

Pebble Brook School

Inspection report

Unique reference number	110576
Local authority	Buckinghamshire
Inspection number	378119
Inspection dates	3–4 May 2012
Lead inspector	Charles Hackett

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection of boarding provision was carried out under the Children Act 1989, as amended by the Care Standards Act 2000, having regard to the national minimum standards for boarding schools.

Type of school	Special
School category	Community Special
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	57
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Annie Andrews
Headteacher	David Miller
Date of previous school inspection	17–18 June 2009
School address	Churchill Avenue Aylesbury HP21 8LZ
Telephone number	01296 415766
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Boarding provision	Pebble Brook
Social care unique reference number	SC023096
Social care inspector	Harun Rashid

Age group	11–16
Inspection date(s)	3–4 May 2012
Inspection number	378119



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Introduction

Inspection team

Charles Hackett

Additional inspector

Ronny Young

Additional inspector

This inspection was carried out with two days' notice. The inspectors observed 11 teachers and 12 lessons, and visited four activities during an afternoon enrichment lesson. Meetings were held with staff, two members of the governing body and three officers from the local authority. Discussions were held with students about their work and their views of the school.

The inspectors took account of the responses to the online questionnaire (Parent View) when planning the inspection. They looked at students' work and information on their progress. They also evaluated the school's safeguarding policies and other documents. Questionnaires completed by 25 parents and carers, 11 staff and 46 students were scrutinised.

Information about the school

Pebble Brook School is smaller than the average-sized special school. It caters for students with moderate learning difficulties, some of whom have additional learning difficulties such as autistic spectrum disorders. The number of students eligible for free school meals and those who speak English as an additional language is well above average. Currently no students who attend the school are in the care of the local authority.

The school has a small boarding provision on site which offers boarding for students from this school and other special schools in the area for up to four nights each week. Currently four students from the school are boarders.

Building work is currently being undertaken which has resulted in part of the school being cordoned off from students and staff, and some changes to the rooming timetable for a range of subjects. The headteacher joined the school in January 2012 and a new chair of the governing body was appointed in December 2010.

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	4
Achievement of pupils	4
Quality of teaching	4
Behaviour and safety of pupils	3
Leadership and management	4

Key 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 special measures because it is failing to give its students an acceptable standard of education and the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the school are not demonstrating the capacity to ensure the necessary improvement.
- Pebble Brook is not a satisfactory school because students do not achieve as well as they should. Teaching does not ensure that students' literacy and numeracy skills are developed sufficiently. Targets for learning are not challenging and are not monitored effectively.
- Teaching fails to inspire and engage students sufficiently in their learning and some students are not challenged well enough by activities in lessons. For others, their work is too difficult and learning support assistants are not always directed appropriately to support students' learning.
- Students generally behave well in lessons and in the boarding unit. However, in too many lessons they are passive learners. The exception to this is when students eagerly engage in learning in practical lessons where they have more opportunities to show their independent thinking skills. Some students who have just started at the school show more challenging behaviour and staff are at an early stage of developing strategies to work effectively with these students.
- Leaders and managers have failed to maintain the good provision that was in place at the time of the last inspection. However, the governing body and the headteacher are already bringing about important improvements. The system for tracking students' progress has increased the focus on achievement, and the management of staff performance is starting to address some weaknesses in provision. New initiatives and staff training are beginning to have a positive impact but the quality of teaching remains a fundamental weakness in the

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school's provision. Some senior staff do not provide sufficient support in managing staff performance and do not make enough difference to improving the quality of teaching. The curriculum is inadequate because it fails to ensure that students make sufficient progress. The promotion of students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is inadequate.

