

# The Unicorn School

Independent school standard inspection report

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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.<sup>1, 2</sup>

## **Information about the school**

The Unicorn School, located near central Abingdon, is a co-educational special school for pupils aged six to 13 years who have severe dyslexia. Some pupils are also dyspraxic or dyscalculic, while others have speech and language difficulties. The school opened in 1991 and moved to different premises in 2008. Currently there are 66 pupils on roll and all have special educational needs; of these, eight boys have statements of special educational needs. The school draws pupils from Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire.

The school aim is '... to help our pupils raise their self-esteem and learn the strategies they need to return to mainstream school successfully'. The last inspection of the school was in 2008.

## **Evaluation of the school**

The Unicorn School provides an outstanding quality of education which fully meets its stated aim. Since the last inspection the school has continued to improve and all the weaknesses identified then have been successfully addressed. The curriculum is outstanding, as are the quality of teaching and assessment and the pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. As a result, pupils make outstanding progress in their learning and in their personal development. Their behaviour is outstanding. Provision for pupils' welfare, health and safety is outstanding. Safeguarding arrangements are fully in place and rigorously applied. All regulatory requirements are met.

## **Quality of education**

The curriculum is outstanding. It is planned with a degree of detail that ensures complete coverage of all the required areas of learning and enables teachers to meet individual needs very effectively. Progression in learning is assured and the needs of those pupils with statements of special educational needs are met in full. All of the subjects taught have individual policies and these provide the foundation for detailed schemes of work that take account of the full range of pupils' attainment. The schemes support the production of meticulous lesson plans whereby teachers tailor learning experiences to the needs of each pupil. Daily sessions of individual teaching,

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<sup>1</sup> [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/32/contents](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/32/contents).

<sup>2</sup> [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/18/contents](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/18/contents).

by specialist support teachers, enable every individual to manage their condition of dyslexia with a growing confidence. The strong links between these teachers and class teachers mean that the two groups effectively share information that benefits the pupils' academic development and understanding. Effective provision for speech and language therapy adds a further dimension of excellent quality to the teaching. Additional focused provision is also made for those pupils who are dyscalculic or dyspraxic.

Personal, social and health education (PSHE) makes a significant contribution to each pupil's development. The planning and provision of this is painstaking. There is a rich and varied programme of extra-curricular activities, including residential adventure activities, drumming workshops, daily lunchtime and after-school clubs and visits to locations that directly support learning, for example the War Museum and trips to France. Well-known authors of children's books have visited the school, as have international sports personalities. Pupils report feeling energised and inspired by these visitors. Lessons in science and PSHE enable pupils to understand the effects of exercise on the body as well as the need for a healthy diet and lifestyle. Pupils' basic skills in literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology are developed very well and these skills are used to great effect in support of pupils' broader learning.

Teaching and assessment are outstanding. This is an improvement since the last inspection. Teachers are confident in the use of their considerable expertise and use this in inspirational ways to support the individual learning style of each pupil. Pupils are engaged in their learning because the teaching engenders an energy and enthusiasm within each of them. Teachers are adept at enabling every pupil to develop both their knowledge and understanding in a wide range of subjects. Many activities are multi-sensory and are skilfully presented in ways that allow each pupil to access their learning with growing confidence. Because the activities are also investigative, pupils develop a personal responsibility for, and a thoughtful approach to, their learning. Pupils' work demonstrates both imagination and flair. Intensive use of the information technology suite supports learning across all subjects; pupils use this facility with confidence and in ways that enable them to expand on their knowledge and understanding. However, computers are not routinely available within each classroom. The skill of touch-typing is taught and facilities such as voice recognition software enable some pupils with particular difficulties to commit their thoughts more readily to paper. Teachers are unfailingly positive in their dealings with the pupils and this nurturing approach encourages the pupils to thrive.

Assessment systems are rigorous and fully inform teachers about the attainment of each pupil along with their strengths and weaknesses. The assessment process enables teachers to have a keen knowledge of each pupil's difficulties and they use this to plan the most appropriate activities to support learning. The starting points for each pupil are established on their arrival at the school and these are compared to milestones of progress during their stay. Standardised tests are used along with regular assessments, carried out within the classrooms. The assessment data are used consistently by all teachers to plan lessons and make provision for individual

pupils so that they make outstanding progress in lessons. The data compiled by the school confirm that, when compared with their starting points, pupils make outstanding progress overall. This progress is reflected in the growing confidence of pupils and the feeling expressed by older pupils that they are developing the skills they will need in the future and that they are prepared well for the next stage of their education.

Pupils achieve very well against the clear targets set within their individual education plans. Their work is marked conscientiously and this marking provides excellent feedback to them about ways in which they might improve. The feedback is provided both verbally and as written comments.

### **Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils**

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. Pupils speak enthusiastically about the school; they describe the staff as 'warm', 'caring' and 'amazing'. Relationships between staff and pupils are instrumental in enabling the notable increase in pupils' confidence and self-awareness. Pupils' attitudes to the school are unfailingly positive and their pre-inspection questionnaire returns confirm this. These attitudes result from the constant encouragement given by all staff. Rates of attendance are high and attitudes within lessons reflect an enthusiasm and thirst for learning. Pupils are fully involved in school life, particularly through attendance at clubs and membership of the school council; a body which has a real impact on matters affecting the school population.

