

Alternative Curriculum Service

The Porch, Richmond House, Bath Road, RG14 1QY

Inspection dates 7–8 February 2013

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Good	2
	This inspection:	Requires improvement	3
Achievement of pupils		Requires improvement	3
Quality of teaching		Requires improvement	3
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Good	2
Leadership and management		Requires improvement	3

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement. It is not good because:

- Most students make the progress expected of them, including in the sixth form, but not enough make good progress because teaching is not consistently good.
- The sixth form requires improvement as not enough students reach the higher levels.
- Teachers sometimes talk to the whole class for too long. They do not always ensure that activities are at the right level of difficulty for groups of pupils, especially the more able.
- Marking does not always offer precise enough guidance to help all students improve their work.
- Attendance overall is lower than average.
- Leaders and managers, including governors, do not have an accurate view of how well students are learning over time across all key stages.
- Senior leaders need to check more carefully that weaknesses in teaching are identified and resolved.
- Subject leaders need to check more rigorously how well different groups of students are progressing in their subject.
- Governors do not know how effectively additional funding has been used.

The school has the following strengths

- Students say they feel safe. They behave well and this is, in many cases, a substantial improvement from their previous schools.
- There is some good and outstanding teaching which could be shared.
- The alternative educational provision is highly effective and promotes very well students' spiritual, social, moral and cultural development.
- Students' achievements at the end of Key Stage 4 are improving.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed 11 lessons and/or parts of lessons across all three sites taught by 10 teachers. Most lessons were observed jointly with the headteacher or senior leaders. Inspectors also observed teaching at the alternative education provision which provides outdoor learning and team-building activities.
- Inspectors checked on the behaviour of students in lessons and at break and lunchtimes. They also reviewed behavioural records.
- Inspectors held meetings with members of staff and had informal discussions with some students. Meetings were also held with the Chair of the Management Committee, the local authority officer responsible for overseeing the unit and manager of the alternative educational provision.
- Documents looked at included the school's own checks on how well it is doing and development plans, financial records, teachers' planning and assessment files, examples of students' work, policies and procedures, management committee minutes and attendance records.
- There were insufficient responses to the online questionnaire (Parent View) but the inspectors took account of the unit's own surveys for parents, carers and students. In addition, inspectors held telephone discussions with three parents. Questionnaires from staff were also considered.

Inspection team

Sonja Joseph, Lead inspector

Additional inspector

Timothy Feast

Additional inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The Alternative Curriculum Service caters for students who are permanently excluded or considered in need of a more personalised education. All pupils attend full time in Years 10 and 11. The school has consulted on, and plans to open a designated sixth form from September 2013, having conducted a pilot provision for post-16 students since the previous inspection.
- An increasing number of students now continue into the sixth form from Year 11.
- All pupils have behavioural, social and emotional difficulties.
- All students are from families of White British heritage. The majority of students are boys and approximately one third are girls. There are usually a small number of students in the care of the local authority at any given time.
- A below-average proportion of students receive the additional funding known as the pupil premium, although this number changes on a regular basis.
- The service commissions programmes taught by outside providers at off-site locations which fulfils National Curriculum requirements while giving students a choice of academic and vocational pathways. This includes the 'Outdoor Academy', Ufton Nervet.
- Since the previous inspection, there have been significant changes in staffing.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Strengthen the quality of teaching so that it is consistently at least good and leads to good progress for every student by:
 - making sure all teachers have high expectations by providing work that makes every student think hard, including those who are more able
 - teachers reducing the amount of time they spend talking to allow students more opportunities to do their own work
 - teachers using their observations in the classroom to adapt their plans when students demonstrate they have understood the work given
 - providing more detailed feedback in marking so students know precisely how to improve
 - sharing more widely across the service the good practice that already exists.
- Strengthen the effectiveness of leaders and managers, including governors, by:
 - improving the gathering and use of data that track students' progress so that they give a true and accurate picture of students' performance compared with those from similar starting points nationally, making them better placed to provide challenge and raise standards
 - ensuring that the monitoring of teaching is fully focused on how well students achieve and rigorous enough to identify shortcomings and resolve them
 - supporting newly appointed subject leaders, through appropriate training, to develop their skills for checking the quality of teaching and learning in their areas of responsibility
 - making sure the governing body challenges the school more rigorously regarding the quality of teaching and pupils' achievement
 - ensuring governors check how well pupil premium funding is used by measuring whether gaps in attainment are closing
 - establishing more-effective systems to raise the level of students' attendance.
- An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils

