

Merstone School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	104133
Local Authority	Solihull
Inspection number	355527
Inspection dates	23–24 June 2011
Reporting inspector	Susan Lewis

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

Type of school	Special
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	2–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	70
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	16
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Brian Kendrick
Headteacher	Amanda Mordey
Date of previous school inspection	4 June 2008
School address	Windward Way Smith's Wood, Birmingham B36 0UE
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors. Inspectors observed 18 lessons, seeing 13 teachers. Meetings were held with representatives of the governing body, groups of pupils and staff, including teaching assistants. Inspectors observed the school's work, and looked at a wide range of documents including data on students' progress, teachers' planning, curriculum documents, students' files and the school's self-evaluation. They analysed 25 returned questionnaires from parents and carers, together with 44 from students and 19 from staff.

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

- How good are pupils' learning and progress and particularly that of pupils with more complex learning needs?
- How is the school's specialist status helping it to raise pupils' achievement and improve areas of the school's work such as community cohesion?
- How good is the work of middle managers in reviewing and improving their subjects?
- How strong are teaching and learning throughout the school and does their quality differ for different age groups or for pupils with differing needs?

Information about the school

This is an average-sized all-age special school which shares its building with another special school, Forest Oak. The two schools form a federation and have the same Principal and governing body. They also share some specialist staff and resources. Also on the same site is Smith's Wood Sports College, a mainstream school. Merstone caters for pupils with severe learning difficulties and profound and multiple learning difficulties. The latter form an increasingly high proportion of the school's roll. Many have autistic spectrum disorders and/or behavioural, social and emotional disorders. Almost three quarters of the pupils are boys. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is very high. The large majority of pupils are of White British heritage although a high proportion have English as an additional language. These pupils come from a wide range of European and Asian heritages.

The Early Years Foundation Stage provision includes a child assessment unit for up to 10 children. These children are in the process of being statemented and often move on to mainstream or other special schools. All other pupils have a statement of special educational needs; about a third have severe medical needs.

The school was awarded specialist schools status (Communication and Interaction) in September 2010 and has a number of other prestigious awards.

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

This is an outstanding school. Parents and carers say it is an 'amazing school' with 'fantastic' staff and pupils agree. They say that 'everyone is kind here' and 'helps you'. Staff, the governing body and pupils are extremely proud to be part of the school and of the ways in which it fosters pupils' all-round development and nurtures their self-awareness and talents. The highly effective Principal and leadership team and the good governing body work tirelessly to find ways of improving outcomes for pupils further. They know the school extremely well and have put into place very strong self-evaluation procedures. Since the last inspection, excellent ways of checking on pupils' progress have been developed. These are used extremely well by almost all staff to check on how well every individual pupil is doing in every subject. This means that if an area of the school's work is not quite as successful, then it is quickly picked up on. Well-targeted interventions are then put into place to deal with this, such as the new work with signs and symbols in reading and writing. Staff roles, for example that of subject leaders, have developed very well and they are highly involved in identifying areas for improvement not only in their own subjects but for the school as a whole. All this means that the school has an excellent capacity to improve even more.

Outcomes are outstanding overall. Pupils' achievement and progress in subjects is good, whatever their background or ability. These are improving further as a result of the school's new provision such as the development of the sensory curriculum and increased use of technology linked to its specialist school status. Excellent care, support and guidance include outstanding partnerships with families and with others ensure pupils' safety and well-being are extremely well secured. All this, the outstanding curriculum and many opportunities to be involved with local community and school projects mean that areas of pupils' development, such as their understanding of how to keep safe, to live healthy lifestyles and of ecological issues, are excellent. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. They grow hugely in confidence and awareness of their own abilities as they progress through the school. Behaviour is excellent and makes a major contribution to learning in classrooms. Pupils demonstrate huge concern and respect for each other, really celebrating each other's achievements. Attendance is good. The school and parents and carers work extremely well together to enable those with more complex medical needs to be in school as much as possible.