- The boarding provision is satisfactory. Boarders appreciate the safe environment and enjoy a good range of activities. Issues raised at the previous inspection have been addressed. The national minimum standard for staffing is not met because not all members of staff have the required qualifications.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- As a matter of urgency improve the rate of progress for all students by:
 - setting challenging improvement targets that are monitored regularly to gauge students' progress
 - improving the level of literacy support available, especially for those students with reading difficulties
 - developing a whole-school programme for teaching independent writing skills across subjects
 - providing students with better levels of support to develop their mathematical skills.
- Take immediate action to improve the quality of teaching so that it is effective for all students by:
 - ensuring that lessons take full account of students' individual levels of ability and their prior learning
 - ensuring that lessons are stimulating, move at a good pace and use a wide range of approaches which engage students actively in their learning
 - reducing the use of worksheets and finding more imaginative ways for students to demonstrate their learning and achievements
 - involving learning support assistants more productively when supporting students in their learning.
- Strengthen the impact of leadership and management by:
 - making better use of performance management to address shortcomings in the work of staff, including senior staff, in contributing to the school's effectiveness and improving the quality of teaching, learning and outcomes for students
 - holding teachers robustly to account for the progress of students within their lessons and in their care.
- Ensure the school meets all the national minimum standards for boarding schools.

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Main report

Achievement of pupils

The attainment levels of students who join Pebble Brook are well below those expected for their age. During their time at the school students, including those known to be eligible for free school meals and those who speak English as an additional language, make inadequate progress. A recent assessment of achievements in English and mathematics shows that progress is best in some aspects of English in Key Stage 3. Even here however only 60 per cent of students are achieving the expected rates of progress. In mathematics the figure drops to 15 per cent. In Key Stage 4 no students are making the expected rates of progress in either English or mathematics. When compared with students nationally gaps in performance are not closing quickly enough.

The quality of students' learning in lessons varies because of differences in the quality of teaching. Recent improvements to teaching are evident in lessons where students make good progress because they are actively involved in learning and their thinking skills are developed. For example, in an art lesson students were illustrating key words associated with landscapes before moving on to creating landscape drawings of their own. The teacher encouraged them to be actively involved and think carefully about what they were doing. This is not always the case. Too often students have too little ownership of their learning and the work set is not consistently matched to their level of ability which prevents them from making progress at a more effective rate. The more able students are rarely set challenging extension work, and some less able students undertake work that is too difficult for them. The school has begun work to set improvement targets but little use was made of these by teachers or students in the lessons observed.

Students make insufficient progress in developing their literacy skills although they make some progress in understanding the different vocabulary used in specific subject areas. Those who make use of the excellent library are increasing their understanding and enjoyment of reading. In many subjects much of the students' written work involves completing worksheets with too little attention paid to developing their writing skills across the curriculum. As a result, by the time students leave the school they have made too little progress in improving their literacy and especially their writing skills. Students say that they enjoy school but often cite the more practical subjects as their favourite lessons. The parents and carers who responded to the questionnaire felt that their children achieve well in the school. Inspection evidence, including the school's own data on achievement, does not support this view.

Quality of teaching

Although there have been some recent improvements, the quality of teaching is inadequate and does not support students in making the progress they should.

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Teaching is frequently unimaginative and fails to enthuse or engage students in their learning. Too often work is based on the use of a textbook or worksheets and the range of resources used is limited. Work covered in each lesson rarely builds on students' prior learning or moves at a good pace. Recent changes to the timetable have brought about some improvements in the quality of teaching, but this has not had time to have a marked impact on students' overall progress. Students say how much they appreciate the shorter lessons and the opportunities to take part in enrichment activities.

Teachers rarely set a variety of tasks for individuals or small groups with different levels of ability. In most lessons teachers often talk for too long to the whole class and all students are asked to undertake work which is pitched at the same level of difficulty. Teachers provide too few opportunities for students to work cooperatively to find out answers for themselves. For example, in one lesson the answers to a set of questions were written on the board and students were asked to copy them out even though some students were not able to read or fully understand what was written.

There are occasions when teachers assess how well students are doing through excellent questioning. Inspectors saw an example of this in a science lesson when students were developing their understanding of electrical safety. In this lesson, because the work was well matched to students' different ability levels, they made good progress. This good practice is infrequent and there are too many occasions when teachers ask questions of the whole class but only a few volunteer an answer. Not all students are fully involved in learning during lessons, and insufficient effort is made to check whether they understand their work or what they are being asked to do. Very recent improvements have included better assessment systems and a greater emphasis on tracking students' progress over time, although these have yet to have an impact on raising students' achievement.