requires improvement

- Students are generally working at a level that is below the national expectation for their age groups when they arrive at the service, often as a result of previous disrupted educational experiences.
- While at the service, most students make the progress expected of them. However, although there are many instances of students achieving well, not enough make good progress from their starting points so that attainment remains below the national average for all students. Many students do not make good progress because teachers do not always pay enough attention to matching work to students' individual abilities; as a result, the work set for them is too hard or too easy.
- Achievements for students at the end of Key Stage 4 are improving. In 2011/12, the number of students achieving five or more GCSE A* to G grades doubled. However, there were no passes in English and mathematics at the higher levels. Not all students achieve as well as they could in English and mathematics, partly because of the erratic pattern of their attendance and the quality of some teaching.
- Most students, including in the sixth form, make expected progress from their starting points and an increasing number are making good progress. Approximately one third of students achieved four GCSE passes at the lower levels. Not enough students reach the higher levels because teachers do not do enough to measure the actual amount of progress that students make, taking account of their level of ability. This has slowed the rate of progress for the more-able students in particular.
- Most students achieve a range of worthwhile accreditation that enables them to go on to further education or training. In this, the service is very successful.
- There are an increasing number of individual students making excellent progress in following the courses commissioned by the service, including those run off-site. For example, students gain qualifications in sports leadership and awards from the Duke of Edinburgh scheme through the 'Outdoor Academy' provision. This also promotes extremely well their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. The school carefully monitors attendance and the progress that students are making, and staff regularly carry out checks on how well students are doing.
- Over time, most students do make up some of the lost ground from earlier years in reading and writing. However, the extent of the gains in both subjects for the different groups of students is not always clearly recorded. Students make steady progress in reading because of good opportunities to accelerate their skills through guided reading and one-to-one support.
- There is no evidence that any group of students, including boys and girls and those supported previously by school action plus, are doing less well than other students in the service. During this academic year, many students' average point scores, including those for whom the service receives pupil premium funding, indicate that they are closing the gap between their achievements and those expected nationally for students of a similar age.

The quality of teaching

requires improvement

- The quality of teaching is too variable. Although there is evidence of some good and outstanding teaching, this is not consistent in all subjects and across all key stages, including the sixth form.
- Teaching requires improvement because it is not enabling the majority of pupils to make good progress in their learning. Some lessons move at a slow pace, especially where the teacher talks for too long. In these lessons, students, particularly the more able, are not moved on quickly enough to more challenging work. Students resort to being politely uninterested and opportunities to engage in and enjoy learning are lost. Consequently, they do not make fast enough progress.
- Occasionally, teachers take insufficient account of the range of abilities in the class and, as a

result, the work is too difficult for some and not challenging enough for others. Consequently, progress slows as students have little opportunity to find things out for themselves.

- The quality of marking is variable. The best marking tells students exactly what they need to do to improve their work, but some marking is brief and lacking in such comment.
- The most-effective teaching is well planned and has high expectations of students. It captures and sustains their interest through the use of well-chosen tasks and often involves practical learning activities. These are well matched to individual needs and support their social and emotional development. Students can see the purpose of what they are doing. Independent learning is encouraged and the teachers ask questions that help to develop independence. Consequently, good progress is made. In the vocational teaching observed, high levels of engagement and cooperation with others enabled students to make excellent progress. They were developing speaking and listening skills in talking with others to plan their cooking activities and mathematical skills in accurately weighing ingredients.
- Students gain confidence in applying their literacy skills when they have the opportunity to engage in discussion and debate. This was well illustrated in an English lesson, where students showed good concentration and perseverance in listening to the views of classmates on the moral story of *'Romeo and Juliet'*.
- A good programme for personal, social and health education provides students with good awareness of the dangers of alcohol and substance abuse. This work has a positive impact on improving students' moral and social development.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are good

