

Step by Step School for Autistic Children

Independent school standard inspection report

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Reporting inspector	Anne Duffy HMI

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

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Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by Ofsted under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002, as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005, the purpose of which is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.^{1, 2}

Information about the school

Step by Step School is an independent day special school for pupils aged four to 16 years who have autistic spectrum disorder, including severe learning, social and communication difficulties. It is based in a rural setting close to East Grinstead and has three primary classes and one secondary class. There are currently 22 pupils on roll, 16 of whom are boys. For the past two years there have been no children in the Early Years Foundation Stage. The vast majority of pupils have statements of special educational needs or are placed for assessment, and almost all are funded by their local authorities. Step by Step uses the Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) approach which adopts individual learning programmes for each pupil and provides one-to-one teaching support at all times. Additional advice, support and input are provided by speech, language and occupational therapists, educational psychologists and other professional consultants as required.

The school was founded by a group of parents and carers in 2003 and first opened in 2004. Its overarching aim is 'to teach autistic children the knowledge, skills and confidence that will enable them to reach their full potential and lead as full and independent a life as possible'. The school received a light touch inspection in January 2009 when all regulations were met.

Evaluation of the school

Step by Step School provides an outstanding quality of education and makes good provision for pupils' welfare, health and safety. It meets its stated aim very well. Curricular provision is outstanding and is tailored extremely well to meet the individual needs of the pupils. Pupils are guided very effectively towards improving their behaviour for learning and as a result make outstanding progress overall. Teaching and assessment are outstanding. Arrangements for ensuring pupils' safeguarding are good. The school has maintained a high quality of education since its last inspection and meets all the regulatory requirements for independent schools.

¹ www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/32/contents.

² www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/18/contents.

Quality of education

The quality of the curriculum is outstanding. As one parent stated, 'The school provides the unique opportunity for my son to learn and make progress.' Curriculum policies cover all the required subject areas and delivery is tailored very effectively towards meeting the individual needs of each pupil. The balance between subjects, one-to-one sessions and group work is suitably varied. The school has planned the Key Stage 3 curriculum extremely carefully. It has a very well-judged emphasis on developing the skills necessary for later life, incorporating accreditation through the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN). Excellent opportunities are provided for pupils to overcome any barriers to learning posed by their behaviour and to broaden their interest in different subjects or ways of working. Pupils respond well to a range of carefully planned programmes and thoroughly enjoy working with their tutor, or, where appropriate, with one another and their teacher. This is reflected in the outstanding progress that they make in developing their communication skills. Personal, social and health education is very strong indeed and contributes very effectively to pupils' growing awareness of themselves and others. The development of literacy and numeracy skills spans all aspects of the school's work and is linked very well with other areas of the curriculum through a topic-based approach. Pupils benefit from speech, language and occupational therapy and those observed during the inspection showed that they thoroughly enjoyed their success in these areas.

Teaching is outstanding, characterised by high expectations and extremely good relationships between staff and pupils. Staff make very good use of different communication methods according to the needs of the pupils. As a result of a strong programme of training for staff, the school is especially successful in the way in which the specific ABA approach is used to stimulate and maintain pupils' interest and engage them very effectively in the learning process. Work is tailored extremely well to challenge each pupil to make the best possible progress. As one member of staff said, 'Nothing's easy here at all. We're always challenging them to do something.' In group sessions, support is discretely given, so that help is at hand when necessary but pupils are encouraged to try things for themselves. In the group sessions, while good use is made of the termly topic, there is some inconsistency in the way in which the learning objective is introduced to the pupils. For example, a lesson planned to develop pupils' understanding and use of a number line was not as clear as it could be because it was introduced as a lesson about nursery rhymes. In a further lesson, when it was introduced as learning about using a number line to count to 20, confusion was removed and pupils were ready to make a simple evaluation of what they had learnt and how well they had done. Assessment is extremely thorough, with very detailed processes for tracking pupils' short and long-term progress and for planning each next step. As pupil numbers have grown this has resulted in a vast amount of information which, while very individualised, does not make an overview of progress, across all areas of the curriculum, as accessible as it could be.

Pupils make outstanding progress overall, most particularly in their behaviour and communication skills and in their attitudes to learning. Although some resistance is still evident at times, pupils work hard in every session and are increasingly motivated to engage in every task. The marked progress made following entry to the school is demonstrated by those students who are now in the secondary department as well as those pupils who joined more recently. While the younger ones may be focusing most strongly on adapting to school life and learning to learn, older ones are working increasingly independently, effectively using technology to communicate, and building up their ASDAN folders and showing excellent gains in learning over time.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils is outstanding. Pupils thoroughly enjoy coming to school and this is evident in their very good attendance. As one parent said, 'He leaves for school every day full of smiles.' In response to the school's evident care for them, pupils make exceptional progress in managing their anxieties and controlling their behaviour, so that it is outstanding. They respond extremely well to the experiences presented to them both in and outside school. They benefit particularly from activities which stretch and challenge them, such as the overnight stays at a local outdoor adventure centre and the first aid courses run jointly with the St John Ambulance. As a result, they begin to develop the skills necessary to make sense of their own and the wider world. Pupils work independently whenever possible and contribute to the day's routines. Some show themselves increasingly able to think of others saying, 'That was kind, wasn't it?' Acquisition of the key skills of numeracy, literacy and communication are supported extremely effectively by linked activities. For example, trips to a nearby supermarket introduce pupils to the skills of planning and using money which will support their economic well-being in later life. Knowledge and awareness of different lifestyles and cultures, as well as public services and institutions, are supported well through different trips, membership of the local scouts, and visits by a local theatre group.