Well-focused staff training means that teaching and learning are uniformly at least good. Sometimes, particularly in the Early Years Foundation Stage and the sixth form provision, they are outstanding. Attention to pupils' communicative development, and the use of different aids to support this, is a particular strength. Teachers generally plan very well how to involve everyone, using the information available about pupils' previous achievements well. Some excellent use of support staff and sensory resources was observed to enable this. Occasionally, however, in the larger group sessions, those with

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the most complex needs are not always involved all of the time. This is because sometimes the pace is too fast or not enough sensory or other resources, such as information and communication technology, are used.

The excellent curriculum has been really enriched by the school's specialist status and the very strong partnerships with other schools and colleges. Whole campus days such as those with visiting dance groups involved all three schools. For pupils and staff, these were clearly memorable and really promoted teamwork, shared understanding and community cohesion. Excellent provision for the youngest and oldest pupils prepares them very well indeed for next steps wherever that might be. It also gives them and their parents and carers confidence in the future as well as exciting them to learn.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the amount of outstanding teaching and learning by ensuring that:
 - the pace and resources available in the whole class parts of lessons are appropriate to all pupils' needs
 - there is more consistent use of sensory aids and information and communication technology by some teachers.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

1

Parents praise the way these children's talents are unlocked through careful, systematic support and confidence building. Sixth form students achieve outstandingly in a wide range of courses, including vocational and work-related courses, because the school systematically builds up the skills needed, including their literacy and numeracy skills, and gives students growing confidence in their own ability.

Throughout the school, pupils are extremely well prepared for the next stages in their education because of the excellent emphasis on working together, trying your best and on self-help and independence. These features permeate all lessons and mean pupils very quickly settle, whatever age they enter the school, learn to trust and 'have a go' at new experiences. Pupils learn well and make good progress in almost all lessons because teachers and teaching assistants offer highly personalised support to help them complete their work. The school's data and inspectors' observations show that all groups, whatever their need or background, achieve well from their starting point. Occasionally, teaching is less successful in promoting the learning of those with the most complex needs in a group because the activities do not take account of these pupils' next steps. However, individual and smaller group support for these pupils and those with autistic spectrum disorders is excellent. Activities provide exceptionally good challenge and motivate these pupils to be more engaged and to manage their attention and learning. Music, for example, is used extremely well to help pupils cue into lesson themes. Key skills such as work with sounds, letters and numbers are explored in very practical ways. Key Stage 1 pupils really enjoy the pairing of actions to sounds and are proud to show off how many sounds they know. Setting of pupils for mathematics and literacy in Key Stages 2 and 3 is enabling work to be even more targeted and progress accelerated. Pupils were strongly motivated to 'read back' their poems about animals, for example, and could do this more easily because excellent use of animal masks, signs and symbols helped them to focus on what they were

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learning about. Excellent relationships, learning attitudes and behaviour were observed in classrooms and around the school.

All pupils benefit from an appropriate emphasis on communication, numeracy, reading and spelling and make good progress in these. Those with the most complex needs improve noticeably in the ways in which they join in and listen in lessons. They make strong gains in their communication skills and personal and social development, and small but significant gains in their literacy and numeracy skills. Pupils who have English as an additional language achieve similarly to other groups. They benefit hugely from the high level of skill and knowledge all staff have about how to promote language. All pupils take part in an excellent range of physical education activities and many are helped to be involved in these in the community as well, such as with Smith's Wood College. Pupils are really enabled to have a strong voice in school life and in local community life through the excellent school council and the many opportunities they have to work with partner schools on projects.

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	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

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.

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How effective is the provision?

New technologies, such as interactive whiteboards and communication aids are used effectively by almost all staff to enhance teaching and learning. Pupils respond extremely well to these, and the specialist school's budget is helping to expand these resources even more. The very strong communication skills of all staff enable pupils to be really involved in their learning and symbols and signs are used well to support this. Highly effective teamwork between teaching assistants and teachers and very strong systems for target setting for pupils mean that everyone is clear about the next steps for every pupil and support is usually directed towards these.