- Students appreciate the good relationships they have with staff on all sites. Their positive attitude to school compares favourably with negative experiences at previous schools. During their time at the school, students' attitudes and behaviour improve well and they regain interest in education. This contributes well to the students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.
- Students score points each day for good behaviour, work and progress towards their individual targets. This is applied consistently by staff and is valued by students because of the rewards to be gained for reaching a high score.
- Students told the inspector that bullying is rare and isolated incidents are dealt with quickly and appropriately. Students are aware of issues surrounding cyber-bullying and internet safety, including the use of social networking sites. Procedures for controlling access to the internet are effective and robust.
- Students feel safe and secure, including when attending off-site activities. They report that they are given encouragement to take responsibility for their personal safety and well-being. Extensive work is undertaken in personal, social and health education to enable students to learn about the harmful effects of unhealthy lifestyles, including alcohol and drug abuse
- Attendance is below the national average. Most students have a poor record before entering the service and take a short time to readjust to regular attendance. The attendance of the majority of students improves well over time from their low starting points, but is not yet, in most cases, at acceptable levels. This has an impact on the overall attendance of the service. Non-attendance also has an adverse impact on the ability of these students to make good progress.

The leadership and management require improvement

- Although the headteacher and her senior leaders are held in high regard by staff, students, parents and carers, and other professionals. The long-term absence and high turnover of staff, particularly in the last year, has meant that developments have not been as fast as the headteacher wanted.
- Senior leaders do not have a clear enough picture of how well students are doing during the time they spend at the unit. Systems for monitoring how well students are learning are not

effective enough and do not check that the different groups within the school are all making the progress they should in relation to national expectations. This means leaders do not always know if students are making enough progress. This also limits the capacity of the management committee to monitor the unit's rate of improvement.

- Despite this, good tracking of students' progress on an individual basis has ensured that all students have equality of opportunity and that there is no discrimination.
- Senior leaders regularly check the quality of teaching. However, there has not been enough focus on how well students of different abilities learn. This has meant that some weaknesses in teaching have not been clearly identified or resolved quickly enough. The school has tackled inadequate teaching vigorously and considerably reduced it. The proportion of good teaching is beginning to increase.
- Subject leaders, some of whom are new to their role, have yet to be involved in closely checking the quality of teaching and learning in their subject areas and using this information to ensure that all students make at least good progress. They have not all received training for this role.
- Class teachers do not always use their checks on students' progress to ensure that suitable tasks are given to all students to achieve their best.
- As a result of robust arrangements for managing teachers' performance, only those teachers who meet the required high standards are able to move up the salary scale. Serious weaknesses in teaching have been effectively addressed and senior leaders have not shied away from holding difficult conversations with teachers about the quality of their teaching or the consequences of continued poor performance.
- A most notable feature of the service is the partnerships with local schools and external agencies, which make an increasingly positive contribution to students' progress and well-being. Partnerships with parents and carers are strong, although there is more work to do in supporting some students to attend regularly.
- The curriculum, including that of the sixth form, offers a good balance of academic, practical and vocational subjects and high-quality personal learning programmes. The highly effective alternative provision promotes excellent spiritual, moral, social and cultural development through its wide range of enrichment experiences, including camping trips, survival skills and team-building activities. The majority of students gain access to further education or employment when they leave school.
- Support from the officers of the local authority is good. They understand well the issues facing the service and are working closely with the management committee to bring about necessary changes.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - The management committee brings a wide range of skills and experience and provides effective challenge for the school's improvement of students' behaviour, but does not hold the school sufficiently to account for students' progress and the standards they reach. This is because it has not taken full account of pupils' progress in comparison to national expectations in order to challenge leaders rigorously enough about the school's performance and current inconsistencies in teaching. The management committee is aware that weaknesses in the school's data have meant that there has not been adequate information to fulfil this responsibility. It has supported the school well through a period of staff changes and has been fully involved in the recruitment of new staff. The management committee has ensured, more recently, that the way teachers' performance is checked is carefully linked to students' progress, so that pay awards are now more closely linked to improvements in students' achievement. It has been rigorous in its decisions about when to move teachers up the pay scale. The management committee has ensured that procedures for safeguarding, including when students attend off-site provision, are very effective and meet fully all requirements. It has a working knowledge of the budget but is not clear about the use of pupil premium funding and whether it has made any difference to students' progress.

What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>

School details

Unique reference number	131066
Local authority	West Berkshire
Inspection number	402441

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Pupil Referral Unit
School category	Pupil Referral Unit
Age range of pupils	14–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	50
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	20
Appropriate authority	The local authority
Chair	
Headteacher	Jacqui Davies
Date of previous school inspection	16–17 June 2010
Telephone number	01635 528048
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