

Red Balloon Learner Centre Reading

220-222 Kings Road, Reading, RG1 4JJ

Inspection dates

13–14 March 2013

Overall effectiveness

Pupils' achievement	Adequate	3
Pupils' behaviour and personal development	Adequate	3
Quality of teaching	Good	2
Quality of curriculum	Adequate	3
Pupils' welfare, health and safety	Adequate	3
Leadership and management	Good	2
	Adequate	3

Summary of key findings

This school is adequate because

- The students have not yet been at the school long enough for the improvements in their engagement to be reflected in their academic achievement.
- In addition, students' achievement is not yet good because the quality of teaching of academic subjects and the curriculum is not yet good enough to enable students to make good progress.
- Students are not given enough information about how well they are doing. The quality of marking is sometimes good, but this is not always the case, and academic targets for students are not sharp enough.
- The curriculum includes all the required areas of learning, but creative and physical activities are not as well planned or assessed as other areas such as literacy, numeracy and science.
- The new senior managers do not yet have a clear enough view of the whole curriculum to ensure that there is progression for all students in all subjects.
- The leadership and management have done well to establish the school and achieve well in improving students' personal development, but they have not yet had sufficient impact on the quality of academic teaching in order for the students to achieve well in all subjects.

The school has the following strengths

- The pastoral curriculum takes full account of students' individual needs and has a strong impact on the students' personal development and well-being.
- The proprietor and senior managers ensure that the students are kept safe by ensuring that staff recruitment and subsequent training meet all requirements.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school meets 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

- This inspection was carried out with half a day's notice.
- The inspector observed four lessons taught by four different teachers, looked at students' work and held meetings with the school's coordinator (headteacher), group director of education, staff and students.
- The inspector looked at school documentation including schemes of work, teachers' planning, records and reports of students' progress and staff training records. The school's compliance with the regulations for independent schools was also checked.
- The views of staff were also considered including those obtained from 10 Ofsted questionnaires.

Inspection team

Greg Sorrell, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The Red Balloon Learning Centre Reading is a co-educational independent day school for students in the age range 11 to 16 years. The school's stated aim is 'to restore children's self-esteem, get them back on an academic track and support their return to mainstream education or entry to employment'.
- There are currently 11 students on roll of whom six are male and five are female. Six students have a statement of special educational needs. Occasionally, students are dually registered at local authority schools and attend part time.
- The school provides additional provision in the form of links with relevant agencies and links with a local college of further education. Use is also made of local libraries and London museums and galleries.
- Students are placed here by local authorities and all have behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. These difficulties have resulted in all students showing a strong reluctance to engage in learning and some have experienced sustained periods out of full-time education.
- The school was first registered in March 2012 and this is the school's first full inspection.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- To raise levels of achievement, improve the quality of academic teaching so that it is consistently good or better by:
 - ensuring that teachers' marking lets students know how well they are doing and provides guidance so they know what to do to improve their work
 - providing students with more opportunities to reflect on their progress using assessment information so as to prepare them for their next school, further education or employment
 - ensuring that all academic learning targets are sharp and shared with students so they have a clearer idea of how to improve their work and what they are aiming to achieve.
- Improve the quality of the curriculum by:
 - improving the planning and assessment of all subjects, particularly the creative and physical aspects of the curriculum, to ensure that they are as good as those for literacy, numeracy and science
 - reviewing the provision for extra-curricular activities so as to develop students' personal interests.
- Strengthen leadership and management by:
 - ensuring senior leaders, in conjunction with the director of education, evaluate the school's curriculum to ensure that there is a clear progression of learning in all subjects across the school
 - making sure senior leaders take account of national guidance on assessment and the setting of challenging academic targets.

Inspection judgements

Pupils' achievement

Adequate

The quality of students' achievement is adequate. In this new school, this academic year is the first that students are studying at GCSE and functional skills levels in English, mathematics, science and information and communication technology (ICT). Given their starting points, the students' progress is adequate.

The majority of students in both key stages enter the school with levels of attainment in literacy and numeracy which are below expectations for their age. Students' achievement is not good because the quality of teaching and the curriculum are only adequate. In addition, the school places a high priority on promoting students' readiness for learning as soon as the students enrol. However, there has not yet been sufficient time at school for the improvements in all students' engagement to be reflected in their academic achievement. In English, some students make good progress in their studies of literature and their creative writing; whilst in mathematics, students make good progress in shape and space, although difficulties in applying this knowledge in examination conditions limit their achievements. Disabled students and those with special educational needs, including those who have a statement of special educational needs, make the same progress as other students.

