

Alternative Education Service

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	108666
Local Authority	South Tyneside
Inspection number	337115
Inspection dates	3–4 November 2010
Reporting 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	7–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	29
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Cllr Alan Kerr
Headteacher	Mrs Allyson Poole
Date of previous school inspection	21 September 2006
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors. Six lessons were observed. They were taught by four different teachers and a higher level teaching assistant. Discussions were held with senior staff, pupils and members of the management committee and representatives of the local authority. Inspectors looked at examples of pupils' work and records of their progress and achievement. They scrutinised documentation relating to the safeguarding of pupils and plans for development and improvement. These included submissions from the local authority about the support it provides. The responses of eight parents or carers to a questionnaire circulated prior to the inspection were taken into account, as were the responses of nearly all of the staff and many of the pupils.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at the following:

- whether the unit can clearly and accurately identify and measure the progress that pupils are making
- the reasons why attendance is low and how this impacts on outcomes for pupils
- whether teaching is good enough to ensure the rapid and sustainable progress pupils need to make to compensate for low attainment prior to admission
- the degree to which leaders and managers demonstrate they have the capacity to drive improvement by working together to raise attainment and improve provision.

Information about the school

The unit provides education for pupils who have either been permanently excluded from a mainstream school or who are at risk of being so on account of their behaviour. More than half of all pupils remain on the roll of their mainstream schools. The remainder have been permanently excluded from mainstream schools. The majority of pupils are in Key Stages 3 and 4. For pupils up to the age of 14, the primary aim is either to return them to mainstream education or to find appropriate alternatives in special schools. Beyond this, the aim is to ensure that pupils are not lost to education, training or work as they enter adult life. Boys outnumber girls by about 3:1. Nearly all pupils are White British. A few are looked after children. The majority of pupils are known to be eligible for free school meals.

Following a review of provision by the local authority after the previous inspection, significant changes were made to the staffing and organisation of the unit. From operating on multiple sites, the unit was brought into a single building. A new headteacher was appointed in September 2009. In the recent past, the unit has been heavily reliant on temporary teachers. It still does not have a full complement of permanent staff but the final three permanent teaching posts are scheduled to be filled in the very near future.

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?

4

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

3

Main findings

In accordance with section 13 (3) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that this school requires significant improvement, because it is performing significantly less well than in all the circumstances it could be reasonably be expected to perform. The school is therefore given a notice to improve. Significant improvement is required in relation to the quality of teaching and its impact on pupils' achievement, and to the high rate of absence, which is also a serious obstacle to pupils' progress.

Pupils do not make sufficient progress during their time in the unit and their attainment is low. As a result, pupils' progress during their time in the unit and their achievement are inadequate. Teachers' use of assessment is improving. However, it does not yet result in pupils consistently receiving work that is matched closely enough to their learning needs in order to help them make the rapid progress needed to raise their attainment. While attendance is improving, it is not yet high enough to ensure that pupils in Key Stages 3 and 4 make the rapid progress required. Poor attendance also has a negative impact upon pupils' preparation for their future economic well-being.

A period of turbulence followed after the unit was reorganised, during which attendance was extremely low and pupils reported disenchantment with the curriculum at Key Stage 4. However, leaders and managers are becoming increasingly successful in meeting pupils' needs. Teaching is improving although its impact on progress remains insufficient. Attendance has risen sharply in the past year, although it remains low, particularly in Key Stages 3 and 4. Improvements have been made to develop the curriculum at Key Stage 4, through the provision of a wider range of appropriate vocational opportunities. Behaviour has improved significantly in the past year.

Staff increasingly share a clear sense of ambition and loyalty, and a growing desire to provide a better service to pupils. Self-evaluation by leaders and managers is perceptive and accurate. There are clear indications that attainment and provision are improving. The local authority, the management committee and senior staff are working closely and effectively to procure a better future for the unit and as such demonstrate a satisfactory capacity for improvement.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve teaching in order to raise pupils' attainment and improve the rate of progress by:
 - consistently assessing the progress pupils make in lessons in order to match work more closely to individual needs
 - varying tasks more precisely to meet differing learning needs

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- ensuring that time is spent at the end of each lesson to establish what has been learned and remembered rather than to stress what has been taught
- ensuring that pupils have the skills and qualifications they need for their future economic well-being.
- Improve attendance by:
 - developing stronger links with parents and carers, and with partner organisations involved in the social care of pupils
 - building on the improvements made to the curriculum in Key Stage 4.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils**4**