Cultural awareness is promoted through active links with a Tanzanian school, for which the pupils also raise funds. The curriculum extends this awareness through, for example, the study of aboriginal art and the paintings of great European artists. These cultural studies are supplemented by visits to places such as Warwick Castle and an ongoing correspondence with the Tanzanian school. Pupils have a highly developed awareness of the needs of others. Their consideration for each other is exemplary. The moral attitudes of pupils are evident in their outstanding behaviour. They are courteous to each other and very empathetic about the needs of those who are new to the school. This tolerance of others is outstanding and extends beyond the school in the pupils' studies of different religions and visits to local places of worship. Social development is encouraged through the links with other schools in the locality. Sports fixtures and academic challenges are carried out in cooperation with these schools and local businesses.

Pupils are excited by and enjoy their learning. Those pupils soon to leave the school are looking forward to this with confidence; however, a few expressed reticence about their readiness. This is partly because the school lacks a specific support programme for those pupils about to leave the school.

### **Welfare, health and safety of pupils**

Provision for welfare, health and safety is outstanding and fully meets current guidelines. Rigorous attention is paid to matters of safeguarding and the policy is diligently applied. Staff are trained appropriately and at the required intervals. The

thorough training means that the school's policies are well understood by all and are implemented with complete consistency. The recruitment policy is implemented thoroughly and all of the required checks are made on staff and others. The first-aid policy is implemented effectively along with those for fire safety and anti-bullying. Health and safety measures are carried out assiduously and risk assessments applied to potentially hazardous activities are robust. Pupils show a great awareness of their personal safety and they are supervised diligently throughout the school day. Pupils do not recognise bullying as a concern and all of those spoken to said they feel very safe in school. The questionnaire returns by the pupils indicate a high degree of satisfaction with school life. They have an excellent awareness of how to live a healthy life, illustrated vividly by pupils' eager and well-informed responses within a science lesson about exercise and human physiology. The school complies fully with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010.

### **Suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors**

The appointment and the vetting of staff are carried out with care, in accord with the school's recruitment policy. Procedures fully meet regulatory requirements. The single central register is completed meticulously and includes all of the required information.

### **Premises and accommodation at the school**

The premises provide a safe and effective learning environment for the pupils. The building is decorated well and includes fixtures and fittings appropriate to the ages of the pupils. Specialist accommodation, such as the information technology suite, a small hall, the library and art studio, and rooms for individual learning support enable pupils to extend their knowledge and understanding across all areas of learning. There are well-equipped outdoor play areas. The school does not have playing fields of its own but regular access to those of nearby schools provides pupils with many opportunities for exercise and team sports.

### **Provision of information**

The school provides clear, complete and accurate information for parents, carers and others. The helpful website is supplemented by a detailed prospectus which provides all of the required information. A majority of parents and carers returned the pre-inspection questionnaire. A significant majority expressed great satisfaction with what the school is doing for their children and they clearly hold the school in high regard. They are justified in their views.

### **Manner in which complaints are to be handled**

The school's complaints procedure meets the requirements.

## **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:

- extend further the availability of information and communication technology so that it becomes more easily used and available to pupils within their classrooms.
- develop a specific support programme for those pupils about to leave the school.

## 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

<b>School status</b>	Independent		
<b>Type of school</b>	Special school for pupils with severe dyslexia and associated conditions		
<b>Date school opened</b>	1991		
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	6–13		
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed		
<b>Number on roll (full-time pupils)</b>	Boys: 55	Girls: 11	Total: 66
<b>Number of pupils with a statement of special educational needs</b>	Boys: 8	Girls: 0	Total: 8
<b>Annual fees (day pupils)</b>	£15,555		
<b>Address of school</b>	20 Marcham Road Abingdon Oxfordshire OX14 1AA		
<b>Telephone number</b>	01235 530222		
<b>Email address</b>	info@unicorndyslexia.co.uk		
<b>Headteacher</b>	Jacqueline Vaux		
<b>Proprietor</b>	The Unicorn School for the dyslexic child		

**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.**



9 February 2012

Dear Pupils

**Inspection of The Unicorn School Abingdon, OX14 1AA**

You may remember that I visited your school in February to see how you are all getting along and how well the adults help you. Thank you for making me feel so welcome. I came to all of your classrooms and watched you work. I very much enjoyed your friendliness and humour, talking to you about your work and meeting you around the school. I am writing to you to let you know about what I found.

The questionnaires you filled in told me that you enjoy being at the school and that you all felt you are making progress in your learning. I agree with you. Some of the older pupils told me that they enjoy the school so much that they might not even want to leave when the time comes. However, you all make outstanding progress in your learning and I feel that you will do very well. I found your behaviour to be outstanding and the manner in which you look after each other and get on with the teachers was wonderful to see.

Your teachers work very hard to keep you safe and to give you exciting and interesting lessons. You told me this when I met you and I agree with you. You have many wonderful activities and clubs that you take part in and I was very impressed when the school council was able to get even more of these made available to you. I think the trips you go on really help you to get a better understanding of the world you live in.

Your school provides you with an outstanding quality of education and the adults are working to make it even better. In order to help you even more I have suggested that you might have computers in your classrooms that you can use and that older pupils should have more help just before they leave.

With every good wish for your future.

Tom Fisher-Smith  
Lead inspector