

Benjamin College

4 Wren Path, Fairford Leys, Aylesbury, HP19 7AR

Inspection dates	3–4 December 2013	
Overall effectiveness	Good	2
Pupils' achievement	Good	2
Pupils' behaviour and personal development	Adequate	3
Quality of teaching	Good	2
Quality of curriculum	Good	2
Pupils' welfare, health and safety	Good	2
Leadership and management	Good	2

Summary of key findings

This school is good because

- Students make good progress, particularly in communication, literacy and numeracy skills.
- College leaders and staff place students' best interests at the heart of their work. Links between the residential and teaching staff are strong and students continue learning after the college day finishes. Leaders ensure that teaching and achievement are good.
- Teaching is good. Staff manage behaviour well and mark students' work regularly.
- Since the last inspection, the headteacher has established a much more coherent programme for the students across the five sites. Staff now feel well supported in their work. Expectations of teachers are clear.
- Staff develop trusting relationships with students and allow them to express their concerns and worries.
- The college does all it can to keep the students safe. They are well cared for.

It is not yet outstanding because

- Students' behaviour, although improving, is not yet good enough and their attendance at lessons is not regular enough.
- Students have too few opportunities to learn alongside their peers, hampering the development of their social skills. On one site, the learning environment hinders the way teaching is planned.
- Students do not regularly take advantage of opportunities to contribute to the college and wider community beyond their particular residential home.
- Students do not always respond to written guidance on how to improve their work.
- Leaders' ready access to useful whole-college records is limited by current systems.

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 took place with one day's notice.
- The lead inspector was unable to observe any lessons or parts of lessons as students were not in attendance.
- It was not possible to gather information from the online Parent View survey because no responses were made.
- The lead inspector considered the two responses to the staff questionnaire and had discussions throughout the inspection with the headteacher and deputy headteacher.
- The inspector reviewed key documents and policies from across the sites, including those related to safeguarding and the students' work as well as information about the students' attainment and progress.

Inspection team

Sheila Nolan, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- Benjamin College opened in 2008. It provides education for secondary-age students across five registered residential settings owned by Benjamin UK Ltd.
- The college is registered for up to eight students between 11 and 18 years of age. Two of the current students have a statement of special educational needs. Students are funded by their placing local authorities from London Boroughs as well as other areas of the country outside Buckinghamshire.
- All students placed in the college have had a disrupted education in their previous schools. Some have not attended school for lengthy periods. Most students have behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. Some have medical conditions.
- The college provides short-term placements for students who later continue onto mainstream schools or other institutions. The college aims to provide a 'consistent and caring environment in which students can develop their full academic, personal and social potential'.
- The current headteacher was appointed in December 2012. There are five other education staff across the five sites. Each site has a key link teacher, although teachers work across all sites.
- The college uses additional provision for some work in science and for physical education.
- The college was last inspected in 2010. The residences were not inspected at the same time as the inspection of the college. The last social care inspection was in September 2013.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Further improve the quality of education and students' personal development by:
 - bringing students together more often for lessons so that there is greater scope to develop their social skills
 - reviewing the use of the small classroom on one site so that a wider range of learning opportunities can be provided
 - encouraging students to respond to comments in teachers' marking of their work
 - making more intensive efforts to acquire any academic records from previous institutions
 - improving the attendance of students at daily lessons
 - giving students more opportunities to contribute to their college community and the wider community.
- Strengthen leadership further by providing better access for senior staff to centralised records from across all the college sites.

Inspection judgements

Pupils' achievement

Good

Students' achievement is good as a result of good teaching and a good curriculum. Evidence to support this judgement was seen in the students' work files. Although their attainment is well below that expected for their age, given their very low starting points students are making good progress in developing their basic skills. Files and assessment records show that some make excellent advances in reading, writing and numeracy. Some students make significant progress in their reading as they discover real pleasure in reading. Although there are large gaps in students' learning when they join the college, through tiny steps, each student is encouraged successfully to make up some of that lost ground. Some students' progress is still hindered by illness, non-attendance at lessons and difficulties in concentrating and engaging with others. Residential staff manage to fill in some missed work at times other than those designated for lessons. Almost all students at Key Stage 4 gain some form of modular external accreditation.