Pupils' achievement and their progress over time are inadequate overall. This is due to a combination of the very high rate of absence and teaching that is not yet strong enough to compensate for pupils' limited prior learning. As a result, pupils do not make the progress needed during their time in the unit in order to close the gap in their attainment from often low starting points when they join. Where teaching is good, pupils show interest and enjoyment and work with some degree of independence. In these lessons, they join in well and show excitement. This was seen to good effect when pupils in Key Stage 4 were involved in role-play while studying the book 'Of Mice and Men'. Here, there was a palpable sense of pride as they listened attentively to each other and made perceptive observations about characters. However, where teaching makes insufficient use of resources to stimulate interest and the tasks provided consist largely of completing worksheets, pupils learn more slowly and with little sense of enjoyment and do not make the rapid progress needed to raise attainment. Even in the better lessons, learning and progress are often compromised by the absence of many pupils, particularly in Key Stages 3 and 4. This disrupts the flow of learning and results in gaps in pupils' knowledge, which serve to slow future learning even further. High absence resulted in many Key Stage 4 pupils not completing examination courses last year although there were notable exceptions, with several pupils gaining passes in GCSE examinations, including English and mathematics. More pupils are currently attending regularly. One third of all pupils have 100% attendance for the present term and many more Key Stage 4 pupils are keeping up with their coursework. Achievement in Key Stages 1 and 2 is improving because attendance in these key stages has particularly improved.

In discussion with pupils, including the youngest ones, it is clear that pupils feel safe. They feel they are well looked after and that staff manage behaviour well so there is nothing for them to worry about. During the inspection, behaviour was satisfactory and the unit presented as a calm community. This has not always been the case. Last year there were many serious incidents, often leading to short-term exclusions. This year, the frequency of serious incidents has fallen by about 40% over the course of the current term, indicating the success of school leaders' strategies to address these issues.

Low attainment and attendance combine to seriously limit pupils' prospects of future economic well-being. This was evident in last year's Key Stage 4 results, where over half of pupils left with no qualifications. Many of these pupils are known not to be in education, employment or training at the present time. There is very little difference in the achievement of any group of pupils, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities or between boys and girls.

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These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	4
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attainment ¹	4
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	4
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	4
The extent to which pupils feel safe	2
Pupils' behaviour	3
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	3
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	3
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	4
Taking into account:	
Pupils' attendance ¹	4
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	3

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

How effective is the provision?

In lessons, pupils learn at a satisfactory rate overall. The reason progress over time does not match that seen in lessons is that it is too frequently slowed by absence. While teaching has improved, not enough is of the consistently good quality needed for pupils to catch up with their learning and achieve at least satisfactorily. Where teaching is most effective, teachers capitalise on the interests of pupils. In one such example, the teacher used a pop music video to initiate discussion about body image and self-esteem and the impact of unconventional clothes and hairstyles. However, opportunities are too often missed to use stimulating resources, and time at the end of lessons is not always used to summarise and reinforce the learning gained.

Most teachers are becoming better at assessing the progress pupils make. The marking of work is improving and there are many instances when teachers use perceptive questioning to establish what pupils have learned and remembered. However, staff do not make sufficient use of this information to prepare and modify work that presents an equal level of challenge for all pupils. Consequently, assessment does not adequately support pupils' learning. In one literacy lesson, for instance, all pupils were given the same task to complete despite the fact that reading ages for the class ranged across three year groups.

The curriculum is satisfactory overall. It is good in Key Stages 1 and 2, where it closely resembles that of a typical primary school. Many pupils in Key Stage 3 are relatively

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immature and of low ability. To help meet their needs, the curriculum for these pupils tends to follow a primary model rather than a secondary one. A close eye is being kept on this to make sure that if, or when, pupils demonstrate that they are ready for a more academic curriculum in line with that they will face on return to school it is introduced. The Key Stage 4 curriculum is also improving. Last year many pupils rejected it and chose not to attend. This year, there is greater participation in academic courses and vocational opportunities including hairdressing and construction work. The growing range of outdoor and adventure activities and enrichment opportunities is hugely popular and contributes significantly to helping pupils develop a wider understanding of the community and the importance of adopting healthy lifestyles.

Care, guidance and support are satisfactory. The pupils are made vulnerable by the nature of their difficulties. The unit works closely with a wide range of agencies and professionals to keep in touch with them and to try to prevent them from drifting out of the education system. However, it recognises that more still needs to be done to extend these links and those with parents and carers in order to raise attendance further.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	3
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	3
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	3
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	3

How effective are leadership and management?

