

The Acorn School

Independent school standard inspection report

DfE registration number	916/6068
Unique Reference Number (URN)	115808
Inspection number	393346
Inspection dates	16–17 May 2012
Reporting inspector	Steffi Penny HMI

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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

The Acorn School is located on the site of a former maintained primary school in Nailsworth in Gloucestershire. Founded in 1991 by the current proprietor and his wife, the school offers educational provision for students aged 6 to 19 years of age. There are 63 students currently on roll. In the upper school, there is a small number of students from various parts of the United Kingdom and abroad, who stay with families who have students at school. Several students in the upper school have German as their first language but they are fluent in English. No student has a statement of special educational needs. The school aims to provide young people with the finest education possible, using the principles of Rudolf Steiner, as well as those developed by the proprietor and his wife. The vision of the school states that 'the child is at the very centre and nurturing the special qualities of each child is paramount to our endeavours at Acorn'. No external examinations or tests are undertaken. Students applying for university, usually at the age of 19, submit portfolios of work and personal theses. In keeping with Steiner views, the school is opposed to information and communication technology (ICT) for students in the lower school.

The school was last inspected in February 2009.

Evaluation of the school

The Acorn School meets all its aims and provides an outstanding quality of education for its students and the school has acted well on the recommendations of the last report. The curriculum, teaching and achievement of students are now outstanding, having been judged good at the last inspection. Students' behaviour is exemplary and their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. Safeguarding arrangements are secure. The school meets all of the regulations for independent schools with the exception of providing showering facilities for students' use after physical activities and a room for students if they become ill at school. As a consequence, the school's measures to promote the welfare, health and safety of students are good rather than outstanding.

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. It very successfully covers all of the required areas for learning and meets the needs of students very well. Subjects are taught when the school considers it to be an appropriate point in the students' development. All students start each day with a movement session that engages them in exceptionally high quality physical activity. Then the first two hours of every day is a 'main lesson' where one subject or topic is taught for several weeks. After this there are subject lessons for the rest of the day. During the inspection the movement session performed by the upper school culminated in gymnastic exercises which were executed to an exemplary level of competence, enjoyment, pace, and participation. Following this, students started their main lesson alert, refreshed, willing and able to learn.

The curriculum for personal, social and health education (PSHE) is well integrated into all aspects of school life. As a result, students have an excellent understanding of how to keep healthy and safe and their personal development is outstanding. Students contribute fully to the school community through singing in the choirs, playing in the orchestra and participating in school festivals. Extra-curricular activities are provided along with an extensive range and number of educational trips. In the lower school, lesson content, in line with Steiner philosophy, is presented in a vivid, pictorial and oral way. Often this is through the use of stories told by the teacher, high quality drawings and with relatively few abstract concepts. Students are gently, but securely, moved forward in their learning by their class teacher who subtly assesses where re-enforcement of learning would be helpful and who normally remains with the same class throughout students' formative years. The emphasis is on students gaining basic skills and understanding the natural world, through physical exploration, such as nature walks and visits to local farms. Students, particularly in the lower school, find it harder to develop their mathematical skills as independently as they do in literacy, art, craft and healthy living. Consequently, the school is looking at ways to increase the opportunities for younger students to enhance and develop mathematical skills in practical ways, outside of the discrete mathematics lessons and their main lessons.

In the upper school, within the main lesson, a three-day cycle is run. This consists of the presentation of the subject in lecture style with students taking their own notes and then recalling and providing their interpretation of the topic. This culminates in a detailed, illustrated essay. The range of these topics is vast and expert visitors (often parents) are used highly effectively to extend students' knowledge and understanding. Main lessons have also include activities such as a residential stay in south west Wales constructing and designing a straw-bale roundhouse, and a trip through Europe studying art and architecture.

The quality and effectiveness of teaching and assessment are outstanding. Students benefit from the very small numbers in class, along with the very positive relationships that exist between the school and parents who support each other, following the 'Parent Charter'. These successful relationships enable students to

develop exceptionally positive attitudes towards learning. Teachers have high expectations and an excellent knowledge of the Steiner curriculum along with that designed by the headteacher and his wife, which is used in the upper school. Parents told the inspector that 'the teachers' performance goes well beyond their job description and their love for their work and the children, shines through with their enthusiasm, energy and well thought-through lessons'. Inspection evidence comprehensively endorses these views.

When students start school in the youngest class, the vast majority have not had formal lessons in reading, writing or mathematics and have had no access to ICT or electronic media. Generally, these students have attended registered Steiner schools or have been home educated. Students who join the school at other times have a wide range of experiences and backgrounds but, in the main, have found learning difficult in their previous school. Nevertheless, due to excellent teaching, the vast majority of students make outstanding progress in all aspects, including older pupils' use of ICT to support their learning. One good example is the way in which students' artistic and physical skills are outstandingly well developed due to their participation in a wide range of adventurous outdoor activities such as water skiing, kite surfing, wakeboarding, climbing, hill walking and orienteering.

