

The Acorn School

CONTENTS

[Introduction and summary](#)

[Purpose and scope of the inspection](#)

[Information about the school](#)

[Summary of main findings](#)

[What the school does well](#)

[What the school must do in order to comply with the regulations](#)

[Compliance with the regulations for registration](#)

[1. The quality of education provided by the school](#)

[The quality of the curriculum](#)

[The quality of the teaching and assessment](#)

[Does the school meet the requirements for registration?](#)

[2. The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils](#)

[Does the school meet the requirements for registration?](#)

[3. The welfare, health and safety of the pupils](#)

[Does the school meet the requirements for registration?](#)

[What does the school need to do to comply with the regulations?](#)

[4. The suitability of the proprietor and staff](#)

[Does the school meet the requirements for registration?](#)

[5. The suitability of the premises and accommodation](#)

[Does the school meet the requirements for registration?](#)

[What does the school need to do to comply with the regulations?](#)

[6. The quality of information for parents and other partners](#)

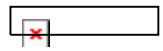
[Does the school meet the requirements for registration?](#)

[7. The effectiveness of the school's procedures for handling complaints](#)

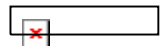
[Does the school meet the requirements for registration?](#)

[School details](#)

Introduction and summary

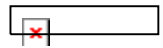


Purpose and scope of the inspection



This inspection was carried out by the Office for Standards in Education under Section 163 of the Education Act 2002 in order to advise the Secretary of State for Education and Skills about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

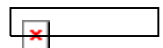
Information about the school



The Acorn School is an independent, co-educational school for pupils aged three to nineteen. Admission is non-selective. At the time of the inspection there were 122 pupils on roll. It is situated in Nailsworth in Gloucestershire and was founded in 1991 by the present owner, who is also the principal. The school reflects the educational vision of its owner. It is inspired by the Waldorf curriculum of Rudolf Steiner, complemented in the later stages by the school's own programmes of study. The organisation includes the kindergarten, lower and upper schools.

The school seeks to recognise 'the individuality and temperament of each child', and aims 'to provide a broad based curriculum with the opportunity of (pupils) achieving a sound education in a wide range of subjects'. It conducts no national tests or examinations but pupils who wish to do so, undertake specific areas of study which are submitted for university entrance.

Summary of main findings



This is a very good school with many strengths. The principal has established a strong ethos and a

a result, make rapid progress. Pupils feel valued and respected. The distinctive curriculum is strong in the creative and expressive arts and is greatly enriched by extra-curricular activities and residential visits. It is flexible enough to meet the different needs of pupils. The school successfully meets its aims and as one pupil expressed it: 'At Acorn they don't just teach you how to learn, they teach you to love learning'.

What the school does well

- its provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is excellent;
- the quality of teaching is almost invariably very good or excellent, and is underpinned by a first-rate assessment system;
- the curriculum is interesting, well planned and wide ranging;
- pupils' behaviour is excellent; they show increasing maturity and have a strong sense of responsibility one for another; and
- their progress in all areas of the curriculum is very good.

What the school must do in order to comply with the regulations

- increase the number of washrooms for boys;
- ensure that the nominated adult for child protection receives appropriate training every two years and that staff receive training every three years; and
- ensure that all attendance registers are marked at the beginning of the afternoon session.

Compliance with the regulations for registration

1. The quality of education provided by the school

The quality of the curriculum

The very good quality curriculum broadly follows the Waldorf curriculum inspired by the educational philosophy of Rudolf Steiner, successfully complemented in the later stages by additional innovative units of study designed by the school. The school's ethos and curriculum strongly emphasise and foster Steiner's belief in the importance of the spiritual, moral and personal development of the individual.

The curriculum is well planned from the kindergarten with the intention of giving all pupils the opportunity to develop their individual talents. The kindergarten provides a high quality, interesting and secure environment in which pupils experience a varied curriculum. This enables them to make very good progress, especially in oral communication and personal and social development. Well-established routines help to foster pupils' self-confidence and assurance. Creative play promotes a growing independence through pupils making choices, using resources in their own way and learning from each other.