Although it was not possible to evaluate students' achievements in lessons, teachers' records of learning and students' work show great strides, for example, in their communication skills and in dealing with everyday finance. Students' achievement is not yet outstanding because their personal challenges still hinder their academic work.

Pupils' behaviour and personal development

Adequate

Students' behaviour and personal development are adequate. Some students make relatively good gains over their time in the college when compared with their starting points. However, because placements are short term, students are usually at the early stages of managing their own behaviour so that they are calm enough to learn. Staff track students' engagement with learning and these records show that concentration in class and engagement in other activities are variable but with an overall trend of improvement as students gain in self-esteem and confidence. However, attendance and punctuality are not yet good enough, although some students make significant progress compared with that shown in their previous records.

All students can show challenging behaviour but staff are skilled at managing such behaviour and liaise closely with the residential staff in supporting students' personal development. Students' generally trusting relationships with staff allow them the space to express their concerns and frustrations at times. Although behaviour is not good overall, students make reasonable progress in their personal development, including being able to communicate with and trust adults.

Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is promoted well. They learn to understand the impact of their behaviour on others. Visits to places of interest extend their knowledge of the wider society and of public services and institutions in England. Students are encouraged to take an interest in news bulletins and current affairs. They are sometimes pleased to contribute to their small community in little ways, for example, by cooking for others in food technology or helping to put flat-pack furniture together. Some are involved in the college African charity. Leaders ensure that when controversial and political issues are considered, that steps have been taken to offer a balanced presentation of opposing views.

Quality of teaching

Good

The quality of teaching is mostly good which enables students to make good progress. Teachers strive well to extend students' knowledge and understanding of basic academic skills as well as life skills. The small numbers allow for work to be carefully tailored to meet different students' needs and to help to fill some gaps in their learning while at the same time supporting gains in personal

confidence and self-esteem. All staff are well informed on each student's immediate area of focus so that not only are skills developed but themed projects are set up in which to apply and consolidate these skills. Teaching staff work closely with residential staff so that learning continues outside of school hours. This liaison is well targeted at developing students' independent learning skills. Where possible, staff use a variety of methods to help the students increase their understanding of the work in hand. However, this work is not fully supported by the learning environment in one classroom on one site where only one-to-one work is possible.

Rarely do students arrive at the college with clear records of earlier learning. This makes for slower progress than is desirable, given the usually short-term placements, as staff have to take time to get to know the students and to assess their skills. This induction period is handled well by the college, particularly when students are initially reluctant to learn. The checks on students' work are regular and thorough, although not enough is done to make sure that students respond usefully to comments and guidance in teachers' marking. Marking is always sensitively managed to focus on the most pressing need, so that the students do not lose heart and give up. As a consequence, students' work shows perseverance and, in some cases, a real determination to benefit from their good working relationships with staff and their short-term placements. Residential staff also complete records of learning so that teaching staff can 'pick up the thread' on the following day.

Quality of curriculum

Good

The curriculum is good, covers the required areas of learning and reflects well the college's aim to provide a 'broad and balanced curriculum that includes key core subjects'. It is delivered through individual education plans and matched to the needs of each student so all can make good progress. Besides a strong focus on basic literacy and numeracy, including reading recovery programmes, the college teaches science on its own premises for biology and through visits to another local centre for practical work in chemistry and physics. Students also study food technology and information and communication technology. There is a range of sporting activity including horse riding and exercise in a local sports centre. All students have membership of the sports centre although not all use it willingly. Humanities and the arts are woven into each student's plan with themed projects to help students apply their emerging basic skills. At Key Stage 4, students have opportunities to gain worthwhile accreditation from major awarding bodies that will help them on to further education and training. A major aim of the college is to build up the students' confidence so that they begin to realise that they can achieve well. Clear schemes of work support staff in planning lessons.

