

Merryfields School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	124519
Local Authority	Staffordshire
Inspection number	359686
Inspection dates	21–22 March 2011
Reporting inspector	Alan Dobbins

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

Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	2–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	68
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Sarah Copeland
Headteacher	Sarah Poyner
Date of previous school inspection	18 January 2008
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors. Inspectors observed, in part or in full, nine lessons and all seven of the classroom teachers. They held meetings with the Chair of the Governing Body, staff, groups of pupils, the local authority link adviser and the School Improvement Partner. Inspectors looked at policies and reviewed documents and the data the school has on pupils' progress. They scrutinised 38 parent and carer questionnaires and spoke with seven parents.

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

- Inspectors explored how well teaching meets the needs of all pupils, especially those with the most severe and complex learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those who attain at the highest levels.
- They looked at how clear an understanding the school has of pupils' progress, especially against equivalent pupils in similar schools.
- They considered how effective senior leaders have been in improving the school.

Information about the school

This is an average-sized special school designated for pupils with profound and severe learning difficulties and/or disabilities. All pupils have statements of special educational needs or are undergoing assessment. Increasingly, pupils are entering the school with more complex difficulties that include autistic spectrum disorders, medical conditions and challenging behaviour. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is greater than is typical. Most of the pupils are of White British heritage. There are twice as many boys as girls. The parents and carers of about a quarter of the pupils have elected to send their children to Merryfields rather than use schools located in their local authorities that are closer to their homes. Since the last inspection, the school has gained the Activemark award and national Healthy Schools status.

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?

2

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

1

Main findings

Merryfields is a good school. It is much better than at the time of the last inspection. It is a joyful place where pupils thrive as learners and as growing young people. Within the constraints of their special educational needs, they are prepared well for the next stage of their education and their future lives. The way the school engages parents and carers is outstanding and they are uniformly supportive of the school. The comment of one reflects the feelings of many: 'The school is like a family. The staff know every child and care for them as though they were their own. I am pleased and relieved my daughter is at this school.'

In the Early Years Foundation Stage, children make a good start. They quickly develop trusting relationships with the staff and this helps them settle well. Their wide ranging learning and other needs are identified as a first step to planning specific activities and to providing relevant specialist support. This helps all children, irrespective of the cause or severity of their learning difficulties and/or disabilities, to make equally good progress against their starting points in each of the early learning areas. By the time they enter Year 1, they show by their behaviour and good attitudes that they understand their role as learners. Over Years 1 to 6, the curriculum focuses on helping pupils become as independent as possible. Good quality teaching and an increasingly wide range of learning experiences realises good progress in the basic skills of literacy and numeracy as pupils move towards independence.

Governors and senior leaders are assiduous in operating robust safeguarding arrangements. Justifiably, staff take pride in the way pupils are looked after. Pupils are genuinely pleased to see the adults who work with them when they exit their transport in the morning because they know they will be greeted warmly and enthusiastically. All staff have strong and sympathetic relationships with the pupils. Pupils see them as people who will always help them if they are bothered or distressed. It is not surprising that they feel happy and exceptionally safe at school. They attend well. Their good attitudes and outstanding behaviour are important contributors to the good quality of their learning. As they move through the school, they gain a good awareness of right and wrong and an excellent understanding of the importance of being safe at all times. Many show maturity when they have choices to make, including those to do with staying safe, choosing healthy food at lunch times and by opting to take part in the lunchtime and after-school sporting clubs.

Since the last inspection, the headteacher, well supported by senior leaders and staff, has made very good use of the self-evaluation procedures in driving exceptional improvement. Hard work has paid off. Pupils' progress is better because teaching is better. The curriculum offers a wider range of learning experiences and more effective support and guidance. Middle leaders are better at their work and the partnerships with other schools

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and with parents and carers make an outstanding contribution to pupils' progress and their development. As a result, pupils are being prepared better for the demands of the next stage of their education. Year 6 pupils, who left in each of the last three years, did better year on year in English, mathematics and science. Current records suggest those who will leave at the end of this year should do better again in these subjects. Recent appointments have added to the collective skill and experience of governors. They are now capable of providing even greater support and challenge to senior leaders. Its members, and the senior leaders, are very clear about what is required to maintain the journey of ongoing improvement to ensure pupils' achievement rises even more. Senior leaders have, rightly, identified that tasks in lessons are not always closely matched to the next steps in learning for individual pupils and that teachers do not consistently judge progress against their targets for learning. Senior leaders have begun to refine the way they use data in evaluating the school's effectiveness by looking more closely at how pupils' performance compares with that of pupils in similar schools nationally. They already use data exceptionally well to check the progress of different groups of pupils, which ensures that all groups achieve equally well. Senior leaders' ambition and the extent of development since the last inspection provide persuasive evidence that the capacity to sustain improvement is outstanding.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise pupils' achievement by making better use of assessment information for:
 - planning lesson activities that are relevant to each pupil because they match well with their learning needs
 - judging pupils' progress against their targets for learning.
- Refine the use of performance data by developing the way leaders compare pupils' progress with that in similar schools nationally.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