From classes 1 to 8, the 'themes' of the Steiner curriculum define the areas of learning. The 'main' lesson is usually two hours each morning and a given theme lasts for about four or five weeks, slightly longer than the traditional Steiner model. The broad range of themes includes a focus on mathematics, art, myths and legends, history and geography from class 5, and science from class 6. Learning in other subjects, such as English, is integral to all main lessons helping pupils to make links between different aspects of their work. Lessons in English, mathematics, religious education (RE), music, French, physical education (PE) and the creative and expressive arts form the remainder of the curriculum. There is a strong emphasis on all aspects of literacy, contributing significantly to pupils' good skills in these areas. They use these skills effectively in learning across the curriculum. RE has a central importance and includes wider aspects of study, such as personal, social and health education, and citizenship. This supports and reinforces the distinctive ethos of the school in relation to healthy living and personal conduct. French is introduced from the lower school, helping pupils to develop a lively interest and enjoyment in the subject.

In the upper school, the main lesson has two sessions and the broad range of subjects continues to be included in the curriculum. Themes for the main lesson move beyond the Steiner curriculum to include environmental and human science, current and world affairs, politics, ancient religions and astronomy. If a new topic for study arises, either a teacher or an external expert is engaged to write the main lesson programme, as, for example, with a recent marine pollution topic. The school has no laboratories for science, and in consequence physics and chemistry have less emphasis than biology. The broad curriculum encourages pupils to keep their options and choices open. In discussions with inspectors, older pupils were clear that this was an advantage. They believe that greater knowledge and maturity means that their later decisions are better informed.

The final year programme consists of two or three specialist modules undertaken by each pupil. Under supervision, these older pupils choose, plan and research two or three areas of particular interest, writing an extended study on each. These include topics on anatomy, philosophy, the life and work of poets and the history of the Native North American Plains people. The resulting impressive pieces of work are successfully submitted as evidence for university entrance. The school is adept at tailoring the curriculum at the later stages to meet individual needs or preferences to ensure that those with artistic or practical skills are also able to pursue these to a high level.

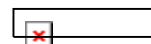
The creative and expressive arts have high status and are successfully fostered throughout the school. Music is consistently promoted from the early years through singing and learning to play recorders and pipes. The learning of rhymes, verses and songs contributes to very good progress in music and to learning in other subjects. The foundation skills and techniques in art and a range of crafts are taught systematically and are refined at all stages, resulting in very good progress. Healthy eating and living are promoted consistently. Education in relation to smoking, drugs and alcohol has a high profile and extends to the school's partnership with parents, whose absolute support is expected.

Extra-curricular activities are a fundamental part of the school's provision and enrich the curriculum significantly. Water sports are a particular strength with a good range of specialist skills and opportunities accessible to all pupils. Gymnastics and games are popular and well supported, but the school chooses not to participate in competitive leagues, preferring to focus on the benefits to individuals and groups within the school community.

Regular day and residential visits further enhance the curriculum. These add substantially to the quality of pupils' learning through direct experience of the wider world and through the extended opportunities for sustained personal and social relationships.

The school's teaching time for some classes in the lower school is below the number of hours recommended by the Department for Education and Skills for maintained primary schools. However, parents are made aware of their responsibility to complement the educational provision of the school.

The quality of the teaching and assessment



The consistent quality of the teaching and the assessments which inform it are strengths of the school. The staff have very high expectations to which all pupils respond very well.

Teachers' lesson planning has clear objectives for teaching and learning and assessment is used very well to inform the support given to individuals and groups of pupils. Teachers' assessment in lessons is very effective and enables the pupils to improve their work and increases the progress they make. The planning of lessons takes very good account of what the pupils already know and can do and builds on this.

The teachers' subject knowledge is very secure and the school makes very effective use of the strengths of individual teachers when considering their deployment. In lessons, the pupils are consistently encouraged to apply what they know, and to use their initiative. As a result they are very effective learners who are keen to improve, concentrate and apply themselves very well to the tasks they are given. This contributes significantly to their achievements and the very good progress they make both in lessons and over time. A range of suitable teaching approaches is used and staff show great enthusiasm and interest in their work. This is very evident to both older and younger pupils who, in discussion with inspectors during the inspection, stated that their teachers were 'inspiring'.

The school has comprehensive and effective assessment procedures which enable the teachers to have a very secure knowledge of the pupils' different abilities, their strengths and weaknesses. These assessments include impressive child studies in the kindergarten, and in other classes, detailed notes on pupils' social and academic development and progress. This knowledge is very effectively used to plan work which is well matched to the pupils' needs. Assessment information is also used to form teaching groups. This enables the work to be precisely matched to the abilities of the pupils and significantly contributes to their achievements.

Throughout the school, at the end of a unit of study which has been the focus of a main lesson, work is marked alongside the pupil. Spelling and grammatical errors are identified and these become part of the spellings a pupil is asked to learn each day. Anything that is not regarded as the pupil's best work is discussed in some detail and improvements are suggested by the teacher. This is very effective and enables the pupils to progress.

