

The Dales School

Cowpen Road, Blyth, Northumberland, NE24 4RE

Inspection dates 22–23 October 2013

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Good	2
	This inspection:	Outstanding	1
Achievement of pupils		Outstanding	1
Quality of teaching		Outstanding	1
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Outstanding	1
Leadership and management		Outstanding	1

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school.

- Pupils make exceptional progress from their individual starting points. Their progress in reading, writing, communication and mathematics is equally strong.
- Achievements for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage are good and for individuals they are outstanding. Progress increases the longer learners are at the school. For example, some pupils, by the time they leave in Year 6, are achieving close to their peers in mainstream schools in reading.
- The quality of teaching is always good and a significant proportion is excellent. Staff skilfully weave teaching, interventions, the use of apprentices, the curriculum and their extensive knowledge of each individual together to achieve excellent outcomes for all pupil groups.
- Pupils are keen to attend school, they feel safe and secure. Their behaviour is outstanding. Their attitudes and care for each other contribute very well to their learning and progress.
- All pupils have many opportunities to take part in sport both within the curriculum and in extra-curricular activities. This makes a good contribution to their physical well-being.
- The Dales has continued to improve markedly since its last inspection. There is a constant drive for excellence from the headteacher, senior leaders and from all staff.
- A happy, cohesive and totally committed staff team have secured the capacity to improve the quality of teaching and pupils' achievement even further. For example, through staff undertaking research, attending training and sharing good practice.
- Parents are delighted with the progress their children make at The Dales. A typical comment was that, 'Children make good progress here and then it turns into even better progress.' Their only criticism was the school's website. Although parents can talk to staff at any time the ability to quickly access information via the website is hampered as it does not always contain full or up-to-date information.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed eight lessons; two of them were undertaken jointly with the headteacher. Additional 'learning walks' took place and a number of short visits were made to lessons.
- Meetings were held with a group of pupils, members of the governing body and with a representative from the local authority. A meeting was held with a group of parents.
- There were no responses to the online Parent View questionnaire but a parental survey conducted by the school was taken into account by inspectors. There were also a number of letters that were sent to the inspectors from parents which were considered alongside 32 responses to the staff questionnaire.
- Inspectors looked at a range of documentation including information on pupil tracking and achievement, self-evaluation and school development planning, pupils' work books and key policies and procedures, including those for safeguarding.
- During this inspection, inspectors asked additional questions designed to ascertain the school's view of the impact and effectiveness of local authority services to support school improvement. This information will contribute to work carried out by Ofsted to assess the use, quality and impact of those services.

Inspection team

Michele Crichton, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Frank Cain

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- The Dales is a school for pupils who exhibit a wide range of disabilities or special educational needs. The main groups of pupils are those with autistic spectrum disorders, communication needs, attention deficit hyperactivity disorders and those with complex social, emotional and behavioural needs.
- All pupils have a statement of special educational need.
- Pupils attend from across the county of Northumberland and some have experienced significant disruption in their education prior to joining the school.
- Most pupils are White British.
- The proportion of pupils known to be supported by the pupil premium is above average. The pupil premium is additional funding for those pupils who are known to be eligible for free school meals, children from service families and those children who are looked after.
- Currently no pupils speak English as an additional language.
- The school has maintained its range of awards since the last inspection.
- The proportion of looked after children is currently very small.
- The headteacher is a Local Leader of Education (LLE).
- Since the last inspection, the governing body and the senior leadership team have been reorganised, either with new staff and/or a change of role.
- Additionally, the school became part of The Shiremoor Teaching School Alliance, as Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities lead, in 2012 and shares best practice with other schools in its partnership, regionally and nationally.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the school's website so that all relevant information is kept up to date and is available for parents and others to access.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils is outstanding

