

The Alternative School

Independent school standard inspection report

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Reporting inspector	Amraz Ali HMI

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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}

Information about the school

The Alternative School, or TAS (pronounced 'taz') as it is known to its students, is a school for boys and girls aged from 14 to 16 years. It was established in May 2007 and formally registered as a school in 2010. There are currently 34 students on role, 25 full-time and nine part-time; of these 22 have a statement of special educational needs. The statements cover a range of needs, including learning difficulties, emotional and behavioural related difficulties and conditions associated with autistic spectrum disorders. Almost all of the places for students currently on roll have been funded by local authorities, maintained schools or pupil referral units and some students are on the roll of this school and a maintained school. The school runs from three separate sites in the Pendle district of Lancashire. Its base is on the ground floor of The Old Library in Barnoldswick, one site is a room located in the Ace Centre in Nelson and the other is a room in the New Era Centre in Accrington.

The school is non-denominational and aims 'to take a more holistic approach and support both the personal and educational needs of young people, helping them to overcome a wide range of barriers and develop themselves into well rounded young individuals. To engage young people in a wide range of positive activities and to develop them as young adults, at a pace that is suited to that young person'. This is the school's first full inspection.

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

Evaluation of the school

The Alternative School successfully meets its aims and provides a good quality of education for its students. The satisfactory curriculum meets students' needs by providing individualised learning opportunities and has strengths in the opportunities that promote pupils' personal development. The curriculum along with good teaching provides an all-round education which develops students' attitudes and improves their attendance and engagement in education well. Students' spiritual, moral social and cultural development is good and their behaviour is satisfactory. The provision for welfare, health and safety is satisfactory and all of the requirements to safeguard students are in place. The school meets most of the regulations for independent schools.

Quality of education

The curriculum is satisfactory overall but with particular strengths in the way that it is made flexible to match the individual needs of students. The required range of experiences is provided and there are suitable schemes of work for the subjects taught although there is a weakness in the provision of science. Planning for the teaching of science is through a range of subjects, such as physical education and outdoor education courses, which cover the required range of scientific areas of study. The planning is not of the same quality as that for other subjects. There are limited facilities available for practical science work and students do not have regular access to laboratory experience. Work undertaken in most subjects leads to externally accredited qualifications. Activities, both indoors and outdoors, provide the students with new experiences that effectively develop their basic skills, particularly in reading, writing and mathematics, in situations that are less formal than more traditional schools and which students say are non-threatening. Personal, social, health and citizenship education (PSHCE) is an important part of the education provided and each student receives clear and consistent careers guidance with small achievable steps to help them gain college places. A strong feature of the school's work centres on its use of the outdoors and The Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme, on which the majority of students are enrolled. Students are able to select from a wide range of outdoor sporting and adventurous activities, such as canoeing, caving, archery and mountain biking.

Teaching and assessment are good. Teachers plan their lessons well and the teaching observed met students' needs well. Many students start at the school with weak basic skills and they are often acutely aware of their own shortcomings in literacy and numeracy. A key factor in the school's success has been in the small group sizes and the one-to-one support provided for students. The support and guidance they receive ensures that they make good progress overall. Teachers are confident and use their good relationships effectively to motivate students. Praise and encouragement are often the order of the day. Students state that this has been a key factor in helping them to succeed with their studies. Teachers' instructions are clear and questioning is used to check on students' understanding and to make links

with previous learning. Students generally concentrate well and understand the importance of gaining qualifications if they are to move on to further education, employment or training.

Although the pace of lessons is generally good there are instances when time is not always used to its fullest effect, for example when students are waiting for their peers from another site to arrive or when some students are allowed additional breaks. There are times within lessons when not all students are actively engaged in lesson-related activities and some opportunities are missed for students to talk to each other about their work. The quality and range of resources is sound and appropriate use is made of the computer suites in the centres. The school takes advantage of each site's closeness to a public library. Teachers record students' progress against their targets and monitor the standards of students' work efficiently. Provision for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is good. Good use is made of photography, computers and music to motivate and engage students. Many are proud of their achievements, such as the 'raps' and song lyrics that were performed for parents and carers at a recent awards ceremony.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. Behaviour is satisfactory overall; in class it is often good and many students demonstrate positive attitudes to their work and enjoy their learning, which is reflected in their improved attendance rates and greater engagement in education. A comment from a former student was, 'They all made me feel really welcome and at home; they didn't judge me and they treat everyone fairly.' Students are well mannered and courteous in one-to-one situations with adults. However, there are times when some students are not always polite and well behaved in larger groups despite the best efforts of staff. Students' spiritual development is encouraged by providing opportunities for them to experience nature through the many visits out. There are opportunities for students to develop an awareness of other cultures, for example through visits to China Town in Manchester, and staff go out of their way to tackle students' stereotyped views of others and their prejudices. Students have a clear understanding of the differences between right and wrong although some still choose to make poor choices. When they do so adults respond sensitively to encourage students to reflect on their behaviour and its impact on themselves and others. Students are taught about the judiciary in England, which includes a visit to a prison. This, complemented by visits to art galleries and museums, provides students with a broad understanding of English institutions.

Small class sizes and individual help from adults enable students to develop their confidence and to express their individuality. All students work towards externally recognised qualifications. This provides them with a sense of self-worth and accomplishment and has a very positive effect on their self-confidence. Students take part in outdoor team activities, which develops their ability to get on with others. Students make a positive contribution to the community; those who are enrolled on

the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme undertake voluntary work in the community, such as gardening. Students' improved basic skills and better engagement with learning means that almost all go on to college places and the school prepares them well for their future lives.

