

Stepping Stones School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	119103
Local authority	Lancashire
Inspection number	379730
Inspection dates	8–9 February 2012
Lead inspector	Alastair Younger

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	5–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	21
Appropriate authority	The local authority

Headteacher	Alison Cannell
Date of previous school inspection	19 December 2008
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Introduction

Inspection team

Alastair Younger

Additional inspector

This inspection was carried out with two days' notice. Five lessons were observed, taught by all three teachers with classroom responsibilities. Meetings were held with senior staff, the Chair of the Management Committee and a representative of the local authority. Informal discussions were held with many pupils. The inspector took account of the responses to the on-line questionnaire (Parent View) when planning the inspection. He also took account of 10 responses to the questionnaire circulated to parents and carers before the inspection. The inspector observed the school's work, and looked at documentation including that relating to school self-evaluation and improvement and pupil safety.

Information about the school

This is a small, short-stay school providing for pupils who are either permanently excluded from mainstream schools or are at risk of being so on account of their behaviour. Pupils who are at risk of being excluded remain on the roll of their mainstream school but are dual registered to Stepping Stones. About half of the pupils are permanently excluded. A similar proportion is known to be eligible for free school meals. All pupils currently on roll are boys and are predominantly White British. There are no looked-after children. All pupils are recognised to have special educational needs and nine have a statement of special educational needs. With an average length of stay of about nine months the school has very high mobility.

Until September 2011 the school served the Lancaster, Morecambe and Carnforth area, but following the closure of another short-stay school it now also serves the Fylde and Wyre areas. Many staff from the closing school transferred to Stepping Stones at the same time. A new headteacher was appointed in June 2011 and a new deputy headteacher in November 2011. Both were staff members before their appointment.

In addition to the on-site provision the school also manages an early intervention programme to prevent exclusions from mainstream schools. The 24 pupils currently involved in this programme remain solely on the rolls of their mainstream schools and, as such, outcomes are not reported in this report.

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	2
Achievement of pupils	2
Quality of teaching	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils	2
Leadership and management	2

Key Findings

- This is a good school. Pupils are happy to attend, feel safe and strongly express the view that they are being greatly helped to improve their learning and behaviour. The school enjoys, and merits, the considerable approval of parents and carers.
- Pupils achieve well. A very large majority of parents and carers agrees. Pupils say the school helps them to do as well as they can. Stepping Stones sets high expectations and, in most cases, succeeds in helping pupils to rapidly close the gap between their potential and actual academic performance.
- Most pupils behave well. Exclusions are extremely rare and there have been no recent incidents of bullying. A few pupils abuse the system of self-referral to 'Peace Rooms' (a form of 'time out') where they go at times of crisis. Sometimes this is genuinely useful, but at other times it is used merely as a way of attracting attention.
- The safety of pupils is strongly promoted. They say they feel safe and their parents and carers agree. Staff are very well-trained in the management of behaviour that could result in self-harm or injuries to others.
- Teaching is good. Teachers take care to involve all pupils equally in learning. Teachers are good at deploying skilled classroom assistants to help pupils in their learning and behaviour.
- Leadership and management are good. The headteacher and deputy headteacher complement each other well. They are well-supported by a management committee that combines a good range of helpful expertise with a good knowledge of the community the school serves.
- The school has taken excellent note of an area for improvement identified in the previous inspection report, which was to improve pupils' cultural development. As a result pupils' cultural development is now outstanding in that it pervades so many aspects of school life.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Monitor very carefully the use of 'Peace Rooms' to ensure that they are genuinely helpful to pupils, rather than a means of avoiding work and attracting attention by:
 - keeping comprehensive records of the use of such rooms
 - recording the reasons for referral, either by staff or self-referral
 - rewarding diminishing need for the use of such rooms and using this as an indicator of improving behaviour.

Main Report

Achievement of pupils

Parents and carers are confident that their children are making good progress and pupils say they are being helped to do as well as they can. The findings of the inspection support this view.

Pupils learn well and make good progress in classrooms because they are well-taught and pay good attention to their teachers. In all the lessons observed by the inspector, pupils were seen to be trying hard to meet their learning objectives. Most behaved well and through their contributions to discussions they were helping each other to gain a better understanding of what they were trying to learn. This was notable in a Years 5/6 English lesson where pupils shared ideas well about writing a moral story about a fictional culture.