Tracking procedures are in place for all students and progress is monitored carefully to ensure each student is very well supported to reach their potential in all areas of learning and their personal development. Although no external examinations are taken, the school has an excellent record of students achieving university placements.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

The quality and effectiveness of the school's provision for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of students are outstanding. All students are exceptionally polite, courteous, and have impeccable manners. There is an atmosphere of calm reflection, peace and happiness throughout the school and students' enjoyment of school is tangible. Behaviour is outstanding and attendance is high. Exceptionally warm and trusting relationships are evident throughout the school and this ensures students develop high levels of self-esteem, self-belief and confidence. Students work and play together harmoniously due to the nurturing atmosphere created by the school community. As a consequence, students leave the school as well educated, intelligently-opinionated, free-thinking adults; meeting the school's aims. As one parent noted, 'I have seen an insecure and complicated child blossom, work hard, love learning and thrive.' Another typical parent view was, 'The Acorn School is simply wonderful. My child is extremely happy there and really loves school. The teachers are lovely, caring and supportive. I just wish I had been able to go to the school as a child.'

There are extensive opportunities for students to learn about the needs of others, particularly through their main lesson and fundraising and involvement in charity work. A good example is the support given to an orphanage that was set up in

Thailand by a previous student. Students are given regular opportunities to reflect on their learning in lessons and further develop their sense of spirituality through an appreciation of nature, art, music and movement. Students develop a strong awareness of public institutions in England through the curriculum and through visits to places of cultural interest, particularly in the upper school.

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

Procedures to promote students' welfare, health and safety, including child protection, are good overall. Students say they feel safe and extremely well cared for. Students develop a strong commitment to healthy physical, emotional and mental lifestyles through the curriculum. Staff are deployed effectively so that supervision is efficient both in lessons and around the school. Robust policies and procedures are in place for safeguarding students and are assiduously followed by all staff. Staff have been properly trained in child protection. Effective risk assessments are carried out covering all areas of the premises and activities off site. The range of policies relating to fire safety, health and safety, bullying, discipline and first aid meet the needs of the students well. Staff and a good proportion of students have received training in first aid. The school fulfils its duties with regard to the Equalities Act 2010.

Suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors

The school has appropriate procedures for ensuring that all adults who work in the school are suitably checked for their ability to work the students. The single central register meets all requirements.

Premises and accommodation at the school

The accommodation includes a converted house and two demountable classrooms. The premises are maintained to a good standard, providing a safe and secure environment for students to work and play. Although outdoor spaces on the school site are limited, excellent use is made of local areas for field sports and nature walks. The school does not have showering facilities for students to use after physical exercise and there are no suitable facilities for students who may become ill during the school day.

Provision of information

All of the required information is provided, or made available, to parents, carers and others including termly written reports on the progress of their child. The school's statement of purpose through its 'Parents' Charter' includes much useful information, including a clear statement that the school expects an unequivocal commitment from families to enforce the school's policies at home. This commitment includes delaying the introduction of electronic media to students and, when computers are introduced, a rule that students will not participate in social-media sites. The charter also includes an agreement that students will not drink alcohol, smoke or attend

unauthorised teenage gatherings while on the school roll, regardless of the student's age.

Manner in which complaints are to be handled

The school's procedures for handling complaints meet all requirements for independent schools.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The proprietor has ensured that the school meets The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2010, schedule 1 ('the Regulations'), with the exception of those listed below.³

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of the premises of and accommodation at schools (standards in part 5) and must:

- ensure the provision of appropriate facilities for students to shower after physical exercise (paragraph 23(j))
- ensure the provision of appropriate facilities for students who are ill (paragraph 23(k)).

What the school could do to improve further

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

- continue to explore ways to ensure that students can develop and demonstrate their mathematical skills and understanding with minimum adult help, particularly in the lower school.

³ www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2010/1997/contents/made.

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	Independent co-educational		
Date school opened	January 1992		
Age range of pupils	6–19 years		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 32	Girls: 31	Total: 63
Number on roll (part-time pupils)	Boys: 0	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational needs	Boys: 0	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Number of pupils who are looked after	Boys: 0	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Annual fees (day pupils)	£5,250–£7,545		
Address of school	Church Street Nailsworth Stroud Gloucestershire GL6 0BP		
Telephone number	01453 836508		
Email address	info@theacornschool.com		
Headteacher	Mr G Whiting		
Proprietor	Mr G Whiting		

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.



18 May 2012

Dear Students

Inspection of The Acorn School, Stroud GL6 0BP

I came to your school in May to see how well students were learning and how well the school supports them. I visited students in lessons and talked with them about their work. I would like to say a big thank you to all the students, parents and staff that I met for making me feel so very welcome, and for their kindness, generosity and hospitality. I judged that your school provides you with an outstanding quality of education. In particular your artistic, gymnastic and choral skills were an absolute pleasure to see and hear. Staff work exceptionally hard to make your learning exciting and interesting. The excellent teaching ensures that, along with your exemplary attitudes to learning, you make outstanding progress so when students leave the upper school their work is of an exceptionally high standard.

You work with caring, thoughtful adults who are always looking for ways to make your school an even better place to be. In order to help the school improve further I have suggested that:

- students over the age of 11 have showers with water after physical activities
- there is a better place for you to lie down if you are become ill while at school
- the school continues to explore ways to ensure that you can develop and demonstrate your mathematical skills and understanding with minimum adult help, particularly in the lower school.

With my very best wishes for your future.

Yours sincerely

Steffi Penny
Her Majesty's Inspector