

Red Balloon Learner Centre – Northwest London

Independent school standard inspection report

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Reporting inspector	Angela Corbett 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 Red Balloon Learner Centre – Northwest London is an independent day special school. The school is situated in a large house in a residential part of Harrow with students coming from surrounding local authorities in west London and from diverse backgrounds. They are usually funded by their local authorities and lengths of time spent at the centre vary from one term to over two years, depending on need. Students vary widely in their academic abilities on admission and almost all have complex needs, notably behavioural, social and emotional difficulties. Many have experienced severe disruption to their education and have experienced severe bullying in their previous schools.

Currently, there are six students on roll aged between 13 and 15 years, of whom five have statements of special educational needs. The centre is part of the Red Balloon Learner Centre Group, a consortium operating nationally, which was established in Cambridge in 1996 and is a registered charity. The school opened in April 2008 and its last full inspection was in June 2009.

The school aims to provide 'a safe and stimulating environment encompassing an individual, full-time, academic, pastoral and therapeutic programme' and to provide a programme for each student that is designed to prepare them for the next stage in their educational 'journey'. It also aims to support them in their return to mainstream education, entry into further education, employment or training.

The school is currently registered to take up to 15 boys and girls aged from 10 to 17 years. The school is now seeking approval from the Department for Education to change the age range so that it caters for students aged from 11 to 17 Years.

Evaluation of the school

Red Balloon Learner Centre – Northwest London provides a good quality of education and meets its aims well. A very successful combination of good quality teaching, a good curriculum that is highly tailored to each student and the strong emphasis on social development ensures that students make good progress, both academically and personally. Students' behaviour is good because of the good provision for their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and the effective learning environment. The school's safeguarding arrangements meet requirements. While

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

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

students receive good day-to-day care from a highly committed staff, overall provision for their welfare, health and safety is satisfactory because of some minor shortcomings in policies and their implementation. Since the last inspection, there have been improvements in provision including the introduction of work experience and a specialist music room. The school meets all but one of the required regulations.

The material change for the school to cater for students aged from 11 to 17 years is recommended.

Quality of education

The good curriculum covers all the required areas of learning and provides a broad and balanced education. Curriculum policies and schemes of work are of good quality and are designed to support the secondary age range well, including for students in Year 12. Teachers use these to develop individual schemes for each student to meet their current stage of academic development and specific learning needs and interests. High priority is placed on developing students' literacy and numeracy within English and mathematics lessons but also in other subjects. For example, students have been developing their literacy skills and current affairs knowledge through reading a student newspaper and several have had their own articles published.

Innovative use is made of 'Red Balloon of the Air' to deliver virtual lessons in information and communication technology (ICT). These sessions provide practical opportunities for students to fully understand the power of new technologies, improve their literacy skills through reading and writing 'blogs' to their 'virtual teacher' and learn about internet safety.

Students are given appropriate careers and future education advice. Since the last inspection opportunities for work experience for older students have been introduced and the school has become an examination centre. Older students take an increasing number of qualifications tailored to their interests and needs such as GCSEs in art and Spanish as well as GCSE or equivalent accreditations in English, mathematics and science. Students' personal, social and health education (PSHE), which includes religious education and citizenship, is good. National events, such as Aids Day, anti-bullying week and the Queen's Jubilee, and religious special days, visits and visiting speakers are all used to effectively bring relevance to students' learning. The developing project-based learning combines the teaching of different subjects, including history and geography. For example, a recent project of 'planning a trip across Europe' combined mathematics, ICT, geography and science. However, these activities have yet to be coordinated sufficiently to ensure that they provide students with experiences across all the areas of learning.