Attainment is very variable. On entry it is often well below average. For instance, about three quarters of pupils are admitted with reading and writing skills that are about two years behind national expectations. Current Year 6 pupils varied between Level 1 and Level 4 on entry. A few pupils have recognised learning difficulties, which potentially limit their future attainment, but most, when they pay attention and behave well, have the ability to meet, or occasionally, exceed national expectations. In nearly every instance, pupils rapidly close the gap between their potential and actual progress and levels of attainment. The school sets the ambitious targets for pupils to make double the progress expected of pupils in mainstream schools, to make up for previous underachievement. Well over half of pupils meet this in reading and nearly all others make good progress towards it. There is particularly good progress in reading because of the wide range of successful intervention programmes including a strong emphasis on the teaching and learning of letters and the sounds they make. Pupils in Key Stage 1 have made rapid progress, and currently most are attaining in line with national expectations. Pupils are encouraged to become enthusiastic readers and several Years 3 and 4 pupils took great pride in reading well to the inspector from their own writing about the 'Iron Man'.

All pupils have special educational needs and, in such a small school, the performance of different groups has to be treated with caution because they can be heavily influenced by the under- or over-performance of a single pupil. The evidence of inspection suggests that no group outperforms or underperforms than any other.

Due to the changing nature of the cohorts attending, year-on-year comparisons of attainment are not reliable. Despite their good progress, on average, most pupils return to mainstream school about a year behind national expectations for their age.

Two of the best indicators of progress in a school such as this are reduction in length of stay and the success rate in returning pupils quickly and successfully to their mainstream schools. In both respects this school succeeds. This is greatly helped by the progress pupils make in learning how to interact with others, how to become more independent in their learning and how to become more attentive. In assessments to measure these qualities, about three quarters of pupils exceed expectations.

Quality of teaching

Teaching is good. This is the main reason why pupils make good and frequently rapid progress. All of the teaching observed during the inspection was good. Lessons often include outstanding features such as the careful involvement of all pupils in discussions and the strong celebration of progress in learning and behaviour. Classrooms are bright and stimulating with some excellent displays of pupils' work alongside well-presented information to help pupils improve their work. Teachers carefully check what pupils have remembered from previous lessons and what they have learned in the current lesson. Pupils are then moved on to harder work or are presented with more detail or support from skilled teaching assistants to help them understand tasks in hand. Teachers are very sensitive to the ways in which individuals learn best, such as through looking or listening or by engaging in practical activities. In a lesson for pupils in Years 1 and 2, vibrant teaching resulted from good variation in the teacher's voice to attract pupils' attention and emphasise the most important features of the lesson. As a result, these young pupils learned quickly about similes and were able to contribute to the composition of a poem that featured them. In another lesson for pupils in Years 3 and 4, following a good discussion about triangles, pupils were presented with a range of visual props to help them investigate the properties of different types such as scalene, equilateral and isosceles.

Behaviour is usually well-promoted by the recognition and reward of that which is good. Occasionally though, teachers allow pupils to leave the classroom on flimsy grounds, ostensibly to go to a 'Peace Room' to settle down but more often in reality to attract attention and avoid work.

Good attention is paid in all lessons to the promotion of reading and writing. Teachers plan lessons carefully to provide pupils with a range of curricular experiences as close as possible to those they would be experiencing in their mainstream schools. Pupils are often encouraged to work together in pairs or small groups to help them develop important social skills. A good religious education lesson was observed in a Years 5/6 class, where pupils were engrossed in learning about the spiritual beliefs of Sikhism and the culture that embraces them. As a result of this input, teaching has a good impact on pupils' spiritual, moral social and cultural development.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Most pupils behave well. Misbehaviour is managed effectively. As a result, this is a safe and settled school. One of the best indicators of improvement in behaviour is the fact that most pupils quickly develop sufficiently good attitudes to enable them to return successfully to their mainstream schools. There are occasional outbursts of misbehaviour, usually at times of personal crisis or borne out of frustration. These are well-managed by trained staff with the result that they cause minimal disruption to the learning of other pupils and put no one at risk. There have been very few exclusions in recent years and there are few serious incidents on record. The number of such incidents halved last year but increased slightly last term. This was largely as a result of the influx of new pupils from the school that had closed. However, as pupils have become more familiar with each other the incidence of serious misbehaviour is once again falling. There is very little bullying. Pupils say there is very little name-calling and there is no hint of either sexist or racist taunts directed at individuals. There are, however, a few instances on record of racist language being used. Pupils say that anything construed as bullying is quickly and effectively dealt with. Parents and carers agree. Pupils unanimously report that staff do everything they can to help them manage their own behaviour and, again, parents and carers agree. A few pupils persist in attention-seeking behaviours. These are low key but are not sufficiently discouraged. A few pupils rely too much on adult support rather than develop more effective strategies for managing their own behaviour and learning.