2

Pupils in all year groups make good progress in developing basic skills and gaining in independence. This includes girls and those with the most severe and complex learning difficulties, including those with autism. Pupils do particularly well in physical education and sports. This is because of the close link with the local secondary school as part of the Activemark award, combined with the good use made of the school's high quality indoor and outdoor facilities, including the swimming and hydrotherapy pools.

The outstanding relationships pupils have with their teachers and teaching assistants help them to feel comfortable and confident as learners. This contributes to their good progress. This was easily recognised in a lesson in drama, which focused on the concepts of 'sad' and 'happy'. The lesson was planned well and pupils knew their learning targets. They quickly grasped the concepts of 'sad' and 'happy' and animatedly attempted to make those who acted 'sad' change to being 'happy', for example, by smiling for them and letting them know that they were their friend. The lesson was an enjoyable occasion for pupils and staff. It was characterised by pupils' outstanding behaviour and by their serious efforts to act out emotions.

Gaining Healthy Schools status has reinforced pupils' awareness of the need to stay healthy. Regular physiotherapy makes clear the need to maintain flexibility and increase

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strength. Many have fragile health and know the value of taking their medication or being checked for blood sugar levels. School meals always include healthy food and a good choice of fruit. The school council meets regularly: a role enjoyed by members is guiding staff about the charitable causes they would like to support. Most recently these have included 'Red Nose Day', 'Pink Day' and the 'Donna and Louise' charity that supports a local hospice. Good awareness of the local community is gained through regular visits to local places in support of learning, such as supermarkets, garden centres, theatres, cinemas and the leisure centre. Cultural differences are celebrated through the special days of different religions and of countries. The gains pupils make in their self-confidence and self-esteem, combined with the outstanding relationships they have with staff and their peers, support a good awareness of spiritual issues, such as the importance of trust and friendship.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

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

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 of the pupils' age.

How effective is the provision?

Teachers and their assistants are good at communicating with pupils using signs, symbols, pictures, switches and electronic communication devices. These skills are helping them to deal increasingly well with pupils with more complex needs. The good-sized classrooms allow varying strategies to be used with different pupils, including having specific work

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areas for those with autism. Teaching pupils according to the strategies that best suit their needs contributes to all pupils, irrespective of the cause or extent of their learning difficulties and/or disabilities, making the same good progress against their targets. In a few lessons, planning does not give enough attention to what pupils already know and can do. Then, lesson tasks do not match exactly with pupils' precise learning needs, which limit their progress.

The curriculum has improved since the last inspection because it is matched better with pupils' basic needs. Opportunities are routinely provided to practise emerging speaking and listening skills and to use signs, symbols and pictures to support communication. Resources are plentiful from small-sized apparatus to large outside play equipment. These, and the outside play areas and especially the swimming and hydrotherapy pools, are used well in enriching pupils' learning experiences. The annual week-long residential visit is very much enjoyed by pupils, as are overnight stays at a nearby school. These provide excellent opportunities for pupils to gain in self-confidence and to practise their independence skills in new places.

Pupils are looked after and supported outstandingly well. All gain the specialist advice they need to help them move, as far as possible, toward independence and in their learning. The collaborative work with other agencies and specialists results in pupils being able to focus on their learning for longer periods of time with greater vigour. The efforts of the physiotherapists and the consultant paediatrician, who holds his clinics at the school, are seen as especially valuable by parents and carers. Provision for pupils with autism is especially good. High level training and good levels of experience help staff deal quickly and effectively with their learning, communication and behavioural issues. Provision, as outlined in the statements of special educational needs, is met in full. Transition arrangements for the next stage of education are well established. At times of change, these provide very effective support for both pupils, and their parents and carers.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	2
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	2
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	2
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

How effective are leadership and management?

Staff are unified behind the headteacher in her drive for continuing improvement. Parents and carers trust and respect her as a highly effective leader and manager. The last inspection provided the impetus for developing more rigorous self-evaluation. This has provided a clear direction in helping the headteacher to steer the school with vision and authority. The most notable improvement has been the increase in pupils' progress, though there have been substantial developments in other areas of the school's work. A good measure of the growing reputation of the school is the increasing number of pupils

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who come from outside the local authority. Senior leaders are determined to maintain improvement at the same rate. The governing body has a good understanding of the school's performance data. Its members have supported the initiatives of senior leaders well. With the recent addition of newly appointed governors, they are better placed to take an even greater role in challenging and supporting senior leaders as they continue to move the school forward.