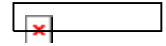
If a teacher is concerned about a pupil's academic progress, a pupil assessment sheet is filled in, discussed with parents and an appropriate action plan devised for class lessons. Each week there are staff meetings at which individual pupils are discussed by the whole staff. As a result, not only are individuals well known to their class teacher but also to the staff as a whole, and their progress is carefully monitored.

Resources are sufficient and are used well to support teaching and learning.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

2. The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils



Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is an area of significant strength. The clear and well-established ethos of the school creates a sense of family to which pupils, staff and parents feel they belong. The rich curriculum and the outstanding quality of care contribute strongly to pupils' personal development. From the kindergarten pupils are increasingly aware of their own spirituality. They have reflective periods each day and are appreciative of the natural world, its benefits and the responsibility of humankind to care for it. Imaginative, high quality work in art and design, music and crafts fosters spiritual and creative awareness so that pupils learn to recognise and value aesthetic qualities.

The RE curriculum places a strong emphasis on exploring behaviour and distinguishing right from wrong and pupils become increasingly aware of how their behaviour affects others. Assemblies strengthen the 'family' life of the school, with opportunities for classes to sing, recite, make music or talk to each other about interesting aspects of their work or experience. Pupils' sense of self-worth is cultivated from the early years through teaching approaches which encourage pupils to ask questions, engage in dialogue, and express their views and ideas to advance their own learning and contribute to the learning of others. The overt code of behaviour which the school expects makes heavy demands of older pupils. They are thoughtful and reflective in their response.

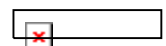
Pupils' social development is outstanding. Pupils are very well known to all staff and feel understood and valued as individuals. They come to school eager to learn and highly motivated, and become engrossed in their work. They are polite and well mannered while losing nothing of their innate spontaneity and liveliness. The close relationship between the school and pupils' families reinforces their sense of security and belonging to a known community. Parents and pupils who had discussions with inspectors were unanimous in paying tribute to this aspect of the school's ethos.

Narratives, legends, poetry and the celebration of festivals help to establish values such as truth, morality and consideration for others. Work in the upper school on comparative religions enables pupils to study other world faiths and understand something of the beliefs and values of cultures other than their own. Visits out of school and regular Summer Adventure camps and other residential trips are a significant feature of the curriculum and strengthen cultural and social development. Pupils learn to live co-operatively with one another and to share experiences in ways which build self-confidence, trust and responsibility. Visits such as the extended European Cultural Tour help to give pupils a first-hand experience of Europe's historical and artistic heritage. The range of this and other cultural and recreational experiences is wide, ensuring that pupils can access different areas of learning and find those which offer them challenge, satisfaction and comradeship.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

3. The welfare, health and safety of the pupils



The ethos of the school, its policies, the relationships between pupils and staff, and older and younger pupils, all strongly promote the welfare, health and safety of the pupils.

At break-times older pupils, following the adults' example, regularly play with younger pupils helping to ensure their safety, well-being and enjoyment. There are appropriate policies which ensure that

risk assessments are completed and that fire safety is considered carefully. Written policies to combat bullying and to promote good behaviour are implemented consistently and the pupils are suitably supervised at all times. The quality of the pupils' relationships with each other and their self-discipline are such that the policies are implemented fully and underpin the life and work of the school.

Behaviour is exemplary and as a consequence the school is a friendly, relaxed and orderly place to which the pupils want to come, to contribute and to learn. The school's ethos, the impressive relationships at all levels, and the exemplary behaviour of the pupils, mean that serious disciplinary offences occur extremely rarely. The school uses a variety of suitable approaches to deal with any such occurrences, including calling in parents for discussion. Pupils stated that there was no bullying in the school and the younger pupils remarked that 'no-one was ever horrid'.

Staff are deployed in a way that ensures that all pupils are properly supervised at all times. At break-times it is not unusual to see several staff in the playground talking or playing with pupils. The embedded sense of community, and the care both adults and pupils show for one another are strengths which promote the welfare, health and safety of the pupils.

The admission register satisfies all requirements but not all attendance registers are marked for the afternoon session.

There is a written policy for child protection and the headteacher provides training for staff on child protection matters. However, the nominated adult has not had appropriate training for this important role.

Health and safety matters are taken very seriously and there are written policies to ensure that due regard is paid to pupils' well-being. There are many outdoor pursuits, including water sports, a month on a European camping trip, and regular weekend activities. Appropriate risk assessments are completed for each of these.

