

The Links Education Support Centre

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	130356
Local Authority	Hertfordshire
Inspection number	381265
Inspection dates	24–25 November 2011
Reporting inspector	Jeffery Plumb

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

Type of school	Pupil referral unit
School category	Pupil referral unit
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	52
Appropriate authority	The local authority
Chair	Maire Lynch (The Management Committee)
Headteacher	Tracey Healy
Date of previous school inspection	13 January 2009
School address	1 Hixberry Lane St Albans AL4 0TZ
Telephone number	01727 836150
Fax number	01727 790530
Email address	head@linksesc.herts.sch.uk

Age group	3–16
Inspection date(s)	24–25 November 2011
Inspection number	381265

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, work-based learning and skills training, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for looked after children, safeguarding and child protection.

Further copies of this report are obtainable from the school. Under the Education Act 2005, the school must provide a copy of this report free of charge to certain categories of people. A charge not exceeding the full cost of reproduction may be made for any other copies supplied.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 4234, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may copy all or parts of this document for non-commercial educational purposes, as long as you give details of the source and date of publication and do not alter the information in any way.

To receive regular email alerts about new publications, including survey reports and school inspection reports, please visit our website and go to 'Subscribe'.

[Piccadilly Gate](#)
[Store St](#)
[Manchester](#)
[M1 2WD](#)

T: 0300 123 4234
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

© Crown copyright 2011



Introduction

This inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors. They observed 11 lessons taught by 11 different teachers. Inspectors held meetings with members of the management committee, a representative from the local authority (governance), and with groups of staff and students. They read letters from schools supported by the centre's outreach staff team. They analysed a wide range of evidence, including data relating to attendance, re-integration, behaviour and students' progress and attainment; statements of special educational needs; behaviour plans; policies including those on safeguarding; the school development plan; two case studies of students in vulnerable circumstances; and information from the school survey. They read six questionnaire returns from parents and carers; questionnaires returned by staff; and those returned by the students.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at a number of key areas.

- How successful is the programme which focuses on working with Asian fathers and their sons in raising students' achievement?
- How effective is the centre in improving the attendance of students who start out on programmes having not attended regularly or not all at their previous mainstream schools?
- What is the impact of the outreach programme on improving behaviour, reducing exclusions and raising achievement for pupils and students in vulnerable circumstances in the area schools supported by this centre?

Information about the school

The Links Education Support Centre provides education and care support for students who have been permanently excluded from school, students who are at high risk of being permanently excluded, and those who face other challenges, such as non-attendance or poor attendance, behavioural, emotional and social difficulties and mental health needs. There is also a new long-term programme for schools referring young people with a very long history of disaffection and disengagement as part of a traded service. The on-site provision for Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 students takes place in a new, purpose-built site on Hixberry Lane. There is also outreach provision based on another site, which supports nurseries, primary and secondary schools in the area in providing support to those pupils and students on their rolls who have more difficulty than most with school and learning.

The needs of the students in the on-site provision are far more complex than at the time of the last inspection. There has been a 50% increase in the number of students referred with mental health needs and/or with autistic spectrum disorder. There has been a 40% increase in the number of non-attenders and school refusers being supported. There has been an increase in the number of Traveller students. Five students have statements of special educational needs, a few of whom have been referred from special schools. There are a very few refugees, all of whom are at an early stage of learning to speak English. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is high.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?

1

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

1

Main findings

The Links Education Support Centre provides an outstanding quality of education. The vast majority of students on entry to the centre have a history of poor attendance at their previous schools, very significant gaps in their education and are not engaged with learning. These same students on leaving say that the centre has turned their lives around and given them the key to open the door to their future. All Year 11 students who left in 2011 entered a further education college or secured employment.