- Children start school with skills which are well below those typically expected for their age due to their disabilities and special educational needs. The vast majority of pupils make outstanding progress during their time at The Dales.
- The school's own progress data show that progress accumulates the longer pupils stay at the school. Information kept shows that, year on year, pupils constantly make good and better progress. This is in their personal and academic learning and means that, by the time they leave, they are very well prepared for their next stage of education.
- Staff use rigorous assessments, analyse all information they gain about pupils' achievements extensively, and then set work at appropriate levels for all groups of pupils. The school's own assessment data show that the majority of pupils consistently exceed the expected rates of progress given their individual starting points.
- Staff ensure progress is of the highest order because they consistently set pupils' individual targets, monitor them closely and quickly extend these further to ensure all pupils, including the most able, make the best possible progress they can.
- From the Early Years Foundation Stage onwards, staff know each pupil as an individual, they have high expectations of all and ensure that developing pupils' communication is at the centre of every activity. For example, there are high expectations of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage because precision listening and signing is expected from all staff.
- Those pupils who are eligible for free school meals and supported by pupil premium funding make the same excellent progress as other pupils. There are no differences in achievements between English and mathematics. In lessons and in pupils' books, it is very evident that all pupils achieve very well.
- Literacy and mathematics are each developed well through a wide range of interesting resources, skilful teaching and wherever possible, practical activities. Pupils' work books show that mathematical knowledge develops systematically and teachers' comments consistently move learning on at just the right pace for the learner.
- Reading is developed well for those pupils for whom it is meaningful and for 'real reading', as staff put it. Rigorous assessments followed by focused interventions and support from staff with great expertise mean that individual pupils catch up very closely to their peers in mainstream schools by the time they leave The Dales. For specific pupils, this means that they are just three terms behind the nationally expected level.

The quality of teaching is outstanding

- Good and outstanding teaching drives the good and outstanding progress of pupils, but this is not the only component to pupils' excellent outcomes at The Dales. Additional, focused support to pupils for specific time periods, skilled non-teaching staff who develop their expertise from talented teachers and teamwork that is strong throughout the school, all combine to make exceptional outcomes for pupils.
- Teachers use assessment information very well to plan lessons and ensure activities are interesting and relevant to the individual. These activities provide pupils with a wide variety of experiences but are consistently based upon the acquisition and use of communication, literacy and numeracy skills. For example, sessions in the garden provide a stimulus for healthy lifestyles and physical well-being. Equally, a literacy lesson combines following instructions to make a dancing skeleton with mathematical counting and scientific information about bones.
- Scrutiny of pupils' literacy and numeracy work books show work that is well matched for all levels of ability and a variety of activities to complete to maintain interest. Challenge and high expectations are consistent between subjects. Work completed by the most able ensures that they are suitably stretched to achieve the best they can.

- All non-teaching staff and teaching staff work together well. Frequently, non-teaching staff may lead the lesson and teachers support. This was evident during a peer-massage session when the teacher took a secondary role and the lesson was exceptionally well guided by a colleague.
- All staff consistently develop high levels of communication. Pupils are given time to think, but staff always wait for an answer. Pupils are gently but persistently reminded to respond, whatever form of communication is used. For example, staff have high expectations that signing will be precise and they spend additional time with each individual to get it spot on.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are outstanding

- Behaviour is superb even though the inspection occurred while exciting and much awaited residential visits took place. Some learners temporarily moved to other teaching classes while changeovers of staff and pupils ensued. Regardless of the changes to routines and additional visitors, pupils' attitudes to learning are positive and they are kind and considerate to others. School behaviour logs show this is usually the case.
- In discussions with pupils, they say there is no evidence of any bullying in the school and pupils say they get on well together, feel safe and that all staff are 'nice'. They readily say that 'we help each other and we have jobs to do.' Pupils were observed regularly helping each other, for example, with putting on coats or passing pencils and books without being asked by adults.
- Pupils are appropriately informed for their age and understanding about how to keep themselves safe. Practical examples are used as much as possible to ensure that this is relevant to the individual. For example, during a baking session where hot trays were handled with oven gloves, attention to safety was a central focus. The most-able pupils are able to discuss the safe use of the internet.
- Sometimes in the school yard at play time, an individual pupil may become over excited. On the very rare occasions where behaviour is inappropriate, pupils respond quickly to staff direction or intervention.
- Parents and staff strongly agree that pupils are well looked after and feel safe. Behaviour is consistently well managed, with a range of strategies that enable pupils to learn how to manage their own behaviour. For example, during a session on peer massage, pupils visibly calmed and soothed each other, as they stroked, with permission, each other's shoulders and back.
- Pupils' attendance is markedly higher in comparison to other special schools and staff follow up any absences diligently. This is highly effective and there are no persistent absences within the school.
- The promotion of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is strongly woven through activities every day. For example, the extensive garden area provides a point of reflection for the changing seasons as produce is grown, picked and made into soup, or art work captures still-life drawings.