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

Provision for pupils' welfare, health and safety is good overall. Many aspects are outstanding but a recent administrative shortfall meant that some procedures were not up to date. These were addressed appropriately during the inspection. The school's commitment to ensuring that all pupils are safe is evident in the care taken on a day-to-day basis, even to the point of making sure all entered the school suitably protected by umbrellas on the very rainy days of the inspection. There is little staff turnover so that pupils feel extremely secure with people that they know. There is a comprehensive safeguarding policy which is implemented effectively. All staff, including the designated person for child protection, have been trained at the appropriate level, therefore staff know who to go to if they have child protection concerns. They are well trained in first aid; the arrangements for fire and other emergencies are well established and are implemented very efficiently. Detailed risk

assessments are in place for individual pupils, for teaching, external areas and for educational visits. Monitoring of packed lunches encourages healthy eating very effectively. There is a range of provision for outdoor play and learning which is enhanced by trips to local activity centres. There is a detailed plan in place which demonstrates how the school intends to further improve provision in line with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010.

Suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors

The school appropriately checks all staff and others to ensure their suitability to work with children. The single central register contains all the necessary information. The school is aware of its responsibilities with regard to ensuring that the appropriate checks are carried out when using therapy or advisory staff on a regular basis and has now included these in the central register as required.

Premises and accommodation at the school

The school buildings and surrounding areas provide very safe and attractive teaching accommodation and areas for play. The premises, which were added to in September 2011, are well suited to the extended age group and provide enhanced provision for cooking, music and physical activity.

Provision of information

All policies and related information are provided, or are made available, in line with requirements. Up-to-date information is given to parents and carers on how well their children have done at school and on any particular issues that arise. Staff visit families at home before a pupil starts at the school and regular telephone calls ensure that contact is well maintained. All parents and carers responded positively to the questionnaire with many stating that they were very happy with the school and the level of information that they receive.

Manner in which complaints are to be handled

Procedures for dealing with complaints are available on request and are compliant with the regulations. There were no complaints in the previous year.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The proprietor has ensured that the school meets The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2010, schedule 1 ('the Regulations').

What the school could do to improve further

While not required by regulations, the school might wish to consider the following points for development.

- Further support the outstanding progress made by pupils across different aspects of their learning and development by:
 - ensuring that the learning objectives of group and topic-based sessions are consistently and clearly stated so that those pupils who are ready to, can evaluate for themselves how much they have learnt
 - making full use of the detailed assessment information held on each pupil to provide an overview of progress made across all areas of the curriculum as the number and the age range of pupils increase
 - ensuring that the systems and processes for supporting the welfare and safety of pupils are as thorough as those for other aspects of the school's work.

Inspection judgements

outstanding	good	satisfactory	inadequate
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The quality of education

Overall quality of education	✓			
How well the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of pupils	✓			
How effective teaching and assessment are in meeting the full range of pupils' needs	✓			
How well pupils make progress in their learning	✓			

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development

Quality of provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	✓			
The behaviour of pupils	✓			

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The overall welfare, health and safety of pupils		✓		
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School details

School status	Independent		
Type of school	Day special school		
Date school opened	April 2004		
Age range of pupils	4 to 16 years		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 16	Girls: 6	Total: 22
Number on roll (part-time pupils)	Boys: 0	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational needs	Boys: 15	Girls: 6	Total: 21
Number of pupils who are looked after	Boys: 1	Girls: 0	Total: 1
Annual fees (day pupils)	£51,114 (primary), £58,078 (secondary)		
Address of school	Grinstead Lane Sharpthorne East Sussex RH19 4HP		
Telephone number	01342 811852		
Email address	dfidler@stepbystepschool.org.uk		
School Director	Donna Fidler		
Proprietor	Step by Step School for Autistic Children Ltd		

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 April 2012

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Step by Step School, Sharpthorpe RH19 4HP

Thank you for helping me to learn about your school. I really enjoyed my visit. It was good to meet you and to see how well you are doing. I am writing this letter to tell you what I found.

Your school provides you with an outstanding education which helps you to make excellent progress in your learning. There are plenty of interesting things for you to do both in and out of school. It was good to see how much you enjoy using the spaces you have to play and work in. You thoroughly enjoy school and I could see that you are trying very hard indeed to learn and do as well as you can. Well done!

All the staff help you and want you to do well in everything you try. I have asked the teachers to make sure that they tell you as clearly as possible what you are going to be learning in your group lessons. This will help you to think about each new idea. You can help, too, by concentrating well and trying things on your own as much as possible. Your school has a lot of information about you and I have suggested that it would help the staff to gather this together so that the people in charge can see at a glance how well everyone is doing. I have also asked them to remember to do everything that schools need to do to make sure that you stay as safe as possible, and to keep good records of this.

I hope that you continue to try hard and do well in the future.

Yours sincerely

Anne Duffy
Her Majesty's Inspector