High priority is given to personal, social and health education. Residential staff are now better integrated into the students' learning programmes. Steps in learning are recorded in the communication book for each residence so that these can be shared with the teaching staff. There is good enrichment of the college curriculum with out-of-hours activities that involve theatre and museum visits as well as visits related to the students' interests. The 'challenge twenty' involves students in negotiating with residential staff as they strive to make a series of out-of-hours visits aimed at expanding their horizons. The students with a statement of special educational needs have programmes linked to their particular circumstances. Careers education and guidance have been introduced since the last inspection to prepare students for the next stage of their education, training or living. There are also strong links with a wide range of other agencies to support and manage their medical and other needs.

Pupils' welfare, health and safety

Good

The arrangements for students' welfare, health and safety are good as are the college's safeguarding procedures. All regulations are met. College staff work closely with the residential staff to continue to build trust between the young people and the adults who support them. Staff are well trained in the management of students. College policies and procedures with regard to

first aid, health and safety and anti-bullying are fit for purpose, implemented well and consistent across all of the college sites. Most college staff are trained effectively in first aid and are supported well by residential staff who are on site during the school day. Child protection is taken very seriously and staff are trained regularly in this to the required level as well as in restraint procedures. Safer recruitment practices are in place and all staff are carefully vetted. Child protection training and practice are given high priority across the college. The college has a very clear policy on the use of rewards and sanctions which focuses on withdrawing rewards rather than on punishments. Students understand the system and generally respond at least adequately to this positive management. The high ratio of staff to students has contributed to a situation where there are no recorded incidents of bullying.

The college checks all staff thoroughly to ensure their appropriateness to work with young people. Teaching staff are suitably qualified and all relevant information is systematically recorded on the single central record covering all school sites. There are sharply focused risk assessments for each student for both on- and off-site activities. The college is meticulous in recording attendance at lessons and in registering the students' engagement in learning. All staff are committed to maintaining a secure and calm environment so that students can take advantage of learning. Some students are involved with a range of external agencies when they join the college. These links are maintained and other partnerships are formed where it is necessary for the good of the students. Because of the very small numbers, students are well known to the teaching and support staff. Although the college strives to develop the students' understanding of how to keep healthy, not all students demonstrate the motivation to act to develop a healthy lifestyle.

Leadership and management

Good

Leadership and management are good which enables students to make good progress. Senior leaders are well aware of the areas where improvement is needed. Much has been done since the last inspection to form the teaching staff into a coherent team. This is partly accomplished through regular weekly meetings so that staff working across the five sites do not feel isolated or unsupported. Teaching staff roles are now clearly distinguished from those of the residential staff. Training for staff and performance management are better linked than previously. All issues from the previous inspection have been addressed.

The headteacher has a clear vision of how to develop the college. Although the premises and accommodation meet requirements, the headteacher recognises the issue with small classrooms, which limit the possible approaches to teaching, and that students have too few opportunities to learn with others which could better promote their personal development. Additionally, there is a need for more efforts to be made in obtaining students' previous academic records to assist in their induction. Much has been done to structure lesson times, the curriculum and schemes of work, record students' progress and link effectively with the residential staff. The school provides all the information it should for parents and carers and for the local authorities. The complaints procedure meets requirements.

There are still some difficulties for senior managers in gaining ready electronic access to all necessary records from all sites because of the way that information is currently stored. 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	135805
Inspection number	422794
DfE registration number	825/6042

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
School status	Independent residential special school
Age range of pupils	12–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	4
Number of part time pupils	1
Proprietor	Mrs Claudette Deysel
Headteacher	Margaret Bond
Date of previous school inspection	8–9 December 2010
Annual fees (day pupils)	£26,000
Telephone number	01296 483584
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