

Blue Skies School

Independent school standard inspection report

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Reporting inspector	Michèle Messaoudi

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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

Blue Skies School is an independent day school for students aged from 11 to 19 who have autism or social and communication difficulties. It is located in Chatham in Kent. Students are placed by Medway and Kent local authorities and have often had a disrupted education before joining Blue Skies. There are currently 20 students on roll between the ages of 12 and 19, all of whom have a statement of special educational needs. Some of these students have been diagnosed as having dyslexia and dyspraxia, in addition to autism. One student is in the care of a local authority. Most students are of White British heritage. The school has no particular religious affiliation. It was registered in 2008 for up to 25 students and it had its first inspection in June 2009. The school moved to the current premises in September 2011 and, although it remains in the same ownership as when it was founded, it has had a recent change of directors. The headteacher has been in post since April 2012.

At the request of the Department for Education, this inspection considered the school's request to increase its student number from 25 to 38.

The school aims to 'provide a holistic approach to enable the students to increase their self-esteem and social skills and to achieve academic success and so help them to prepare for their future. The school seeks to ensure that students have high expectations and mutual respect for each other within a safe environment, and reach their full potential.'

Evaluation of the school

Blue Skies School provides a good quality of education and meets its aims. Its holistic specialist provision meets the needs of students well and ensures that they make good progress. Students' good spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good, reflected in their greatly improved levels of attendance, self-esteem and self-confidence, and in their good behaviour. Safeguarding arrangements are robust and students' welfare, health and safety are promoted well. The school has remedied the shortcomings reported in the last inspection and it meets all but one of the regulations for independent schools. The requested increase in student number is recommended.

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

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

Quality of education

The curriculum is good. It is broad and balanced and enables students to acquire a wide range of basic skills, as well as social and life skills. It is personalised to meet the needs of individual students well and re-engage them in education. Individual programmes are informed by the students' statements of special educational needs and by a wide range of initial assessments including occupational and speech and language therapy assessments. They are negotiated with students to consider their interests. Students' individualised timetables are constructed around a core of English, mathematics, science and personal, social and health education (PSHE), and completed with information and communication technology (ICT), physical education (PE), functional skills, art, cooking, drama and photography. As options, students can also choose to learn French, geography, history, woodwork and the guitar. Post-16 students are encouraged to specialise in three or more subjects among English, mathematics, the three sciences, history, general studies and critical thinking. PSHE includes religious education and life skills and is an essential component of the curriculum.

Project-based learning enables students to make coherent links between various areas of learning and to work independently as well as in teams. The therapeutic curriculum is central to students' learning and personal development, where needed, students are supported by a speech and language therapist, an occupational therapist, a counsellor, a reflexologist, a nurse, and a teacher specifically trained in dyslexia. Progression routes are clear and lead to academic or vocational qualifications and some students opt for a combination of both. The vast majority of students appreciate the flexibility of the curriculum and the school's ability to respond quickly to their changing interests and needs as they develop confidence and improve their basic skills. The school forges links with local colleges to widen the range of available vocational courses. A good programme of careers education prepares students very effectively for work or the next stage of their education. Curriculum enrichment develops students' self-confidence and social, cultural and physical skills well.

The planning of the curriculum is based on commercial schemes of work that support the teaching well. However, there is currently no standardised system to record the content of the curriculum areas covered by each student. The curriculum is adequately resourced and the school makes very effective use of local facilities for sports and swimming.

Teaching and assessment are good and enable the vast majority of students to make good progress in relation to their varying starting points. The staff's understanding of students' needs, aptitudes and prior attainment is supported well by a wide range of assessments, individual educational plans that are reviewed every half term and regular training related to autism. Small-group or one-to-one teaching enables the staff to know their students really well and to develop excellent working relationships that ensure learning takes place in a pleasant and secure environment. Teaching is generally characterised by probing questioning that deepens students' understanding

of the subject matter, effective use of resources to support students' learning and frequent checks on students' work accompanied by constructive verbal feedback. Where the teaching is outstanding, it promotes a high level of intellectual development and challenges students extremely well, which enables students to make exceptional progress. Occasionally, students' rate of progress slows when the teacher gives too much help and so does not sufficiently promote independence or when insufficient time is allocated to research before a practical task. Occasionally, the teaching does not encourage the more reserved students to participate in the lesson.

Students generally gain a good understanding of how they can improve their work through daily constructive feedback, marking, targets, termly reports and annual reviews. However, the quality of marking is inconsistent and ranges from ticks and praise comments to detailed written feedback showing students exactly how to improve. Staff use a wide range of assessment information to monitor students' individual progress over time. However, this information is not presented in a way that gives an instant and easy-to-analyse picture of progress. The targets given to students to improve their academic learning and their personal development generally work well but occasionally they are not sufficiently specific and measurable. Consequently, in these instances, students do not always have a sufficiently clear picture of how to improve.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. Students' attitudes to learning greatly improve and are good because they appreciate having a flexible curriculum, being consulted about their preferences and being taught by staff who understand them well. Consequently, their attendance levels greatly improve and most attend regularly. Through the guidance given by staff and PSHE, most students gain a good insight into their own form of autism and overcome the difficulties they initially face when interacting with others or coping with change.

Behaviour is good. Most students behave extremely well and show high levels of self-control and self-discipline. A small minority of students who have behavioural, as well as emotional and social difficulties, make good progress in managing their anger and anti-social behaviour owing to the support they receive, so that outbursts are considerably reduced. Students form very positive and harmonious relationships with peers and staff and most display self-confidence and self-assurance when talking to visitors. Some have excellent communication skills and are very articulate, while others, who have difficulty understanding the meaning of words beyond the literal, demonstrate a growing understanding of humour. Students feel free from bullying and harassment. They say that they have a keen sense of community and look out for each other. They are polite and show consideration for others.