Achievement is outstanding. From a low starting point, due to poor or non-attendance at school and/or complex emotional and mental health needs, students make rapid gains in academic learning. Students placed in the centre for short-term programmes, because they are at risk of permanent exclusion from their schools, make outstanding progress in English and mathematics. In a few months, they make the amount of progress expected nationally within a year. This is sustained when they return to their schools. Students on long-term programmes also make outstanding progress; within a year they progress at the rate expected nationally over two years. An outstandingly flexible, relevant and personalised curriculum, skilful and challenging teaching and high quality therapeutic care contribute to students' success. As students regain self-belief, they take off with their learning. Traveller girls, who did not attend school previously, see that they can secure a good job if they succeed in their hair and beauty course. Their attendance on this course is outstanding.

The vast majority of students make at least a 20% increase in their attendance compared with their previous attendance pattern at school. They enjoy coming to the centre and appreciate the academic rigour within an exceptionally caring environment. Engagement with learning is outstanding and the centre is an exceptionally calm place in which to work. Students respond maturely to the dignity and respect which they are shown. Behaviour, including for those students with severe emotional and behavioural difficulties, is outstanding. Adoption of safe practices is a very significant strength. Students in their construction lessons speedily put on their boots with steel caps; in hair and beauty, they put on gloves and they know how to keep safe when using computers in the centre's internet cafe. Their contribution to the community beyond the centre's gates is outstanding. They produced a CD of a rap about their concerns of lack of safety in their local park after dark and confidently presented it to their local councillors. In the centre, they are involved in shaping behaviour policy. Students are exceptionally well-equipped with

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

the essential college-readiness and job-readiness skills to be successful in adult life. Although they have a good understanding of what they need to do to adopt a healthy life-style, a few struggle to quit smoking and to stop the misuse of harmful substances.

Teaching is outstanding. Teachers know the needs of every student and plan to meet their needs exceptionally well. Classroom walls are covered with rubrics signposting exactly what students need to do to raise the level of their work. The innovative, highly personalised and carefully tailored curriculum packages enable all students to gain the qualifications required to access meaningful college placements when they leave. Therapy programmes integral to the curriculum remove any emotional barriers students may have and so enable them to engage enthusiastically with learning.

The management of the centre's outreach work in supporting schools in the area is outstanding. The centre successfully trains mainstream teachers in how to work very effectively with students who exhibit challenging behaviours. As a consequence, permanent exclusions from local schools are rare. Local schools wrote to inspectors saying, 'We are a richer community of schools, a better community of people because of the significant contribution made by the centre.' Self-evaluation is rigorous, research is thorough about what works for students and families in exceptionally vulnerable circumstances, and decisions for improvement involve innovative thinking. Projects emerge which successfully engage students in learning and raise their achievement. For example, a project which focuses on bonding Asian fathers with their sons has accelerated the learning for Asian boys supported by the centre. Given the improved curriculum, the accelerated rate of students' progress, the significantly increased range of accreditation opportunities and the total success in all Year 11 students sustaining college placements after leaving the centre in 2011, the capacity for sustained improvement is outstanding.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

Continue to work to encourage all students to adopt a physical and emotionally healthy life-style and so enable them to reach their full personal and academic potential.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils**1**

Attainment on entry for the vast majority of students is very low due mainly to emotional difficulties which have impeded their learning and their infrequent attendance at mainstream schools. Almost all students overcome these obstacles and make rapid progress. Most who return to their mainstream schools speedily sustain this rate of progress and, measured against their capability, attain very good GCSE passes and other nationally recognised qualifications. Those students with very complex emotional and mental health needs following longer programmes at the centre also excel in their learning. They gain a wide range of nationally recognised

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

suitable qualifications, which enable them to embark on very good quality college courses when they leave. All groups of students make outstanding progress in lessons because activities are exceptionally well matched to their needs. In a construction lesson, students made outstanding progress in developing important mathematical skills linked to the world of work. Thinking critically, they solved problems and successfully followed a complex drawing. Their finished crafted joint pieces required to construct a strong furniture item were of a high quality. In a hair and beauty lesson, girls developed important literacy skills relevant to working in a hair salon.