Pupils' behaviour and personal development

Good

Students' behaviour and personal development are good. The students' enjoyment of school is evident through discussion with the students and by observing their behaviour in lessons and during breaks. The students respond well to the school's ethos of acceptance, negotiated learning and the commitment to restoring their self-esteem. In discussion with a group of students, they expressed many positive sentiments, principally that they feel safe at the school and that staff genuinely have their welfare at heart. They would recommend the school to others with similar needs and when asked about any improvements they would like to see, one commented, 'The only improvement I'd like to see is me.' The school has compelling evidence to support students' evaluation of this provision, for example students' concentration in lessons, improved attendance and in the 'readiness for learning' profiles which track students' improved self-esteem and application to learning. Occasionally, a few students show a fitful engagement and, as a consequence, they do not achieve as well as they should. There is a wide range of evidence in daily logs and feedback from well-being sessions which are designed to re-build students' confidence in themselves and adults.

The students' behaviour is good. Students have a good understanding of the different types of bullying and the resultant harm it can cause. Any instances are promptly dealt with and records indicate that instances are rare. The students also develop a good understanding of relationships in an age-appropriate way. They also recognise the adverse effects of harmful substances and extremist views. All students' rates of attendance have improved significantly since joining the school and this represents a major improvement in light of their previous records of disengagement. The students are aware of the importance of regular attendance in improving their academic progress. All pupils are consistently punctual and understand the school's code of conduct.

The students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good overall. Particular strengths are evident in their social and moral development where the students have made great strides as a result of effective staff role models and the school's pastoral arrangements. Spiritual development is assisted by regular opportunities for reflection at circle time and in assemblies. Diverse cultures are represented on the school staff and staff frequently share their life experiences over the very sociable meal at lunchtime. The staff have recognised the need to strengthen this aspect by, for

example, identifying festivals and other events celebrated by different cultures and communities on the school calendar. A recent visit by a local Member of Parliament has provided the students with an insight into national institutions and democratic processes in the United Kingdom. During the inspection, students were planning charitable activities in support of Comic Relief.

Quality of teaching

Adequate

The quality of teaching is adequate overall. Although there are some good features in the teaching, such as the use of probing open questions and carefully marked work, these are not consistently evident in all subjects.

The staff have appropriate subject knowledge for the areas in which they teach and some are specialists which has a positive impact on the students' progress. In a relatively short time, the staff have developed positive relationships with the students and this helps to ensure most lessons are calm and purposeful. Staff provide good role models and calmly manage the occasional instances of challenging behaviour well and ensure learning resumes promptly.

The good teacher student ratio ensures that students receive regular oral feedback during lessons. In an English lesson, students made good progress in literary appreciation, for example, when studying the poem *Invasion*. The students discussed the poet's use of language and verb tenses to convey impending conflict. The teacher's use of open questions and prompting the use of a dictionary for unfamiliar words promoted the students' reflection and capacity to work by themselves. Whilst this personal attention has many benefits, occasionally, the teachers give the students too much information and too little time is given for the student to reflect and provide answers. Teachers' desire to impart knowledge can lead to the teachers talking too much and this inhibits the students' ability to solve problems by themselves.

Staff mark work regularly and provide some detailed written feedback that helps the students improve, for example in students' use of tenses in written English essays. This helpful feedback is not consistently evident and this reduces the students' opportunities to reflect upon previous work independently. Students' individual education plans contain targets for both their academic and personal development. In some cases the academic targets lack precision and relate more to the students' behaviour. Assessments made by teachers, some of which have been obtained using an internet-based program, are used to inform future planning, although academic targets are not routinely shared with students. Teachers have only recently become aware of relevant national guidance on assessment and the setting of challenging learning targets.