The school fulfils its duties under the Disability Discrimination Act 2002.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

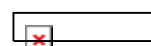
The school meets almost all the requirements.

What does the school need to do to comply with the regulations?

In order to comply with the Independent Schools Standards Regulations 2003 the school should:

- ensure that the nominated adult for child protection receives appropriate training every two years and that staff receive training every three years (paragraph 3(2)(b)); and
- ensure that all attendance registers are marked at the beginning of the afternoon session (paragraph 3(9)).

4. The suitability of the proprietor and staff

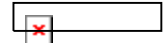


There is a clear set of procedures for recruiting staff and making appropriate checks, including through the Criminal Records Bureau, on their suitability and qualifications before their appointment is confirmed. These procedures are applied consistently.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

5. The suitability of the premises and accommodation



The former village school provides suitable accommodation, although with some limitations. The separate headmaster's house has been soundly remodelled to form the kindergarten classroom with a small but attractive adjacent garden. Accommodation in the main building is used well to provide good-sized classrooms and a hall which is used for PE, drama, choir and assemblies. The staff are resourceful in making the best possible use of available space. The small craft workshop successfully supports a wide range of work in resistant materials and adapts its outside space to become a forge or a boat-yard as current work demands.

The building is maintained in good order and classrooms provide effective learning environments. Washroom facilities are adequate for the girls but insufficient for the boys.

The outside play space is adequate but limited. The nearby recreation ground provides a good quality and extensive grassed area which the school uses regularly. The extra-curricular activities off-site ensure that pupils' opportunities are not curtailed by the limited space on the school site.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

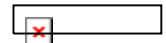
The school complies with all but one of the regulations.

What does the school need to do to comply with the regulations?

In order to comply with the Independent Schools Standards Regulations 2003 the school should:

- increase the number of washrooms for boys (paragraph 5(k)).

6. The quality of information for parents and other partners



The school's prospectus and the handbook Education at the Acorn School give carefully considered and comprehensive information on the school's curriculum and ethos. They contain all of the required information for parents. The Friday Flier newsheet ensures that parents are kept up to date about events and activities in the forthcoming week.

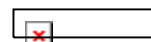
Pupils' written reports are highly informative about all aspects of their progress and achievement. Parents have regular opportunities for formal and informal meetings with teachers to discuss their children's progress. The school encourages parents to come into school or to contact teachers if they have concerns or anxieties. Parents can learn about the school's aims, curriculum content and organisation through the principal's termly evening lectures, Understanding Education at the Acorn School. The Parents' Charter is an unusual feature, and sets out clearly and unequivocally the school's expectations of parental support. This includes attendance at termly class meetings to discuss the curriculum, examine samples of pupils' work and share future plans for the class. It also includes reference to the use of television, videos, and computers as well as expectations of aspects of healthy living considered by the school as essential for pupils' well-being.

Families' Days and Festivals are regarded as opportunities for community gathering and enjoyment or a time for reflection, all of which help to develop and sustain the `family' of the school. The results of the parents' questionnaire completed prior to the inspection, indicate a very high degree of satisfaction with the school. Parents believe their children are well taught, well cared for and make very good progress. Parents who met with inspectors, and the pupils themselves, were similarly highly supportive of the school's work.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

7. The effectiveness of the school's procedures for handling complaints



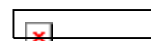
The school has a comprehensive written complaints policy which is set out clearly and contained in the Parents' Charter which every parent receives.

The school has had no complaints to date. Parents are expected to assume responsibilities in relation to their children and attend parents' evenings as a requirement. Consequently the relationship between the school and the parents is an open and informed one. This was evident from the responses to the parents' pre-inspection questionnaire, where the vast majority of the returns stated that the school's complaints procedure was understood.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

School details



Name of school:	The Acorn School
DfES ref number:	916/6068
Type of school:	Steiner
Status:	Independent
Age range of pupils:	3 - 19 years
Gender of pupils:	Mixed
Number on roll (full-time pupils):	Boys 61, Girls 61, Total 122
Annual fees (day pupils):	£2,505 - £5,160
Address of school:	Church Street Nailsworth Stroud, Gloucestershire GL6 0BP
E-mail address:	info@theacornschool.com
Telephone number:	01453 836508
Fax number:	01453759993
Headteacher:	Mr G Whiting
Proprietor:	Acorn School Ltd (G&S Whiting)
Lead Inspector:	Mrs Eileen McAndrew
Dates of inspection:	6 - 9 June 2005

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