Learning support assistants are not deployed well enough. Consequently they do not provide effective support in developing students' literacy skills because they are not given sufficient guidance about how best to support the students' learning. They are most effective in practical lessons where they work well with individual students in offering support and encouragement to help students complete tasks independently, for example in design and technology lessons. Parents and carers are generally happy with the quality of teaching but inspection evidence does not support this view.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Typically, pupils behave well both in lessons and around the site. In lessons they sit quietly and, when given the opportunity, cooperate well with each other. They usually attempt the work set for them by teachers, although some are reluctant when it comes to writing independently either on a worksheet or in an exercise book. Incidents of unacceptable behaviour are recorded in detail and an analysis of these shows that they involve only a small number of students. As part of the recent

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improvements, good quality plans support the behaviour management of students who are experiencing particular difficulties.

Students, including those in the boarding provision, say they feel safe and that behaviour is good. Both boys and girls talked about bullying which occurred in the past. They felt staff had dealt with such incidents well and said that no further problems have arisen. Students show a good understanding of the different types of bullying including, as one student put it, 'name-calling'. All those spoken to stressed that this no longer occurs and that they can comfortably enjoy break and lunchtime activities. Assemblies and the new enrichment lessons are starting to contribute positively to promoting students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

Behaviour is satisfactory rather than good because staff are only beginning to understand how to use the most appropriate strategies for dealing with the more complex behaviours that some students display. Parents and carers consider behaviour to be good and have no safety concerns for their children.

Leadership and management

Although the school was judged good at its previous inspection, the quality of provision and outcomes for students has deteriorated, reflecting a lack of sustained improvement over time. Since the appointment of a new headteacher, some improvements are being made, but there is a lack of consistency among senior staff and many are not sufficiently involved in securing the school's day-to-day and longer term strategic improvement. Not all senior staff share the headteacher's and the governors' vision for the school and what is required to turn the school around. Consequently, the overall impact of leadership and management is inadequate and the capacity for sustained improvement is not secure.

The headteacher and the highly motivated governing body are under no illusions about the school's current effectiveness. Under the leadership of a new chair of the governing body, a much more rigorous approach has been adopted by the governors to raising the school's effectiveness. Together with the headteacher, they are determined to secure excellence. They are fully aware that the inadequate progress of students and quality of teaching must be addressed urgently, and have made a sound start in seeking to do this. With better professional development and the management of performance, along with a detailed school action plan to address all identified weaknesses, work already undertaken is starting to have a positive but as yet, limited impact. Safeguarding policies and procedures are in place. Statutory requirements in the main school are met but, in relation to the boarding provision, one of the national minimum standards is not.

The curriculum does not ensure that students' literacy and numeracy skills are promoted across subjects. While students' moral and social development is promoted, opportunities for students' spiritual and cultural development are inadequate. Much has been done recently to make the curriculum more effective with some success. Lessons are shorter, with more enrichment activities taking place

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at the end of two afternoons each week. An increased emphasis on offering functional skills has already started for older students, and there are plans to extend vocational training from the current offer of work experience in Year 11. Although boys and girls believe that they have equal opportunities within the curriculum, data on students' progress do not demonstrate that all have an equal chance of academic success. The school does however tackle discrimination effectively.

Boarding provision

The quality of the boarding provision at Pebble Brook School is satisfactory. A clear statement of principles and practice describes the overall purpose of the facility, and satisfactory progress has been made in relation to the recommendations made at the previous inspection. Staff and boarders share good relationships and activities support boarders' social and moral development well.

Boarders increase in confidence and independence and develop practical skills as they participate in daily tasks, prepare meals and shop for food. They enjoy a variety of activities in the local community; for example, with visits to a local youth club where they play football and cricket. Participation in such activities contributes positively to their physical and emotional health. High levels of supervision and the calm atmosphere in the provision help boarders to make satisfactory progress in overcoming difficulties, such as managing their behaviour.