The leadership and management are outstanding

- The inspirational headteacher and the committed leadership team have ensured continual improvements in the school's practices since the last inspection. The development of assessment systems and the tracking of pupils' progress are rigorous and have had a direct impact on improving achievement and the quality of teaching. Since the school's previous inspection, achievement, teaching and the use of assessment have all improved.
- The governing body and senior leadership team has been revised with either new members of staff or different roles. Many bring specific expertise and experience of mainstream education. This has also driven improvements.
- Teaching, learning, the curriculum and pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is deeply enriched through the sharing of ideas and the generation of research by all staff. The school's leaders set very clear targets for all staff with excellent training opportunities.

- The school is a hub for students from the National Teaching School and the school successfully runs an apprenticeship scheme for non-teaching staff to gain expert skills in supporting disabled pupils or pupils with special educational needs. Many staff at the Dales advance their own education which in turn contributes to improved outcomes for pupils.
- All good practices are valued and shared within the school, locally and regionally. There are many visits from staff from other schools at support, teaching and leadership levels.
- Developments have also been made to the school building to enhance teaching and learning spaces. For example, adaption to the Early Years Foundation Stage classrooms now gives outdoor provision in all seasons. The Garden House gives excellent opportunities for confidence building through single overnight stays and for life skills as pupils learn to wash and cook independently.
- The new primary school sport funding is used creatively to enhance pupils' physical skills but also their personal qualities. For example, pupils go climbing, canoeing, horse riding and sailing. These activities enable them to develop team work, have personal experiences of overcoming fears or achieving a challenge as well as plenty of fresh air and physical exercise.
- Equality of opportunity is readily shown through the extensive personal learning plans for each pupil with clear, challenging targets that are bespoke to the individual. Close tracking and the regular review of their targets ensures all pupils make the best possible progress.
- Self-evaluation is completely accurate and school improvement plans reflect ambition and drive. Both demonstrate the school's considerable capacity to continue to improve.
- The school's arrangements for safeguarding pupils meet statutory requirements.
- A group of parents spoke directly to inspectors during the inspection, others wrote personal letters. All parents could not speak highly enough of staff and the achievements of their children both personally and academically. Their only criticism was concerning the website which did not always have the latest information about the host of trips or activities that were current.
- The school has a strong relationship with the local authority, which provides good support and challenge. Since the last inspection all staff, including governors, have accessed training. The school's education officer conducts lesson observations, reviews the tracking of pupils' progress and holds the headteacher to account through performance management meetings. These practices have enhanced staff skills and expertise.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - The governing body is extremely knowledgeable about pupils' progress because they visit the school frequently and get regular progress reports from the headteacher. The range of skills and experience of governors enables them to support and challenge well. The school's strength regarding the value of training also continues with the governing body. For example, training for governors can be provided both in-house and externally, so that both newer and the more-experienced governors are able to carry out their roles highly effectively. They have a very secure understanding of the quality of teaching and of pupils' achievements through regular discussions with school teaching and support staff. This especially enables them to understand exactly how well pupils supported by pupil premium funding are doing and hold the school to account to constantly improve outcomes for all pupils. Consequently, their good knowledge of the school has ensured that the school has robust performance management systems that involve reviewing staff pay only in line with their performance.

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	122388
Local authority	Northumberland
Inspection number	425711

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

Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	4–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	68
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Adele Moorhouse
Headteacher	Hugh Steele
Date of previous school inspection	11 October 2010
Telephone number	01670 352556
Fax number	01670 365657
Email address	hugh.steele@northumberland.gov.uk

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