Quality of curriculum

Adequate

The quality of the curriculum is adequate. It is not yet good because, although all the required areas of learning are planned and taught, some areas, including physical and creative subjects, are less prominent in both key stages. Other subjects such as art, history and geography are taught using a topic-based approach, where different subjects are linked together, but the planning is less detailed than that in the schemes of work for English, mathematics, science and ICT. Subjects where students can gain accreditation include English, mathematics, science and ICT, and detailed plans adhere closely to syllabus requirements and, consequently, a clear progression in learning is evident. All students study literacy, numeracy, science and ICT, with a suitable emphasis on basic skills and develop their ICT skills through other subjects. In these core subjects, students have tailor-made schemes of work that are based on the National Curriculum and the requirements of statements of special educational needs where appropriate.

The provision for personal, social and health education (PSHE) is prominent on all students' timetables and has a significant impact on the students' re-engagement with learning and their personal development. Much of this provision is delivered through the 'Knowing Me Knowing You' (KMKY) programme, a combination of PSHE, well-being sessions and therapies. The school is

sensitive to the students' prior educational experience and negotiations are held between staff and learners as to how their programmes are to be delivered. The students receive appropriate careers education and guidance that is supported by links with external agencies. The students' preparation for life after school is assisted by recently established links with a local college of further education. Regular use is made of the community for social and cultural visits, for example local libraries and London museums and galleries. There are plans to go to a local swimming pool, but as yet this has not been implemented. There is no programme of extra-curricular activities at lunch time or after school.

Pupils' welfare, health and safety

Good

The school makes good provision for pupils' welfare, health and safety and meets all the requirements for independent schools. Safeguarding arrangements are robust. All the required checks are carried out on the proprietors, staff and volunteers to ascertain their suitability to work with children. These checks are meticulously recorded in the single central register. The proprietor's core policies and procedures, designed to minimise risks, are implemented effectively and suitable dates have been set for policy reviews. These policies include those for child protection, behaviour, health and safety and anti-bullying.

All staff receive the appropriate level of training in child protection and an adequate number are trained in first aid, fire safety and food safety. Students are always appropriately supervised on site and during visits to the community. The promotion of good behaviour is achieved through well-implemented procedures and students appreciate the security of their school community. The school has a strong focus on the elimination of all forms of bullying, including the potential harm from peer pressure into taking illegal drugs and from social media. Staff work closely with students to achieve these aims. Sanctions, such as fixed-term exclusions, are very rare and the use of restorative justice is employed when required.

In keeping with the ethos of the school, there are extensive procedures, including the KMKY pastoral curriculum, which supplements the PSHE programme to support the students' well-being. The students' emotional well-being is appropriately regarded as key to their personal development and academic achievement. All students have access to appropriate counselling, music and drama therapy as required. The pursuit of healthy lifestyles through diet is strongly promoted on a daily basis, although there is less emphasis on physical exercise.

Leadership and management

Adequate

The quality of leadership and management is adequate. It is not yet good because the new senior management team has not had time to ensure that there is consistently good quality teaching across the curriculum to promote students' good achievement. Nevertheless, in less than two terms, positive steps have been taken to improve the quality of the school's provision, for example with the introduction of performance management, lesson observations and regular proprietorial visits. However, the managers' evaluation of the current provision is overly generous. In particular, there is a need for greater coordination of the various elements in the curriculum to ensure that, whatever negotiated learning pathway the students take, there is a clear progression in all their academic studies.

The proprietor has ensured that the safeguarding arrangements for students' welfare, health and safety are good. The proprietor provides all staff with suitable training at appropriate levels and additional training in special educational needs, designed to provide staff with an improved insight into some students' needs, has recently commenced. Senior managers liaise effectively with placing authorities to ensure that all students are appropriately placed and their special educational needs are fully met.

The premises are well maintained and suitable for safe and effective learning. All the required

information is provided to parents, carers and local authorities. The policy and procedures for complaints meet requirements. The results of the questionnaires received from staff were positive about the work of the school. No returns were received from parents, carers or local authorities. However, the school has evidence that they hold positive views of the school expressed during their regular visits to the school.

The proprietor has ensured that all the regulations for independent schools are met.

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	137999
Inspection number	408684
DfE registration number	870/6011

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	Special school.
School status	Independent school
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	11
Number of part time pupils	1
Proprietor	Red Balloon Learning Centres
Chair	David Uppington
Headteacher	Adrian Trowbridge (Co-ordinator)
Date of previous school inspection	This is the school's first inspection.
Annual fees (day pupils)	£16,000–£18,000
Telephone number	0118 958 3004
Fax number	n/a
Email address	admin@reading.rbhc.org.uk

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