Students say that they feel exceptionally safe in the centre. They have a trusted adult to whom they can turn at any time. They have open door access to the headteacher whenever it is needed. Students report, and staff confirm, that there are no fights in the centre and that racial bullying is exceptionally rare and always dealt with swiftly. Students have a strong voice in how the centre is run, particularly in how they learn and the curriculum programmes they follow. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. They care for each other and have a very good understanding of the challenges faced by students in vulnerable circumstances in different parts of the world.

These are the grades for pupils’ outcomes

Pupils’ achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	1
Taking into account:	
Pupils’ attainment ¹	3
The quality of pupils’ learning and their progress	1
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	1
The extent to which pupils feel safe	1
Pupils’ behaviour	1
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	1
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1
Taking into account:	
Pupils’ attendance ¹	2
The extent of pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1

How effective is the provision?

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low

* In some special schools inspectors do not make a judgement about attainment in relation to expectations for the pupils’ age

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Exceptionally well-planned activities, skilfully matched to students’ needs, accelerate their learning. Relationships between teachers and students are excellent. Consequently, students are confident to ask penetrating questions of their teachers and the answers given, based on expert subject knowledge, significantly deepen students’ understanding of what is being taught. Teachers know the individual ‘quirks’ of each student and plan specific learning outcomes for them based on rigorous assessment of their prior learning. Teachers are adept at using students’ interests to motivate them to learn. Brisk teaching based on high expectations successfully challenges students in an environment where they can confidently take safe risks. Often students surprise themselves with what they achieve in lessons.

Highly personalised and flexibly planned, the curriculum meets students’ academic and personal needs exceptionally well. Vocational courses, taught in a 21st century environment, prepare students for the world of work. For example, the hair and beauty salon is set up to match the ambience and equipment found in a ‘top notch’ salon on the high street. Students are helped with their emotional needs through carefully designed therapeutic programmes. Accreditation opportunities are extensive and so every student gains meaningful qualifications to equip them for entry to college. Never complacent, there is a constant drive to improve the curriculum. Having engaged very disaffected Traveller girls and successfully accelerated their learning, the headteacher is already thinking through how to extend their learning through further curriculum development. An internet cafe is used very effectively to develop students’ key skills. They enjoy thinking through issues critically and solving problems using computers. Art and music provide students with opportunities to be creative. An interesting and challenging physical education programme makes a valuable contribution to students’ physical fitness.

Students are exceptionally well listened to when they enter the centre. What they say is used to plan to re-engage them with learning. Short-stay students, returning to their mainstream schools, are very effectively supported and the vast majority settle back successfully. Year 11 students are given outstanding support in accessing relevant college courses. Robust procedures are in place to improve students’ attendance and they are highly successful. Students and their families are exceptionally well-supported by joined-up-working between health professionals, social services and educational staff. Once students regain, or in many instances for the first time gain, self-belief they take off with their learning. The centre works in an effective partnership with the local Youth Offending Team to work ceaselessly to help students get back on track with their lives. The vast majority do so and become life-long learners with high, but realistic, aspirations.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	1
Taking into account:	
The use of assessment to support learning	1
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils’ needs, including, where	1

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

relevant, through partnerships	
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

How effective are leadership and management?

The senior leadership team, led by the headteacher, promotes ambition and drive exceptionally well. The whole staff team embraces and implements the vision, which successfully re-engages disaffected students with learning and so rapidly accelerates their learning. Leadership of the outreach service to schools is outstanding and greatly appreciated by local headteachers. It is of tremendous benefit to pupils and students in vulnerable circumstances and keeps them in school. Monitoring of teaching and learning is rigorous, and the feedback and coaching teachers receive following lesson observations successfully enables them to improve their teaching.

