

Acorns School

Independent school standard inspection report

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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

Acorns School, which is located in Marple, an area of Stockport near Manchester is part of the Keys Childcare Ltd group. The school caters for students aged from five to 17 years with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. It has no religious emphasis or affiliation. All the students have been referred by their local authority because of their severely disrupted prior education. Currently, there are 19 students on roll from seven different local authorities; 18 of whom have a statement of special educational needs. Nine students are looked after. The school first opened in 1997, and was previously inspected in June 2009. The school aims to 'educate in an emotionally healthy environment' by providing 'a holistic education that will provide them (students) with learning opportunities, which target their specific individual educational needs'. It further emphasises that it 'will help these children and young people to achieve their academic and personal potential and hence to help equip them with the skills they need to enjoy a full, well integrated and satisfying life'.

Evaluation of the school

Acorns School provides a satisfactory quality of education for its students. The overwhelming majority of students make satisfactory progress in their learning, but better progress in managing their behaviour and improving their regular attendance at school. Teaching is good in the primary phase and satisfactory at secondary level. Staff at the school provide a safe and secure learning environment, which is helping to develop the students' enjoyment of attending school. Although the school has made good progress in developing students' behaviour and their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, its overall progress since the previous inspection is satisfactory because teaching has not improved significantly at secondary level. The school meets all the regulations for independent schools, all safeguarding regulations are met in full and it is successfully meeting its stated aims

Quality of education

The quality of the curriculum is good overall, but stronger in the primary phase and Key Stage 4. There is good coverage of all the required areas of learning across the school, with an appropriate emphasis given to developing key skills in literacy and numeracy. In the primary phase, the pupils are effectively taught to read, write, spell and engage in regular speaking and listening activities. These varied experiences

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

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

provide a sound basis for all the other work that the primary pupils do and, as a result, their progress is generally good. At secondary level, the curriculum continues to be based on the National Curriculum, with additional work in personal, social and health education (PSHE) and, mainly at Key Stage 4, a range of work-related activities that includes links with Connexions and local businesses. The consideration that the school has given to increasing flexibility and accreditation opportunity at Key Stage 4 is working well. For example, a student leaving the school last year achieved Entry Level 3 in English, mathematics and science, a bronze in the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme, and Preparation for Working Life Level 3. Students have other opportunities to gain nationally recognised awards, such as full GCSEs, the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN), and AQA Unit Awards. The school uses existing nationally published schemes of work and examination syllabuses at Key Stage 4. While these provide suitable coverage and sequencing of learning areas across the subjects taught, the school has yet to develop a robust approach to monitoring and evaluating the appropriateness of these in meeting the identified needs of the students in all key stages.

The quality and effectiveness of teaching and assessment are satisfactory overall, but good or better in the primary phase. The working relationships between teachers and students are good throughout the school. The respect and treatment of students by staff does much to help them manage and control their behaviour in and around the school. Lessons are satisfactorily planned, but focus more on what the teacher intends to teach, and less on what the students will learn. The school effectively collects student performance data, which it uses well at whole-school level to record progress and achievement. While these assessment processes are particularly strong in the primary phase, secondary teachers underuse assessment information to plan their lessons, which results in insufficient awareness of the need to match the content to suit the needs of all students. Although there are some good features to the teaching of secondary aged students, such as purposeful working relationships, too much is teacher directed, with too little consideration given to how students can develop greater independence in their learning by taking greater responsibility for researching, writing and presenting their own work. An example of this is seen at Key Stages 3 and 4, where the students are not reading for a purpose in their lessons, as an aid their independent learning; rather, they read what the teacher directs them to. Also, while additional adults in lessons add to the management of students' behaviour, they have too undefined a role in relation to supporting targeted aspects of the students' learning.

Teachers make good use of a range of resources, primarily in the traditional areas of textbooks and worksheets. However, there is more limited provision for practical learning in science, textiles and sculpture (including 3-D sculpture) in art, and in the broader technology areas of resistant materials and electronics. The quality of teaching in the secondary phase is satisfactory and it is this which prevents the school from achieving a good judgement for the overall quality of its educational provision. While there are regular lesson observations carried out by the headteacher, the outcome of these do not, as yet, link teaching more specifically to students' progress and learning in lessons, and to targeted future professional development for teachers. Although the headteacher has developed a whole-school

development plan focused on improving the overall quality of provision, staff currently make no contribution to this process.

The students are making satisfactory progress overall, but good progress in improving their behaviour and in attending school more regularly. The students start at the school with low levels of attainment, especially in their ability to use key skills in literacy and numeracy. By the time they leave the school, standards are still low but have improved, especially in their ability to write more accurately to a standard that helps them achieve a nationally recognised award.

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 its students are good, with the school meeting all the regulations. The staff who work directly with the students are sensitive to their particular needs, especially in using de-escalating techniques to resolve the occasional very challenging behaviour. This close working relationship enables the staff to know the students very well. This is helping the students to develop a greater appreciation of the consequences of their actions on others, both in and out of school. Although capable of anti-social and very disruptive behavioural outbursts, the overwhelming majority of the students mostly contain any inner feelings and frustrations and, as a result, their behaviour in school is generally good. This represents a significant improvement from when the students started at the school and also makes a positive contribution to their enjoyment and regular attendance; two areas in which the students have generally made good overall progress. However, some of the other behavioural traits relating to learning, for example, sustaining concentration, being attentive at all times and engaging in purposeful discussion with others, are developing at a slower pace because some teachers are not yet providing sufficient opportunities for the students to take the initiative and to work independently in lessons.