The school has adopted the word 'respect' as a central tenet of its work. The word and its meaning are constantly reinforced by staff in lessons and throughout the school day. Pupils have a good understanding of what it means and recognise its importance.

Pupils attend well and punctuality is good, with the result that very little learning time is lost waiting for pupils to arrive. Attendance is broadly average. It has been improving for each of the last three years and nearly all pupils improve their attendance significantly in relation to that in previous schools. There are comprehensive procedures to check on the reasons for the absence of any pupil and for where they are if they are not in school. This is a very important factor in checking that they are safe. Disruption to lessons is unusual because the causes of it are quickly identified and well-managed. Pupils respond positively to the school's reward system, which is fairly and consistently managed. Pupils are given good advice about how to keep themselves safe.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are good. The school is well-served by its management committee and is supported by the local authority in its role as the responsible body. The management committee brings to the school a wealth of expertise and is constituted to represent the community and schools it serves well. The headteacher and deputy headteacher generate a good atmosphere of ambition and creativity. The continuing professional development of staff is strongly encouraged, with a good balance being maintained between learning and care. Teachers manage teams of teaching assistants well, making sure that their considerable expertise is not wasted.

The school is developing increasingly effective partnerships with mainstream schools through its early intervention strategy. This is led and managed well. Clear indicators have been identified to evaluate its effectiveness in reducing exclusions from mainstream schools but it is too early to judge how well it achieves this. The school also has good relationships with many support agencies and works well to co-ordinate meetings between them in support of pupils and their families. Parents and carers report total satisfaction with the way the school helps them to contribute to their children's education and well-being.

The school has fully addressed areas of its work identified as needing improvement in the previous inspection report. As a result, writing is becoming a strength rather than a weakness. Pupils' cultural development has also become a strength. Attendance and behaviour continue to improve. Teachers identified as needing support have received it and as a result have greatly improved their performance, with the result that teaching is nearly always at least good. As such, the school demonstrates good capacity for further improvement.

Leaders and managers ensure that all pupils maintain access to a good, broad and relevant curriculum, which supports their learning and promotes their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development well.

There is good promotion of equality and there is no evidence of discrimination. Comprehensive arrangements ensure that the safeguarding of pupils remains paramount to the school's work. Care is taken with recruitment to ensure that only suitable adults are appointed. All staff are well-trained in the protection and handling of pupils.

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	46	46	8	0
Primary schools	8	47	40	5
Secondary schools	14	38	40	8
Special schools	28	48	20	4
Pupil referral units	15	50	29	5
All schools	11	46	38	6

New school inspection arrangements have been introduced from 1 January 2012. This means that inspectors make judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2010 to 31 August 2011 and represent judgements that were made under the school inspection arrangements that were introduced on 1 September 2009. These data 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.

Primary schools include primary academy converters. Secondary schools include secondary academy converters, sponsor-led academies and city technology colleges. Special schools include special academy converters and non-maintained special schools.

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

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning and development taking account of their attainment.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Behaviour	how well pupils behave in lessons, with emphasis on their attitude to learning. Pupils' punctuality to lessons and their conduct around the school.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving based on its self-evaluation and 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 governors and 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:	inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school.
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.
Safety	how safe pupils are in school, including in lessons; and their understanding of risks. Pupils' freedom from bullying and harassment. How well the school promotes safety, for example e-learning.

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.



10 February 2012

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Stepping Stones School, Lancaster LA1 4HT

I would like to share with you how much I enjoyed my visit to your school in order to inspect how you are getting on. The answer is: you are doing well.

Stepping Stones is a good school and it is helping you to get back to your own schools as quickly as possible. For some of you this is not possible, so Stepping Stones helps you to find an alternative, sometimes in a special school.

What impressed me was that while you are attending Stepping Stones you are being well-taught and are making good progress. You are also being given good advice about how to improve your behaviour and most of you are clearly listening.

I felt that while most of you were being greatly helped to improve your behaviour sometimes teachers were letting you decide for yourselves when to leave classrooms and stop learning. This is not a good idea so I have asked them to take care in deciding whether you have a genuine problem, want a bit of attention, or just do not want to work. Please do not abuse a system designed to help you.

You have told me in no uncertain terms that you appreciate how much staff help you to do your best. This is down to the good job that senior leaders do at your school. As you and your teachers often say, 'Respect!'

Yours sincerely,

Alastair Younger
Lead Inspector

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