The curriculum's strength lies not simply in its breadth and balance, but in its ability to inspire pupils to learn as well as its absolute relevance and flexibility to meet their needs. Therapy needs and practical opportunities to develop and practise skills are carefully woven into pupils' lessons in school and visits into the community. Students in the sixth form, for example, follow a core key and life skills curriculum, which is particularly successful in supporting their independence and self-help skills as well as widening their understanding of their own needs and of the wider world. Extensive enrichment activities are available both within school and outside. Pupils gain confidence in interacting with others through these but also their own abilities and personalities are much more visible to the community and partner schools and pupils triumphs are celebrated by these.

Outstanding working with other agencies ensures that the physical and emotional health and well-being of pupils is protected at all times, including the support for those whose circumstances make them particularly vulnerable. Students' health, safety and welfare are paramount and reflected in the excellence of arrangements for care, guidance and support. The strength of relationships between staff, pupils and families means that pupils feel hugely valued and supported. Pastoral support, when pupils and families experience trauma or when a sympathetic approach is needed, is excellent. Strong provision is made through the extra support that is provided and the ways in which the school works with other agencies for those pupils who have additional learning or other needs, including those who speak English as an additional language. Excellent systems are in place to support transition into school, whether into the Early Years Foundation Stage or other year groups at other than the usual times, and to support transfer into other schools and college.

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	1
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

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How effective are leadership and management?

Leaders and managers at every level are constantly challenging the school to do better and, because of the improved assessment data, they do this in rigorous and highly focused ways. Monitoring of teaching and learning is well established. Teaching and learning has improved to good with a number of outstanding features, such as the ways in which most staff use the data available about pupils' achievements to plan their lessons and group work. Governance is good. The governing body is highly visible and supportive and its members bring many relevant skills to bear on its work, asking key questions about how well the school is doing.

Safeguarding is outstanding. The school is ever vigilant for pupils' welfare and has excellent relationships and procedures with other agencies and families to secure this. Keeping pupils safe has a high priority within the school and is hugely focused on ensuring pupils understanding how to keep themselves safe. This is a highly inclusive school in which every pupil and member of staff is valued as unique and their different backgrounds celebrated. All have equal opportunities to succeed. The school actively seeks ways of removing barriers to learning for all pupils through new technologies, different mobility aids and close working with therapists. Community cohesion is good. The school and the campus are a hugely harmonious community. The active working together of these schools means that Merstone pupils are very well integrated into community life. The school has growing regional and national links and a good detailed plan to develop and evaluate the outcomes of these although this will not be fully implemented until next year. The school meticulously researches best value in terms of purchasing resources. It uses its extra grants such as its specialist school's funding very carefully to enrich pupils' experiences and learning. It tracks carefully how well interventions are working which helps to ensure that value for money is excellent.

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	1

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Early Years Foundation Stage

Outcomes for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage are excellent. Children's skills and experiences on entry are generally low and their needs are wide ranging. Some have challenging behaviour and most find it hard to cooperate or join in on tasks for other than short times. The provision is hugely successful in developing children's personal, social and emotional development and their communication and language. Progress in these areas is outstanding because the assessment unit day, and the staffing, are arranged so that children have many opportunities to improve these skills. Staff have very high expectations of behaviour and promote an excellent understanding of right and wrong. Excellent arrangements for entry into the assessment unit enable children to quickly settle and be prepared to 'have a go' at new experiences. Staff work extremely well together and with the Key Stage 1 staff or the child's next placement, to promote smooth progression into their next class.

Detailed and careful observation, excellent record-keeping and assessment all ensure that staff know the children very well and that the teaching and learning promote exceptional progress. Families say they 'can't believe' how much progress their children have made. Children's safety and well-being are very well promoted. Excellent accommodation and resources and interesting themes build well on children's interests, such as the current insects theme. Excellent relationships with parents and carers means that they are very well informed as to how well their children are progressing.

Leadership and management of the Early Years Foundation Stage are excellent. The leader is determined to be at the cutting edge of practice both in assessment and provision and undoubtedly is so. Staff are very active in looking for new ideas, know exactly what else they want to do to improve and have an excellent capacity to do so.