Teaching and assessment are good. They are not yet outstanding because teachers' questioning sometimes lacks depth to fully review and develop students' learning. Teachers' subject knowledge is good and they use this to plan lessons meticulously using their thorough knowledge of students to tailor themes and resources to effectively support their learning. Consequently, students usually maintain their

interest and concentration levels well and make good progress from very different, and often very low, starting points. This was exemplified in a Year 10 science lesson when students made good progress in understanding the conditions for the growth of yeast by watching a video clip, conducting an experiment and writing about the method. While ICT was used in this instance, opportunities to use ICT as a tool to aid students' learning in other lessons are sometimes missed. All staff develop strong working relationships with students and have high expectations of what the students can achieve. As a result classrooms are calm and purposeful with good use made of time in all lessons. Students are taught in very small groups or on a one-to-one basis. While adults capitalise on this to provide highly personalised support for students, they can, however, become too reliant on their teachers. Consequently, opportunities are missed for students to develop independence through assessing their own and others' work so they can recognise their successes and how they can improve.

Teachers mark work thoroughly and provide helpful written and verbal feedback to students. Students' learning and engagement are recorded for each lesson in their individual 'behaviour for learning' plans. These are firmly based on students' statements of special educational needs and a range of school-based tests and assessments. Targets for academic and personal development are set and routinely reviewed, revised and used to inform future planning.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good overall. Within this judgement, their social development is outstanding because staff provide excellent role models, make every effort to develop students' self-confidence and belief in themselves and to teach them how to get on with others. Students' moral development is good because of the consistency of approach and the high expectations for behaviour and mutual respect set by school staff. Counselling, circle time, therapeutic sessions such as art therapy and lessons in well-being help students learn how to recognise and manage situations they may find difficult or stressful. Such activities also contribute to students' good spiritual development. Over time students learn to trust adults again and make appropriate choices. This is reflected in their good behaviour and much improved attitudes to learning that underpin their good academic progress and much improved attendance at school. Most attend regularly, and for a few attendance is high, with some students overcoming travel difficulties to be at school, reflecting their enjoyment and confidence in the school.

Teachers use opportunities both in and out of lessons, as well as in specialist teaching in subjects such as art and music, to promote students' good cultural development, an improvement since the last inspection. Visitors such as the local MP and HRH Princess Anne, visits, and PSE lessons also develop students' cultural understanding and awareness of British public institutions. Links with a school in Africa and the annual residential trip to Cumbria provide some opportunities for students to broaden their horizons beyond London. Students are encouraged to

develop their own ideas and interests, such as a visit to the Imperial War Museum organised by one student. On a day-to-day basis students develop their literacy and numeracy skills, learn to take responsibility and make a good contribution to school life by helping to plan lunchtime menus, tidy up after meals and grow produce. These all help to prepare them well for life beyond Red Balloon.

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

Although the school provides good day-to-day care for all students, its overall provision for their welfare, health and safety is satisfactory because of some minor shortcomings in policies and procedures and their implementation. These include an omission in the first aid policy concerning when to call an ambulance, a lack of precision in the links between anti-bullying and behaviour policies, and review dates are not shown on most policies. However, all the required policies and procedures are in place for the health and safety of students and staff and, with the exceptions noted above, have regard to the current national guidance.

The school complies with fire safety requirements and has acted to remedy the issues raised in a recent external fire risk assessment. For example, fire warden training has been booked for January 2013. Other health and safety risk assessments are in place with good attention to specific activities such as use of the science laboratory. Risk assessments for educational visits are undertaken and are satisfactory although in some instances they lack rigour. Records of all incidents are kept, including for bullying, poor behaviour and any sanctions. Serious incidents are rare and the school's approach is always to talk through all incidents to resolve them as well as help students to take responsibility and learn from their actions. All staff are trained in first aid and child protection procedures; there is rigorous follow up of any concerns, including absence from school, with excellent partnership work with outside agencies.

Staff work together as a team, and are highly attentive to the well-being and personal developmental needs of all students. They watch carefully for any sign of a student's changing behaviour or mood, acting swiftly to intervene and offer skilful support. Students say that they feel safe and are looked after well by staff. They learn how to keep themselves healthy and safe, including when using the new technologies, through ICT and PSE lessons, visiting speakers such as Police and Fire officers and practical experiences such as travel training. Good use is made of a nearby independent school's sports facilities for their twice weekly physical education lessons. There is good focus on healthy eating.

Suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors

The school has suitable procedures for the recruitment of the proprietors and staff which meet all the regulations. Checks are recorded in the school's single central register, although it required minor amendment during the inspection.