Safeguarding procedures are exceptionally thorough and the governing body has established rigorous procedures to ensure that keeping pupils safe is central to the school's work. Parents, carers and pupils see the school as a very safe and secure place. They say that their children are equally valued. This is because the school promotes equal opportunities exceptionally well and ensures that there is no discrimination of any sort. All pupils have equal access to all that the school offers and all groups of pupils do equally well. Pupils have a very good knowledge of their local community through many well-established links and their regular visits to local places. National and international links are being established with schools in the south of England and in Australia. Partnerships impact exceptionally well on pupils' progress. Those with schools in the local area provide powerful support for the work of the school, as do the close links with many relevant agencies. The partnership with parents and carers is outstanding. The very active 'Parents', Teachers' and Friends' Association' has, over each of the last three years, provided substantial funds to support the school in its work. For example, taking financial responsibility for running the two school minibuses opens up a world of experiences for pupils that are not available within the school. The daily home-school diary entries, often supported by dictaphone messages, are very much valued by parents and carers. As one said in praise of staff, 'Knowing how much they care for the children and how well they look after them, it is not surprising that they let us know in great detail what sort of day they have had.'

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	2
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	2
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
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	2
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	2

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Early Years Foundation Stage

Well-organised provision and purposeful leadership and management ensure that children get off to a good start in the Early Years Foundation Stage. In a safe, secure and comfortable environment, children and their parents and carers develop strong relationships with staff. Children's learning and additional needs are well known to staff. This helps make teaching good because lessons are individualised to the specific needs of the children. The curriculum is presented in small steps and this provides a good base for recognising progress. Records show even the smallest steps in progress and that all children make good progress from their different starting points. However, moderation arrangements are not securing well enough the accuracy of the recorded scores so that the comparison of children's progress with relevant national guidance is not as secure as it should be.

These are the grades for the Early Years Foundation Stage

Overall effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage	2
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage	2
The quality of provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage	2
The effectiveness of leadership and management of the Early Years Foundation Stage	2

Views of parents and carers

The good proportion of parents and carers who returned the questionnaire or who talked to an inspector were uniform in their praise for all aspects of the school. They are happy with the school because their children enjoy being there and because they know that their children are safe and cared for very well. The great majority feel that the school is led and managed very effectively, also that their children make good progress in preparation for the next stage of their education. Those who talked with an inspector were very impressed with the commitment of the headteacher to continually improve the school. Inspection findings endorse each of these positive judgements.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Merryfields School 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 38 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 68 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	29	76	9	24	0	0	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	33	87	5	13	0	0	0	0
My school informs me about my child's progress	30	79	7	18	1	3	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	24	63	11	29	1	3	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	28	74	9	24	1	3	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	25	66	12	32	0	0	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	17	45	21	55	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)	18	47	15	39	2	5	0	0
The school meets my child's particular needs	28	74	7	18	3	8	0	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	26	68	11	29	1	3	0	0
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	26	68	10	26	2	5	0	0
The school is led and managed effectively	29	76	6	16	2	5	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	30	79	6	16	1	3	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	59	35	3	3
Primary schools	9	44	39	7
Secondary schools	13	36	41	11
Sixth forms	15	39	43	3
Special schools	35	43	17	5
Pupil referral units	21	42	29	9
All schools	13	43	37	8

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 August 2010 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 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.

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.



23 March 2011

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Merryfields School, Newcastle ST5 9NY

It was a pleasure for me and my colleague to meet and spend time with you when we visited your school. Thank you for making us so welcome. We found your school to be a good school. These are some of the things we especially liked:

- the good progress you make in your learning and in developing to be as independent as possible
- the outstanding way you behave and the way you work hard in your lessons
- that you feel very safe and are happy at school
- that you are learning what is right for you so that when you leave you are prepared well for the demands of your next school
- the good way the school staff and others who visit the school, such as your physiotherapists, help you in your learning and in growing up
- the way in which your leaders are working very hard to make the school even better.

We have asked your headteacher and the governing body to do a few things to make the school even better for you. They need to improve the way they check on how well you are doing against your own targets for learning. This will provide more accurate information on what you know and can do, which will help your teachers plan lessons that are always right for you, not too hard and not too easy. Also, we want your leaders to work out a better way of comparing how well you are doing against pupils in other similar schools. Of course, you can all help too, by always working as hard in all your lessons as you did when my colleague and I visited your classrooms.

Yours sincerely

Alan Dobbins

Lead inspector

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