepared for their future through interesting work experience and their acquisition of a good level of basic skills.

Welfare, health and safety of students

Provision for students' welfare, health and safety is good. The school has in place a good range of detailed policies and procedures, which meet all the regulations, to ensure students' well-being. These include policies for child protection. The designated officer has received higher-level training as required. All school staff have received training on child protection, health and safety, first aid and fire awareness and there are good procedures and training in place for tackling any incidents that may occur. The school's records show that staff know how to deal with any issues quickly and effectively and how to report them accurately. Staff carry out risk assessments for most eventualities, including those for educational visits, fire and health and safety.

There are frequent, regular inspections of the buildings, including health and safety checks. Action plans are produced straightaway and promptly implemented to address any identified issues. However, safety information and files, though very well maintained, are held in a number of different places. This makes it more difficult for senior staff to find essential information quickly in the event of an emergency. There is a comprehensive accessibility plan in place which complies with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, as amended. Students have a good understanding of how to lead a healthy life, by taking part in many different sports within and out of school and learn about being healthy and eating sensibly. They enjoy the excellent healthy meals that the school's caterers provide. They say that they feel safe and that there is someone to listen to if they have a worry or personal problem. Students say that staff deal effectively and sensitively with any reported bullying, although this rarely happens.

Suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors

All regulations are met. The school, through its parent organisation, effectively implements a rigorous recruitment policy. The school's single central record of checks made on staff confirms that all appropriate checks have been made to ensure the suitability of those working with the students.

Premises and accommodation at the school

The school's premises and accommodation enable students to learn effectively and safely. Classrooms are suitably furnished, well lit, ventilated and heated. Classrooms

vary in size but are all suitable for the group sizes being taught. The rooms are all in sound decorative order. The site has three boarding houses, a range of specialist rooms, a very large multi-purpose sports hall and a modern dining block. The school has extensive grounds which are used for games and recreation.

Provision of information

Current and prospective parents and carers receive a full range of information. Current parents receive regular written reports and as well as frequent formal and informal meetings. The school keeps in close frequent touch with parents by telephone. The prospectus is clear and informative.

Manner in which complaints are to be handled

The school has a clear and well-written complaints policy and procedures that fully meet all requirements. The school values feedback on its work and investigates informal complaints made by students, staff or parents very thoroughly. There have been no formal complaints in the last year.

Effectiveness of the boarding provision

The boarding provision is of good quality with effective management systems which support students and staff. There is good promotion of equality and diversity. Both male and female boarders have good access to all resources and sporting facilities. The school offers students a range of international cuisines and holds occasional theme days where the understanding of other cultures is promoted.

The school makes good arrangements for meeting the health needs of students, overseen by a head of care who is a registered nurse. All care staff undertake first aid training as part of their core training. The school has an arrangement with a local general practice to attend to any student requiring treatment. There are suitable arrangements in place for the care of boarders who are ill and for the storage and administration of medication. There are well-stocked first aid boxes in all key areas of the school although not all boxes contain a list of their contents. The school has access to a range of health care professionals such as physiotherapists and adolescent mental health services.

All catering staff are suitably trained and menu plans show that a balanced, varied and nutritious diet is provided, including special diets where necessary. The last environmental health inspection highly commended the school's catering arrangements. The school has good policies, procedures and records in place to cover all aspects of safeguarding, including bullying, behaviour management and complaints. A written young person's guide informs students how they may make complaints. The school's designated child protection officer has received suitable

training. All boarding staff receive regularly updated training in safeguarding. There are good systems in place to ensure that students live in a safe and secure environment, including regular fire evacuation drills some of which take place during hours of darkness. A health and safety committee meets monthly to consider all possible areas of risk within the campus. The school's processes for the vetting and recruitment of care staff are extremely robust.

There are effective working relationships between care and teaching staff, including several formal meetings each week to discuss individual students' progress. There is a wide range of evening and weekend activities, including sporting activities, and clubs available to students within the school and in the local community. Students positively contribute to decision-making about life at the school through the school council. New students have an introductory day at the school with their parents before confirming their place. Statements of special educational needs are appropriately reviewed and students complete a 'Have Your Say' form which forms part of the review.

Care staff prepare students well for independent living by regularly cooking their own meals. Both of the boarding houses are decorated and furnished to a high standard. Televisions, games and internet access are available in all of the houses. Students have either a single or double bedroom, some with en-suite facilities. All of the girls have single en-suite rooms. There is a sufficient number of toilets and bathing or shower facilities. There are good arrangements for the safekeeping of personal items, and for the distribution of weekly pocket money which comes from parents.

The school has good management and organisational systems in place which support staff and students. Students, parents and other relevant stakeholders are kept well informed about the aims and principles of the school, for example through the website and the handbook of policies and procedures. The principal and the head of care have the appropriate professional qualifications and child care experience to carry out their role. At least 80% of the care staff have a level 3 qualification in caring. All newly appointed staff complete an induction programme which trains them in the core areas of their role. The organisation offers staff ongoing training in key areas of work, and all staff complete an annual personal training and development plan. Care staff receive regular supervision from the head of care. Students' case files are clearly written and contain a full assessment of their needs and how the school will meet them. The operation of the school is subject to unannounced monitoring visits by the Priory Group with comprehensive written reports, and termly executive reports on the quality of the service. These internal regulatory systems help to ensure that the school continually improves the service in the best interests of the students.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The proprietor has ensured that the school meets The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2010, schedule 1 ('the Regulations'), with the exception of those listed below.⁴

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of the quality of education provided (standards in part 1) and must:

- ensure that, where students have a statement of special educational needs, the education provided fulfils its requirements (paragraph 2(2(e))).

The school meets the national minimum standards for residential special schools and associated regulations.

What the school could do to improve further

While not required by regulations, the school might wish to consider the following points for development:

- ensure that students are fully aware of their individual learning targets and have a clear understanding of their next steps in learning
- ensure that teachers' marking includes commentary on how students' work could be improved further.

⁴ www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2010/1997/contents/made

Inspection judgements

outstanding	good	satisfactory	inadequate
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The quality of education

Overall quality of education		✓		
How well the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of students		✓		
How effective teaching and assessment are in meeting the full range of students' needs		✓		
How well students make progress in their learning		✓		

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development

Quality of provision for students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development		✓		
The behaviour of students	✓			

Welfare, health and safety of students

The overall welfare, health and safety of students		✓		
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The quality of boarding provision

Effectiveness of boarding provision		✓		
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School details

School status	Independent		
Type of school	Residential special school for students with specific learning difficulties		
Date school opened	1986		
Age range of students	10–19 years		
Gender of students	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time students)	Boys: 67	Girls: 4	Total: 71
Number on roll (part-time students)	Boys: 0	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Number of boarders	Boys: 48	Girls: 3	Total: 51
Number of students with a statement of special educational needs	Boys: 40	Girls: 4	Total: 44
Number of students who are looked after	Boys: 1	Girls: 0	Total: 1
Annual fees (day students)	£17,652-£40,743		
Annual fees (boarders)	£25,698-£48,783		
Address of school	Mark House Blackford Road Mark Highbridge Somerset TA9 4NP		
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Headteacher	Mrs Michelle Whitham-Jones		
Proprietor	Priory Group		