These are the grades for the Early Years Foundation Stage

Overall effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage	1
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage	1
The quality of provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage	1
The effectiveness of leadership and management of the Early Years Foundation Stage	1

Sixth form

The excellent provision helps students to grow in maturity and develop self-help skills. Students make great strides both in their practical and core work and particularly in taking more responsibility for their own health, safety and well-being. Teaching is outstanding and includes thorough planning and attention to students' diverse needs. Very practical ways are found to help students apply and extend their improving communication, social, literacy and numeracy skills. They are proud of these, their increased knowledge of how the world works and of their growing independence and maturity. Students are excellent role models for the rest of the school and fulfil their responsibilities with pride. Highly

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effective assessment informs each student's personal programme. A range of work-related and vocational courses, as well as support for key skills, is in place and the sixth form leader is always searching out new possibilities. Excellent use is made of the local and wider community facilities to help students apply their developing skills.

Leadership and management of the sixth form are excellent. The enthusiastic sixth form leader has developed highly effective links with local businesses and colleges to ensure students are really well set up for their next placement. Staff work as a highly effective team and no opportunity for students' learning and enjoyment is lost.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	1
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	1
The quality of provision in the sixth form	1
Leadership and management of the sixth form	1

Views of parents and carers

An average proportion of parents and carers returned the questionnaire. Inspectors also had access to the school's own information about parental views. Parents and carers have absolute confidence in the school's ability to keep their children safe and say that their children enjoy school. Almost all are positive about all other aspects of the school's work. A very few expressed some concerns about where their children's needs are met, their children's progress and how the school communicates with them about this.

Inspectors found this to be an outstanding school which works hard to find the right approach for each child. The school is always seeking ways to engage parents more in their children's learning and has plans in place to extend this further.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Merstone 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 25 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 70 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	20	80	5	20	0	0	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	22	88	3	12	0	0	0	0
My school informs me about my child's progress	23	92	0	0	1	4	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	18	72	6	24	1	4	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	20	80	3	12	1	4	0	0
The school helps me to support my child's learning	18	72	6	24	1	4	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	19	76	5	20	1	4	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	72	5	20	1	4	1	4
The school meets my child's particular needs	17	68	6	24	0	0	1	4
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	19	76	5	20	0	0	1	4
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	19	76	4	16	2	8	0	0
The school is led and managed effectively	21	84	2	8	1	4	1	4
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	22	88	1	4	2	8	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	46	48	6	0
Primary schools	6	47	40	7
Secondary schools	12	39	38	11
Sixth forms	13	42	41	3
Special schools	28	49	19	4
Pupil referral units	14	45	31	10
All schools	10	46	37	7

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 31 December 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 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.



27 June 2011

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Merstone School, Birmingham, B36 0UE

Thank you for making us so welcome when we visited recently. It was good to hear about the progress you feel you are making and about the different things that you enjoy. You told us how much you like your school and how kind the teachers and other pupils are. Some of you said that your school is 'fantastic'.

We agree with you that you are lucky to go to such an outstanding school. You are making good progress, particularly in your communication, reading and your mathematics work and in the different courses and subjects that you study.

We were pleased to hear how safe you feel in school. We found that your behaviour is excellent and that your teachers really help you to be as independent and mature as possible. There were a number of other things we really liked about your school, for example the work with other schools and colleges that gives you lots of interesting experiences and the chance to get more qualifications and learn skills that will help you later. The school really helps you to develop your understanding of how to live a healthy life and how to get on with others. It was good to see you taking on so much responsibility for your own learning and for thinking about others' needs.

We have asked the Principal and the school's leaders to do some things that would improve the school's work further:

- to make the teaching even better by being sure that when you are working together in bigger groups teachers do not go too quickly for those of you who find the learning hardest
- to use more resources such as computers and switches and sensory aids at these times.

You can help, too, by making sure you attend every day and by continuing to work hard.

Yours sincerely

Susan Lewis

Lead Inspector

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