Through an extensive range of partnerships, students’ personal therapeutic needs are met exceptionally well and their learning is very significantly enriched. Project work with Traveller and Asian families is pioneering and courageous, and effects change which very significantly raises students’ achievement. Equality of opportunity lies at the core of the centre and students with complex special educational needs and/or disabilities achieve better than average, as measured by the national progression data for such students. Students’ understanding and involvement in their local, national and international communities, particularly in respect of their peers around the world, is outstanding. They have taken the platform and made presentations at national conferences on issues faced by students in vulnerable circumstances. Safeguarding policies and procedures are outstanding. Child protection procedures fully meet requirements and risk assessments, including those of students’ challenging needs-related behaviours, are exceptionally thorough and detailed. The management committee is very supportive. The local authority exercises its governance role diligently, is integral to the strategic thinking and planning for the future and supports the centre in developing its role and improving further its traded services to local schools.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	1
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	1
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	1
The effectiveness of the school’s engagement with parents and carers	1
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	1

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	1
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	1

Views of parents and carers

Returns from questionnaires show that the parents and carers are delighted with what the centre achieves for their children. They wrote that: 'The Links has given my son the confidence and respect he deserves' and 'The care and support for both the student and family is wonderful and since being here my son has been transformed from someone who hated school into a confident child who is working hard to achieve his full potential'. Another wrote: 'I feel that since my daughter started at this centre she has achieved 100% in all of her studies'. Inspection evidence reflects the positive comments made by parents and carers about the centre.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted’s questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at The Links Education Support Centre to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school.

The inspection team received 6 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 52 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	3	14	16	73	3	14	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	2	9	12	55	8	36	0	0
The school informs me about my child’s progress	4	18	17	77	1	5	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	3	14	13	59	5	23	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	2	9	12	55	5	23	3	14
The school helps me to support my child’s learning	9	41	12	55	0	0	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	8	36	13	59	1	5	0	0
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	6	27	9	41	6	27	0	0
The school meets my child’s particular needs	7	32	13	59	2	9	0	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	5	23	14	64	2	9	0	0
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	9	41	10	45	3	14	0	0
The school is led and managed effectively	3	14	16	73	3	14	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child’s experience at this school	2	9	12	55	8	36	0	0

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	43	47	10	0
Primary schools	6	46	42	6
Secondary schools	14	36	41	9
Sixth forms	15	42	41	3
Special schools	30	48	19	3
Pupil referral units	14	50	31	5
All schools	10	44	39	6

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2010 to 08 April 2011 and are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2010/11 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100.

Sixth form figures reflect the judgements made for the overall effectiveness of the sixth form in secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement. ■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils. ■ The quality of teaching. ■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships. ■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



28 November 2011

Dear Students

Inspection of The Links Education Support Centre, St Albans, AL4 0TZ

We enjoyed our recent visit to your outstanding centre. Thank you for talking with us so openly and telling us so many accounts of how this centre has helped you sort your lives out and how much you enjoy your lessons. Here are the main things we found.

- Since being in this centre, your attendance has improved very significantly, your confidence has risen and your progress in English and mathematics is outstanding.
- You behave in a very mature way and care for and support each other exceptionally well.
- Your curriculum packages, particularly the vocational subjects such as construction and hair and beauty, are outstanding.
- Your accommodation, which includes a hair salon and internet cafe, is of very high quality.
- The teaching and care you receive are outstanding and all your teachers go the extra mile to ensure that your needs are met.
- Your adoption of safe practices and active involvement in the local community are excellent.
- You leave the centre with the college and work-place skills required to be independent and successful young people.
- Your headteacher works ceaselessly to remove the barriers to learning that you have when you come into the centre, and to provide outstanding education and care for each of you through very well-planned personal learning programmes.

We have asked your headteacher to do her very best to encourage and give you all of the support you all need to adopt a healthy life-style. In particular, we want the centre to help the few of you who continue to smoke and to use harmful substances to stop.

Yours sincerely

Jeffery Plumb
Lead Inspector

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaining about inspections', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk. If you would like Ofsted to send you a copy of the guidance, please telephone **0300 123 4234, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.**