

Acorn School

Little Oak, Knowstone, South Molton, EX36 4SA

Inspection dates 27–28 February 2013

Overall effectiveness	Inadequate	4
Pupils' achievement	Adequate	3
Pupils' behaviour and personal development	Inadequate	4
Quality of teaching	Inadequate	4
Quality of curriculum	Adequate	3
Pupils' welfare, health and safety	Inadequate	4
Leadership and management	Inadequate	4

Summary of key findings

This school is inadequate because

- Teachers do not make good use of the information they have about students' basic skills to plan lessons that are matched well to students' needs. This has an adverse impact on students' achievement.
- The staff do not manage students' behaviour well enough during lessons. The students are too easily distracted and do not make good use of their time. This limits progress.
- There are weaknesses in the provision for students' welfare, health and safety.
- Leaders and managers, including the proprietor, are not working well enough together to improve teaching and students' achievement. There is no effective system for making improvements in a timely way and checking the success of action taken.

The school has the following strengths

- The school encourages students' interests and eventually succeeds in getting them to re-engage in learning.
- Relationships between students and staff are good and this helps students have confidence in their abilities.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school requires improvement and must take action to meet schedule 1 of The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2010, as amended by The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2012 ('the independent school standards') and associated requirements.

Information about this inspection

- The school was given half a day's notice of this inspection. The inspector discussed with the headteacher essential policies and procedures, including those relating to child protection. He met with staff, the executive headteacher, the educational psychologist and two directors.
- The inspector joined lessons and observed both teachers and two teaching assistants teaching five part-lessons.
- He talked with students about school, looked at their workbooks with them, and reviewed their progress records.
- There were too few views expressed on Parent View, the online survey and no responses from the Ofsted parents' and carers' survey.

Inspection team

Jonathan Palk, Lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- This is an independent, day, special school for students who have social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.
- There are currently three girls and one boy, aged between 12 and 16. All are looked after by their local authority. Two of the students have a statement of special educational needs. All have had long breaks in their previous schooling.
- The current headteacher has been in post for 18 months.
- Phoenix Learning and Care, a company that offers residential, care and educational provision, owns the school. It was opened in 2007 and was last inspected in March 2010.
- There is no additional provision.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- The school must improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by ensuring that:
 - school leaders check on the quality of teaching and learning and the progress of students regularly
 - the proprietor and staff work closely together to review and monitor the impact of behaviour, welfare, health and safety policies on students' achievements
 - the results of reviews and evaluations of the school's performance are brought together in an improvement plan that contains clear, measurable targets that can be checked on.
- The school must meet the following independent school standards:
 - Ensure that lessons are well planned and make good use of class time (paragraph 3(c))
 - Ensure teachers show a good understanding of the aptitudes, needs and prior attainment of the pupils, and ensure these are taken into account in the planning of lessons (paragraph 3d)
 - Ensure that the information gained from regular assessments of students' work is used to plan lessons so that students can make good progress (paragraph 3(g))
 - Ensure that behaviour management strategies are used effectively to encourage students to act responsibly and reduce disruption to other students' learning (paragraph 3(h))
 - Ensure that the academic performance of students can be measured against the school's own aims or national norms (paragraph 4)
 - Ensure that arrangements are made to safeguard and promote the welfare of students at the school with regard to the guidance issued by the Secretary of State (paragraph 7)
 - Ensure that the policy to promote good behaviour among students is implemented effectively (paragraph 9)
 - Ensure that the relevant health and safety rules in respect of smoking on school premises are implemented (paragraph 11)
 - Ensure that the proprietor has provided separate toilets for boys and girls (paragraph 23A(1)(b))
 - Ensure that the proprietor provides suitable facilities to cater for students' medical needs (paragraph 23B(1)(a) and 23B(1)(b))
 - Ensure that the proprietor maintains the school's accommodation and facilities to a sufficient standard to ensure the health, safety and welfare of pupils, as far as is reasonably practical to ensure the safety of students (paragraph 23C)
 - Ensure that the proprietor provides all the required information to parents and carers of students and parents and carers of prospective pupils and, on request, to the Chief

Inspector, the Secretary of State or an independent inspectorate (paragraph 24(1)(a))

- Ensure that all the required information is made available to parents and carers of students and of prospective students (paragraph 24(1)(b)).