Students' cultural development and awareness of diversity are promoted well through the curriculum. Enrichment activities, for example visits to the library, local shops and museums, as well as residential trips and inter-school competitions,

extend students' cultural, social and physical skills well and increase their awareness of public institutions and services. However, students' multicultural education is not sufficiently enhanced by real-life experiences such as visits to different places of worship. Students are prepared well for life beyond school through the careers and life skills programmes. For example, they learn to plan visits and make travel arrangements, and they experience working in local businesses and services. They have many opportunities to contribute to the school and wider community. Their achievements include winning a top prize in a local photography competition, selling cakes to support the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, raising funds for a school in Africa and making a public presentation on 'Living with autism'.

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The school makes good provision for students' welfare, health and safety and students feel cared for well. All policies and procedures, including those for child protection, behaviour, bullying, fire and first aid, have due regard to the latest guidance. Effective procedures for recruiting staff and volunteers are fully implemented. Safeguarding arrangements are robust; staff have a good understanding of the correct procedures. Appropriate risk assessments for the premises and for off-site visits, coupled with a high proportion of staff trained in first aid and compliance with fire safety regulations, ensure the health and safety of all.

The school successfully promotes an inclusive ethos and students' emotional well-being through good pastoral care and the collaborative work of a multi-disciplinary team of staff. The vast majority of students, parents and carers have full confidence in the staff's ability to deal with any concerns. Students' behaviour is managed well and sensitively, and there are appropriate strategies to help students to manage negative emotions, for example anger management sessions and 'mini-breaks'.

Students learn how to keep safe and healthy through daily reminders, the life skills programme, PSHE and enrichment activities. Growing vegetables, cooking a wide range of dishes and exercising vigorously at least three times a week, enhance their awareness of healthy lifestyles. However, some students are not sufficiently committed to eating healthily and regularly consume snacks that are high in fat and salt. The school has a three-year accessibility plan that meets the requirements of the Equality Act 2010.

Suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors

All the required checks are carried out on staff, supply staff and proprietors to ascertain their suitability to work with young people, and they are properly recorded in a single central register.

Premises and accommodation at the school

The new premises provide classrooms of various sizes and social and quiet areas that ensure effective and safe learning and socialising, as well as opportunities to 'chill

out' when emotions run high. The teaching accommodation and washing facilities are sufficient for the proposed number of 38 students. The walls and corridors are attractively decorated with a wide range of students' work. A room has been allocated to provide facilities for students who are ill and it is furnished with a bed but there is no easy access to a toilet and washbasin. The outdoor area has been partly decked and equipped with furniture that is practical for social occasions and recreation. It is decorated with tubs that are used by students for planting fruit and vegetables.

Provision of information

All of the required information is provided, or made available to parents, carers and placing authorities. Parents and carers feel well informed of their children's progress through annual reviews, termly reports and twice-yearly formal meetings with the staff.

Manner in which complaints are to be handled

The complaints procedures meet all requirements for handling complaints swiftly and fairly.

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:

- provide appropriate facilities for pupils who are ill, in accordance with regulation 5 of the Education (School Premises) Regulations 1999 (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.

- Adopt a standardised system to record the curriculum content covered by each student in every subject area.

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

- Help students to form a clearer picture of what they need to do to improve their work and their personal development by:
 - sharing the best practice in marking
 - ensuring that they are given targets that are consistently specific and measurable.
- Present the information from assessments in a way that gives an instant picture of students' individual progress and so facilitates the monitoring of their progress.
- Enhance students' multicultural education and awareness of diversity through a wider range of real-life experiences.

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 for students with autism or social and communication difficulties		
Date school opened	April 2008		
Age range of pupils	11–19		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 17	Girls: 3	Total: 20
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational needs	Boys: 17	Girls: 3	Total: 20
Number of pupils who are looked after	Boys: 1	Girls: 0	Total: 1
Annual fees (day pupils)	£30,840		
Address of school	Blue Skies 126 Maidstone Road Chatham Kent ME4 6DQ		
Telephone number	01634 357770		
Email address	info@blueskiesschool.co.uk		
Headteacher	Miss Adelle Chapman		
Proprietor	Blue Skies Ltd (Jonathan and Lauren Higgins)		

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.



6 July 2012

Dear Students

Inspection of Blue Skies School, Chatham ME4 6DQ

Thank you very much for making me so welcome when I visited your school recently. I much appreciated the fact that so many of you completed the questionnaires and wanted to speak to me. Most of you had only positive things to say about the school. You said that you enjoy having a flexible curriculum. You feel that the staff know and understand you well. You think that you make good progress in your subject areas. You say that you have made excellent progress in your attendance. You judge that behaviour at the school is mostly good. You feel secure because the staff look after you well. I agree with you on all these points. I was very impressed by the balance of your views and by your self-confidence and your politeness.

You attend a good school where adults work hard to enable you to develop good communication and social skills and prepare you well for your future. To make your school even better, I have made the following suggestions.

- Ensure staff follow the same method of recording what you study.
- Ensure staff help you to form a clearer picture of what you need to do to improve your work by giving you comments in their marking that are always helpful and targets that are clear.
- Find an easier way to monitor your progress.
- Enable you to develop a better understanding of what it means to live in a multicultural society by giving you more practical experiences of diversity.

I have also asked the school to improve facilities for when you are ill.

Please keep attending regularly, behaving well and trying to achieve as much as you can. You have my best wishes for the future.

Yours sincerely

Michèle Messaoudi
Lead inspector