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

Arrangements for the welfare, health and safety of the students are satisfactory. There are policies and procedures in place to minimise risks throughout the school day and provide a caring and safe environment for students on a day-to-day basis. Regular fire safety audits take place and very recently all portable electrical appliances have been checked to ensure they are safe. Students state that instances of bullying are rare and the vast majority of students state that they feel safe. All staff have been trained to the appropriate level in child protection. The school has suitable policies for anti-bullying, safeguarding children, health and safety, and behaviour. It has satisfactory levels of fire safety at all three sites as identified by its risk assessments and there is a satisfactory first-aid policy. The school visits policy is effectively implemented and there are appropriate risk assessments in place for each visit out of the school. The school has admission and attendance registers. However, although there are systems in place to record the time that a student arrives and leaves, the daily attendance register, completed by the tutor and maintained electronically, does not meet the regulations fully. This is because there is not a daily set registration period and the recorded attendance does not indicate morning and/or afternoon attendance. The school fulfils its duties under the Disabilities Discrimination Act 1995, as amended and has prepared a three-year plan to improve accessibility for students with disabilities.

Students develop a satisfactory understanding of what constitutes healthy living through the curriculum, for example, when studying for sports leader qualifications. Healthy eating is encouraged by providing access to fresh fruit and healthy ingredients for snacks and fruit 'smoothies'. However, not all students act on the guidance offered. Students have been made aware of the risks associated with drug misuse and smoking but efforts to discourage smoking have met with some resistance from students and has had limited impact in changing habits.

Suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors

A single central record is kept up to date and shows clearly that all staff and regular visitors have been subject to an enhanced check by the Criminal Records Bureau before they are allowed to work at the school. The school has a staff appointment system, which ensures that all of the necessary checks are made before staff are appointed.

School's premises and accommodation

Each of the school's three bases provides different facilities, sometimes within the communal buildings that they share or with the use of additional resources close by. At the two annex sites all visitors have to sign in at the main reception for the building. The classrooms located in these buildings are secure. Although the premises at all three sites are decorated and furnished to an appropriate standard and together are an adequate size to accommodate up to 45 students, some classrooms are larger than others. At the Accrington site the classroom is not suitable for teaching together all of the 12 students, who are based at this site. This facility is managed by careful timetabling and by directing students to study independently at the nearby library. All three sites provide access for pupils with disabilities and for emergency services. However, although there are sound arrangements for administering first aid if required, none of the sites have dedicated facilities for pupils who are ill.

At two of the sites there are appropriate and separate toilet facilities in place for staff and students to use. There are advanced plans in place for remodelling the Barnoldswick site to increase the number of toilets available for both staff and students. However, currently there is only one washroom facility and this is not sufficient for the number of students and staff at the site. The sites offer limited but satisfactory access to outdoor space and appropriate use is made of nearby parks and open spaces further afield. Sporting activities take place in community centres at Nelson and Accrington.

Provision of information for parents, carers and others

The school provides parents and carers with the required information through the prospectus and website. There is a clear statement of the aims and curriculum of the school and the arrangements for discipline. Parents, carers and others are invited to an induction meeting with an individual member of staff where the school's routines and policies are explained. The school provides parents and carers with an annual written report on the progress of their child. However, where students are wholly or partly funded by a local authority, an annual account of income received and expenditure incurred by the school in respect of that student is not submitted to the local authority.

Procedures for handling complaints

The school has a complaints policy and set of procedures, which meet all of the regulations. The school has taken steps to ensure that parents and carers are aware of these.

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.³

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of provision for pupils' welfare, health and safety (standard 3) and must:

- maintain attendance registers in accordance with the Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006 (paragraph 17).

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of the premises and accommodation (standard 5) and must:

- provide sufficient washrooms for staff and pupils, including facilities for pupils with special needs and disability, which take account of regulations 3 and 4 of the Education (School Premises) Regulations 1999 (paragraph 23(j))
- provide appropriate facilities for pupils who are ill, in accordance with regulation 5 of the Education (School Premises) Regulations 1999 (paragraph 23(k)).

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of the provision of information for parents, carers and others (standard 6) and must:

- ensure that where a pupil who is registered at the school is wholly or partly funded by the local authority, an annual account of income received and expenditure incurred by the school in respect of that pupil is submitted to the local authority and on request to the Secretary of State (paragraph 24(1)(h)).

What the school could do to improve further

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

- improve the curriculum planning for science and improve access to specialist science laboratory facilities
- increase the opportunities for students to talk and share their ideas about their work with other students within lessons.

³ www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/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 pupils			✓	
How effective teaching and assessment are in meeting the full range of pupils' needs		✓		
How well pupils make progress in their learning		✓		

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development

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

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The overall welfare, health and safety of pupils			✓	
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School details

School status	Independent		
Type of school	Secondary		
Date school opened	September 2007 – registered September 2010		
Age range of pupils	14-16		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 19	Girls: 6	Total: 25
Number on roll (part-time pupils)	Boys: 7	Girls: 2	Total: 9
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational needs	Boys: 16	Girls: 6	Total: 22
Number of pupils who are looked after	Boys: 0	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Annual fees (day pupils)	£4,815		
Address of school	The Old Library Fernlea Avenue Barnoldswick Lancashire BB18 5DW		
Telephone number	01282 851 800		
Email address	info@thealternativeschool.co.uk		
Headteacher	Kirsty-Anne Pugh		
Proprietor	Kirsty-Anne Pugh		