Premises and accommodation at the school

The school is based in a large house, which has been fully refurbished and extended, since the last inspection, to provide additional teaching and small-room accommodation. This provides a homely, safe and effective learning environment to support students' academic and personal development. Specialist subject teaching is catered for in the small science laboratory, new music room, art room and ICT suite. The well-resourced kitchen is used for preparing school lunches as well as teaching food technology. The garden is put to good use as an outdoor recreation area, for growing produce and, when the weather permits, as an outdoor classroom. The toilets are used in line with the Red Balloon Learner Group policy of shared use. While there are sufficient to meet the requirements of the school's registration number of 15, the shared use does not meet the regulatory requirement for separate facilities for boys, girls, staff and visitors.

Provision of information

The school provides parents and carers with all of the required information through the Red Balloon Group website, the prospectus and the parents' and carers' handbook. Highly detailed information about students' achievement, both academically and personally, is provided for parents and carers, through written reports, a formal meeting and weekly contact from each student's tutor. Almost daily contact with parents and carers helps to keep them and staff fully informed about students' needs and progress; reflecting the school's partnership approach. Detailed reports are prepared by all staff for the formal review of statements of special educational needs, which students also contribute to.

Manner in which complaints are to be handled

The school has a clearly written complaints policy which 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'), 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 separate washrooms for staff and students to take account of regulations 3 and 4 of the Education (School Premises) Regulations 1999 (paragraph 23(j)).

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

What the school could do to improve further

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

- Enhance the curriculum by adopting a co-ordinated approach to the provision of subjects taught across the curriculum and enrichment activities to build on and extend students' learning experiences.
- Improve teaching so that students make even better progress by:
 - increasing the use of ICT as an aid to students' learning
 - improving teachers' use of questioning to develop and review students' learning
 - developing students' independence, enabling them to recognise their successes and how they can improve by ensuring teachers provide regular opportunities for students to assess their own and others' work.
- Bring more rigour to the implementation of policies and procedures for ensuring students' welfare, health and safety.

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 school for students with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties		
Date school opened	April 2008		
Age range of pupils	11–17 years		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 5	Girls: 1	Total: 6
Number on roll (part-time pupils)	Boys: 0	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational needs	Boys: 4	Girls: 1	Total: 5
Number of pupils who are looked after	Boys: 0	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Annual fees (day pupils)	£18,000–£22,000		
Address of school	13 Kenton Road Harrow Middlesex HA1 2BW		
Telephone number	020 8864 6433		
Email address	adm@nwlonon.redballoonlearner.org.uk		
Headteacher	Alexandra Flatman		
Proprietor	Dr Carrie Herbert		

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.

29 November 2012

Dear Students



**Inspection of Red Balloon Learner Centre – Northwest London, Harrow
HA1 2BW**

Thank you for making me so welcome when I visited your school recently. I very much enjoyed talking with you and visiting your lessons. I judged that your Red Balloon centre provides you with a good quality of education. Here is a summary of the main inspection findings.

The good curriculum and good quality of teaching you receive enable you all to make good progress and to work for qualifications that will help you in the future. You enjoy activities both in and out of school, such as recent visits to the Imperial War Museum and to the science day at the Royal Albert Hall. The staff work hard to help you improve your self-confidence and learn how to manage situations you may find difficult. Consequently, your personal development is good. As you told me, you enjoy coming to Red Balloon because you know the staff are there to help you, you feel safe, at home and able to learn. This is reflected in your much improved attendance at school. Well done! You receive good day-to-day care and support from staff but some systems for ensuring your welfare, health and safety need to be more thorough. I have asked the school to work on this and also to ensure that separate toilet facilities are provided for students and staff.

All the staff are committed to doing the best for you. To help them improve your school, I have asked that they:

- improve teaching by using ICT more in lessons to help you with your learning, check your learning more in lessons and give you opportunities to assess your own and each other's work to develop your independent learning skills
- provide you with a broader range of visits, visitors and out-of lesson activities.

You can help by continuing to make the most of the opportunities offered to you. I would like to wish you all well for the future.

Yours sincerely

Angela Corbett
Her Majesty's Inspector