The establishment of this unit did not go smoothly. It soon became clear that a complete restructuring of staffing was needed in order to meet pupils' needs. Over the past six months, the results of this restructuring are becoming increasingly evident. Staff are growing in confidence and ambition and are firmly behind the headteacher in her determination to keep driving improvement. The unit is now mainly staffed with permanent teachers and has entered a period of much greater stability. This is allowing leaders and managers to plan continuing professional development in an organised fashion, with a clear focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning and the raising of standards. The assessment of pupils' progress is improving, giving leaders and managers more accurate information to help them to self-evaluate with increasing confidence and accuracy.

The management committee is also fully supportive and is influential in helping to drive improvement. Members are drawn from a wide range of backgrounds, representative of the local community and bring with them valuable skills to support improvement. They have a good understanding of the problems the unit has faced and what needs to be done to prevent them from recurring. The local authority, in its role as the appropriate authority for the unit, has also been very supportive, helping the development of the unit by the

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judicious secondment of key personnel to help address areas of weakness, such as attendance and behaviour.

Partnerships are satisfactory, but the fact that the admissions policy does not include a reference to the pupils returning to school means that obstacles are frequently encountered when return is mooted. This slows down the process and results in many pupils remaining in the centre for considerably longer than the notional 14 week placements that are planned for them. Unit staff take care to tackle any signs of discrimination. They demonstrate a satisfactory understanding of the backgrounds of different pupils and the potential personal problems they face. There is no evidence to suggest that any group of pupils makes significantly better or worse progress than any other. Safeguarding procedures are good. They are strongly underpinned by a comprehensive range of policies and procedures which are strictly adhered to. Training for staff is of high quality, frequent and relevant. The unit works closely with other key agencies to help fulfil its responsibility for the safeguarding of pupils beyond the school gate.

The unit is operating as an increasingly harmonious community. Staff and pupils respect one another. Many pupils arrive with very little understanding of any part of the community other than the immediate surroundings of their schools and homes. Visits to places such as the National Heritage Centre for Glass, in nearby Sunderland, help pupils to learn more about the factors and circumstances that helped mould the local community. There is only limited evidence of success in promoting community cohesion further afield.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	3
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	3
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	3
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	3
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	3
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	3
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	3
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	4

Views of parents and carers

About a third of parents and carers responded to a questionnaire circulated before the inspection. This is a higher than average response for a unit such as this. Most parents

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and carers expressed very positive views about the way the unit is helping their children. A very small number raised a concern relating to pupils' safety. The effectiveness of safeguarding was investigated as part of the inspection and was found to be robust.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Alternative Education Service 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 8 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 29 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	5	63	2	25	0	0	1	13
The school keeps my child safe	6	75	1	13	1	13	0	0
My school informs me about my child's progress	5	63	3	38	0	0	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	5	63	2	25	1	13	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	5	63	3	38	0	0	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	4	50	2	25	2	25	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	3	38	4	50	0	0	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)	4	50	2	25	1	13	0	0
The school meets my child's particular needs	5	63	3	38	0	0	0	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	5	63	2	25	0	0	0	0
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	4	50	3	38	0	0	0	0
The school is led and managed effectively	5	63	1	13	0	0	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	5	63	1	13	2	25	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	58	36	4	2
Primary schools	8	43	40	9
Secondary schools	10	35	42	13
Sixth forms	13	39	45	3
Special schools	33	42	20	4
Pupil referral units	18	40	29	12
All schools	11	42	38	9

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 2009 to 31 March 2010 and are the most recently published data available (see www.ofsted.gov.uk). Please note that the sample of schools inspected during the autumn and spring terms 2009/10 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. Secondary school figures include those that have sixth forms, and sixth form figures include only the data specifically for sixth form inspection judgements.

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.



6 November 2010

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Alternative Education Service, South Shields, NE33 5LZ

Thank you for making the inspectors welcome when we visited the unit recently. We were pleased to see that more of you were in attendance and we noted how well you behaved. We were looking closely at those two things because we knew that last year there were a few problems with them. Well done for your part in helping to make things improve. It was good to get to talk with so many of you and especially reassuring to hear you say that you felt safe and well looked after.

Although we saw good learning in some classrooms, we feel that significant improvement is needed in order to help you achieve as well as you should. For this reason, we have given the unit a 'notice to improve'. This means that an inspector will visit the unit again in about six months time in order to see how much it is improving. We have taken account of the fact that a lot of improvements have already begun to be made but the unit needs to speed up the process even more. In particular, teaching needs to improve to the standard where it consistently helps you to make faster progress. Attendance also needs to improve because, even though it is better than it was last year, it is still not as good as it should be.

Please continue to behave well. Those of you that do not attend enough could help by trying your hardest to come to the unit much more regularly. This will help the unit to improve further and help you to make the most of your education there.

Yours sincerely,

Mr Alastair Younger

Lead Inspector

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