Inspection judgements

Pupils' achievement

Adequate

Students' achievements from their low starting points are adequate. The school is successful at encouraging students to re-engage with learning despite the sometimes bad behaviour. Students make adequate progress across a broad range of curriculum experiences and in their personal development. The school has a good record in getting students back into mainstream education and, where relevant, to college for post-16 studies. However, weaknesses in teaching and assessment, particularly in planning lessons that match students' needs, mean that students' progress is only adequate. A scrutiny of work in English showed that students are writing longer and more sustained pieces of work. However, although grammar and punctuation skills are improving, they are still a barrier to reaching higher levels. In mathematics, students showed improving fluency and a few are making enough progress to enter for Foundation Level GCSE in English and mathematics. Individual students, including those who have a statement of special educational needs, progress well in some subjects from their starting points. For example, one of the students has made twice the expected progress in reading skills, while another has made a similar amount of progress in mathematics. The improved reading skills have awakened some interest in other subjects. In particular, better reading is helping students in science, geography and history, although they still have big gaps in relevant skills and knowledge. One student's interest in photography has led to some significant gains in literacy skills. The standard of artwork is high with students acquiring a good range of design and artistic skills. However, despite this positive progress from starting points, attainment in all basic skills remains well below that of other students of the same age.

Pupils' behaviour and personal development

Inadequate

Students' behaviour and aspects of their personal development are inadequate. Students forge good relationships with staff. This is because they trust them and will confide in them. Students consider that although poor behaviour does occur they are safe in school. They are happy to be in school and their attendance is good. When the learning stimulates them and teaching is interesting they work hard and work independently but when the teaching fails to engage they are rude, discourteous and prone to disrupt the learning of others. Attitudes, therefore, are very variable. The boundary as to what is acceptable behaviour in lessons is not clear enough.

The school has a strategy for managing behaviour that is not entirely effective. Students take opportunistic breaks during lessons, when they are frustrated or disengage with their learning. They absent themselves from their lesson and join another. This often disrupts other students' learning. While serious incidents are diminishing, the behaviour logbook records that daily incidents in lessons are still continuing. The rewards and sanctions system has been recently overhauled. Students are responding to this, particularly where it involves loss of privilege at home.

The provision for students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development has some elements that are effective. In art and music lessons and educational visits, students now gain sufficient exposure to and awareness of other cultures. They appreciate the contribution culture makes to contemporary British life and are developing an understanding of British institutions and values. While self-discipline is still something all the students struggle with, they are aware of right and wrong and slowly but increasingly are making the right choices to build respect for themselves and others. This does not extend to smoking, which they do openly on the school site. In its own unique way the use made of the local environment, its open moorland and wooded valleys encourage reflection and improve students' self-esteem.

Quality of teaching**Inadequate**

The quality of teaching and assessment is inadequate overall though some aspects are adequate. Teachers do enough to ensure that students make adequate academic progress. The teaching of the Entry Level unit awards scheme and the Foundation Level English and mathematics GCSE course is satisfactory and ensures individual students make enough progress to register for higher level courses at college. Some subject teaching, such as art, and the teaching of the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) and the certificate of personal effectiveness (COPE) ensures students are adequately prepared for their next stage of education, training or employment.

But there are three areas of weakness which prevent students' progress from being good and cause teaching to be inadequate overall. Teachers get to know what students are capable of doing quickly when they join the school, but do not plan lessons well enough by using this information. There is no guidance to help teachers' use of regular assessment information and daily and weekly lesson plans do not set clear objectives for learners that are linked to the skills they need to make good progress in basic skills. A system for regularly tracking students' reading, writing and numeracy skills against national norms has recently been introduced but the teachers' knowledge of the gaps in students' learning remains patchy.

The management of students' behaviour in lessons is inconsistent and consequently teachers do not make maximum use of the time available. Students are too easily distracted and the adults are not skilful at bringing students back to task. Consequently time is wasted and the learning in those lessons inadequate. The questions asked are sometimes too superficial or do not link clearly to the objectives of the lesson. Learning is best when objectives are clearly shared with students in a way that helps them understand what they have to do to be successful. However, there is no consistency in setting expectations about what students need to do to reach their targets. For example, marked work does not explain what students have to do to improve. In conversations with the students, there is a tendency to accept too readily what students have done rather than engaging them in how they could improve their work. One exception is the one-to-one teaching, when adults have the full concentration of students. This is often good.

In all lessons, the students have the support of teaching assistants. However, there is an over-reliance on teaching assistants to take the lead on learning and insufficient guidance from the teachers on what is to be achieved. In these cases, the expectations are not challenging enough, and students do not have sufficient interest to persevere. As a result the pace of learning is slow and students do not get enough done.

Quality of curriculum**Adequate**

The quality of the curriculum is adequate. While there are weaknesses in some aspects of teaching, the organising of the curriculum is more successful. It is broad and balanced and covers the required areas of learning. It is tailored adequately to individual needs and teachers are successful at adjusting the schemes of work to allow students to make the most of their interests and make adequate progress. The best example is the way the school works with students to select appropriate units within the AQA Entry Level unit awards scheme, ASDAN, COPE and for national qualifications in basic skills.