Boarders are provided with appropriate pastoral care and support for their personal and academic development. Their health is promoted well. Each boarder has an individual care plan which is reviewed regularly. Care staff administer medication to boarders and maintain appropriate records. The quality of food is good and meets the dietary needs and preferences of boarders. Teaching staff work closely with care staff to ensure continuity in communication and behaviour management. Boarders are provided with facilities that are conducive to study and they are supported by care staff when completing their homework.

Boarders' opinions are sought over key decisions which affect their daily lives. At the end of each week, reports on their progress are sent to their parents and carers. Clear child protection policies and systems include effective procedures for recruiting new staff. Boarders' surveys and those students spoken to confirm that they feel safe both on and off site. Appropriate anti-bullying policies and procedures are in place and boarders said that they have not experienced any issues relating to bullying. Staff use effective methods to reduce the seriousness of any behaviour incidents and to avoid the use of physical restraint whenever appropriate.

There is a clear staffing structure in place with sufficient numbers of staff on duty to meet the assessed needs of boarders. Staff roles and accountability are clear. Most staff receive appropriate training and support to fulfil their roles. However, not all care staff have attained a relevant minimum Level 3 qualification or have qualifications which demonstrate the same competencies. Members of the school's governing body regularly visit the boarding school and conduct unannounced

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monitoring visits. As a result, the school knows its strengths and weaknesses and makes improvements which benefit boarders.

National minimum standards

- Ensure that all care staff have attained a relevant minimum Level 3 qualification or have qualifications which demonstrate the same competencies. (NMS 19.2)

These are the grades for the boarding provision.

Overall effectiveness of the boarding experience	3
Outcomes for boarders	3
Quality of boarding provision and care	3
Boarders' safety	3
Leadership and management of boarding	3

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	54	42	2	2
Primary schools	14	49	32	6
Secondary schools	20	39	34	7
Special schools	33	45	20	3
Pupil referral units	9	55	28	8
All schools	16	47	31	6

New school inspection arrangements have been introduced from 1 January 2012. This means that inspectors make judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September to 31 December 2011 and represent judgements that were made under the school inspection arrangements that were introduced on 1 September 2009. These data 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.

Primary schools include primary academy converters. Secondary schools include secondary academy converters, sponsor-led academies and city technology colleges. Special schools include special academy converters and non-maintained special schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning and development taking account of their attainment.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Attendance:	the regular attendance of pupils at school and in lessons, taking into account the school's efforts to encourage good attendance.
Behaviour:	how well pupils behave in lessons, with emphasis on their attitude to learning. Pupils' punctuality to lessons and their conduct around the school.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving based on its self-evaluation and what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Floor standards:	the national minimum expectation of attainment and progression measures.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the governors and 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:	inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school.
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.
Safety:	how safe pupils are in school, including in lessons, and their understanding of risks. Pupils' freedom from bullying and harassment. How well the school promotes safety, for example e-learning.

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.



5 May 2012

Dear Students

Inspection of Pebble Brook School, Aylesbury, HP21 8LZ

Thank you for being so helpful when we came to visit your school. We enjoyed meeting so many of you and being able to talk about the school with you. We noted that most of you say you like school and that you like the practical lessons best.

We consider that there are some things at your school that are improving but that overall it needs to get much better. We have therefore judged it to be inadequate and in need of special measures to help it to improve. Too much teaching is not good enough to help you learn as well as you should. Teachers do not do enough to match the work they give you to your different levels of ability and do not encourage some of you to work even harder and achieve more. In some lessons, you are not keen to learn because you do not find the work interesting. Your behaviour is satisfactory and you are safe in school. The last time the school was inspected, it was judged to be good. This means that standards have dropped a lot and shows that the school's leaders over time have failed to improve the school. However your new headteacher is beginning to bring about the necessary changes. The governors are supporting him very well.

To be a better school, we have suggested the following areas of improvement:

- ensure that you all make better progress, especially in English and mathematics
- make sure all teachers make learning more interesting and provide work that is at just the right level for each of you
- ensure all senior staff with responsibilities do more to help the school improve.

I hope that you will do your best to help by always working hard in lessons.

Yours sincerely

Charles Hackett
Lead inspector

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