The students know the difference between right and wrong, but for many this continues to present personal challenges in and out of school. The vast majority of the students understand and apply simple social conventions when working with peers and staff, but occasionally, their frustrations get the better of them and they become obstructive and obstreperous, which affects their own and others' learning.

The students have an appreciation of the law and of public service providers, and work in PSHE and religious education is enabling them to develop a greater understanding and appreciation of how to tolerate and live with others who may have a different faith, ethnicity or outlook on life.

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The school's measures to promote the welfare, health and safety of its students, including child protection, are satisfactory with all the regulations being met. During the inspection, staff showed that they effectively apply the principles of safe practice

to all aspects of their work; as a result, the students feel safe when in school. Risk assessments are detailed and relevant to the range of activities undertaken on or off the school site. The headteacher has ensured that key documents relating to safeguarding, including child protection, are made available to all staff, with the additional requirement that they sign a log to indicate these have been read and understood. Although this works well in practice, the headteacher has yet to systematically monitor the impact of these policies on improving the quality of provision within the school, including taking account of students' views. Fire safety checks are robust. Fire evacuation practices are appropriately planned and carried out, and daily checks ensure that all fire fighting equipment is in good working order. The security of the buildings is good.

Suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors

The school meets all the regulations in ensuring that staff are suitably checked to work with the students. The school's single central register contains all required and relevant information.

Premises and accommodation at the school

The school meets all the regulations. There are two buildings, which are attached by a secure covered walkway. The main building, which caters for the secondary aged students, has three floors comprising the main school offices, staff and students' toilets, general classrooms, and more specialist teaching areas that are used for art, information and communication technology, and food technology; this latter area is also the school kitchen, which is used for school lunches. The building is secure, with entry via a main door that is unlocked in person by a member of staff. There is an outdoor area, which is suitable for the number and age of the students. The attached building caters for primary aged pupils, and comprises of two classrooms and attached toilets. The overall condition of the buildings is satisfactory, although recent water ingress into one first-floor classroom has meant that this has been temporarily decommissioned until the small amount of water damage to the ceiling is repaired.

Provision of information

The school meets all the regulations. The school brochure provides a range of helpful information for parents and carers, including the school's aims and purpose, and succinct overviews of key policies. Contact information is both clear and accurate, and it is made clear to parents and carers what information and full policies are available, on request. Annual reports are detailed but in a few instances teachers fail to make clear what progress a student has made in a particular subject. The response from those parents and carers who used the inspection questionnaire was overwhelmingly positive about the information that they receive from the school. Although the school, through Keys Childcare Ltd, provides an annual statement of account for each student's local authority, the headteacher and senior education officer are aware that these lack more personalised information about the exact spending on each aspect of their provision within the school.

Manner in which complaints are to be handled

The school's procedures for handling complaints comply fully with all regulations.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The proprietor has ensured that the school meets all The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2010, schedule 1 ('the Regulations').³

What the school could do to improve further

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

- Improve the quality of teaching by:
 - making better use of information about students' prior attainment to inform lesson planning
 - ensuring that the focus on developing literacy skills at Key Stages 3 and 4 focus include a greater emphasis on reading for purpose, as an aid to the students taking greater responsibility for researching, writing and presenting their work
 - developing the role of teaching assistants (additional adults) in lessons to ensure that they have a more active role in helping the students to learn, alongside supporting and managing their behaviour.
- Ensure greater staff involvement in whole-school development planning.
- Develop whole-school strategies for monitoring all aspects of the quality of provision, but especially how teaching contributes to students' progress.

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	Special day school for students with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties		
Date school opened	1997		
Age range of pupils	5–17 years		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 13	Girls: 6	Total: 19
Number on roll (part-time pupils)	Boys: 0	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational needs	Boys: 13	Girls: 5	Total: 18
Number of pupils who are looked after	Boys: 6	Girls: 3	Total: 9
Annual fees (day pupils)	£31,200		
Address of school	19B Hebert Lane Marple Stockport Cheshire SK6 7NN		
Telephone number	0161 4495820		
Email address	acornschool@keyschildcare.co.uk		
Headteacher	Mrs Naseem Akhtar		
Proprietor	Keys Childcare 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.



5 October 2012

Dear Students

Inspection of Acorns School, Stockport SK6 7NN

I should like to thank you for the way you behaved during my recent visit to your school. I enjoyed meeting you and your teachers.

I hope that you, your parents or carers enjoy reading the following, in which I summarise my main findings from the inspection.

- The quality of education at Acorns School is satisfactory.
- Although your standards of work are lower than expected, you make satisfactory progress in your learning and good progress in managing your behaviour and improving your regular attendance at school. Well done.
- Staff are good at ensuring you stay safe at school, and this is helping you to enjoy working with your teachers.
- Those in the primary building enjoy good quality teaching and are making good progress in reading, writing and spelling. Those of you in the secondary building would benefit by more purposeful reading of books and other resources, as an aid to you working more independently to research, write and present your work.
- All adults in your lessons have an important role in helping you to learn and make progress.
- All staff need to join with the headteacher to plan future improvements for you all.
- You are beginning to understand and appreciate how your occasional behavioural outbursts affect your own and others' learning in lessons.

I hope that you continue to enjoy attending school and that you achieve all that you and your parents or carers would wish for in the future.

Yours sincerely

Brian Blake
Her Majesty's Inspector