The school provides good enrichment to the curriculum and students mostly respond well to this. The 'forest school' encourages students to work together to show independence and develop confidence in their abilities to solve problems. Working in the school garden offers the chance to develop a positive attitude to healthy eating. The personal, social and health education programme is carefully planned. There are also work placements, membership of clubs and regular visits to places of interest. Advice about their futures is well organised and results in students making

successful applications for places at college. The quality of resources for teaching higher grade GCSE science and design and technology is only just adequate.

Pupils' welfare, health and safety

Inadequate

The school's provision for the welfare, health and safety of students is inadequate and a number of concerns require immediate attention. While students feel safe in school there are significant shortcomings.

All staff have had training in child protection at the basic level but the member of staff with designated responsibility for child protection and welfare issues has not yet been trained at the higher level. The lack of guidance from a suitably trained officer compromises students' ability to raise concerns without risk, as well as compromising the ability of the school to manage incidents appropriately.

The child protection policy and other required policy documents, including those for anti-bullying and health and safety, meet requirements. Anti-bullying measures are effective. However, serious incident logs and daily records of students' behaviour in lessons and towards others are not reviewed with sufficient robustness. Managers do not identify trends or patterns in a young person's behaviour nor take the necessary action to deal appropriately with issues that arise. This affects how well other students get on with their work in lessons and adversely affects their achievement. The link between residential experience and school through care workers is not formalised. Consequently, sanctions to help students manage their behaviour in school are invoked inconsistently.

Procedures for the safe recruitment and checking of staff to be sure that they are suitable to have contact with young people work well and the single central record is maintained correctly. Risk assessments including those for fire are undertaken regularly and the results properly recorded. There are regular evacuations and risk assessments for visits are undertaken correctly.

The school does not take enough action to prevent students and staff from smoking on the premises. Students carry lighters with them and this compromises the safety of other students and staff.

Leadership and management

Inadequate

Leadership and management are inadequate. The proprietor is aware of the school's weaknesses but has not moved with enough speed to rectify these.

The school has improved the accommodation since the last inspection but it does not provide separate toilets for boys and girls. The classrooms and the spaces for recreation are adequate. However, there are some inadequate security arrangements.

The school's complaints policy fully meets requirements but this document and those relating to how the school tackles bullying and seeks to promote students' health and safety are not advertised in the prospectus as being available to parents and carers. The prospectus is in the process of being updated but the new version and the existing version omit essential information about the proprietor.

The students' annual reviews and progress reports give a clear insight into the work students have been doing in school and record their progress through the schemes of work. However, the systematic and regular checking of students' progress against national age-related expectations or the school's own aims is not established and so this information is not available.

The headteacher has begun to forge links with care home staff so that joint working to support students' academic achievement can be accelerated, for example, in relation to homework but this is not yet successful.

The headteacher, who is also the leader of teaching, has done a great deal since the last inspection to try to inject ambition into what students can achieve through introducing examinations and certificated courses, and staff have undertaken the necessary training but the resulting success has so far been too limited. Improvement planning is too piecemeal and the impact of actions taken to improve students' learning is not reviewed and acted upon with enough regularity. The school's evaluation of its performance, particularly the quality of teaching, is not based on firm evidence, gathered regularly. Arrangements to monitor the performance of teachers, including their lesson planning, and the work of assistants are inadequate because they are not securing improvement. There are no clear timescales for reviewing the impact of policies or addressing weaknesses identified by external consultants.

The proprietor has not adequately challenged school leaders over the quality of teaching and students' achievements and they have not dealt with other weaknesses. As a result, the school has failed a large number of regulations.

What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	A school which provides an exceptional quality of education and significantly exceeds minimum requirements.
Grade 2	Good	A school which provides a high quality of education that exceeds minimum requirements.
Grade 3	Adequate	A school which meets minimum requirements but needs to improve the quality of education it provides.
Grade 4	Inadequate	A school where minimum requirements are not met and/or the quality of education has serious weaknesses.

School details

Unique reference number	135773
Inspection number	420235
DfE registration number	878/6061

This inspection was carried out 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.

Type of school	Independent day special school
School status	Independent school
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	4
Number of part time pupils	0
Proprietor	Phoenix Learning and Care
Chair	Mr Keith Burley
Headteacher	Mrs Joanna Davies
Date of previous school inspection	15–16 March 2010
Annual fees (day pupils)	£20,900 - £22,800
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