

INSPECTION REPORT

ABBEY HILL SCHOOL

Bucknall

LEA area: Stoke-on-Trent

Unique reference number: 124500

Headteacher: Merrilyn Coutouvidis

Reporting inspector: Alastair Younger
23587

Dates of inspection: 25th – 27th February 2002

Inspection number: 195178

Short inspection carried out under section 10 of the School Inspections Act 1996

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INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL

Type of school:	Special
School category:	Community
Age range of pupils:	3-18
Gender of pupils:	Mixed
School address:	Greasley Road Bucknall Stoke-on-Trent
Postcode:	ST2 8LG
Telephone number:	01782 234727
Fax number:	01782 234729
Appropriate authority:	The Governing Body
Name of chair of governors:	Betsy Boon
Date of previous inspection:	June 1997

INFORMATION ABOUT THE INSPECTION TEAM

Team members		
23587	Alastair Younger	Registered inspector
9981	Saleem Hussain	Lay inspector
22391	Nick Smith	Team inspector
20745	David Williams	Team inspector

The inspection contractor was:

Penta International
Upperton House
The Avenue
Eastbourne
BN21 3YB

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Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London WC2B 6SE

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PART A: SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL

This is a large community school for pupils with a broad range of special educational needs. Pupils' ages currently range from 4 to 18. Originally for pupils with moderate learning difficulties, the school now includes a unit for children with autism and accepts pupils with a much wider range of difficulties in its assessment unit. There is also a significant number of pupils with behavioural and emotional difficulties and a small number of pupils with sensory impairment. There are currently 221 pupils on roll; boys outnumber girls by about 3:1, a ratio often found in schools such as this. Just under 10 per cent of pupils come from homes where English is not the main language spoken and this is representative of the local population. Attainment on entry is invariably low, often compounded by lack of language and socialisation skills and challenging behaviour. The school has Beacon status and forms a part of a Stoke Education Action Zone.

HOW GOOD THE SCHOOL IS

This is an excellent school. Exceptional leadership and very effective management have contributed to a high degree of strong teaching, leading to pupils achieving much better than would be expected given their difficulties. Nearly all pupils leave with passes in a good range of externally accredited examinations. The school is particularly good at identifying its own weaknesses and then systematically remedying them as quickly as possible. It is giving excellent value for money.

What the school does well

- Pupils achieve very well; they meet and often exceed their personal targets in numeracy and literacy and most leave school with impressive qualifications.
- Teachers make lessons interesting and tasks achievable; teachers and support assistants work well as a team.
- The headteacher and deputies ensure that high expectations of staff and pupils are fulfilled; there is extensive and rigorous monitoring of teaching, achievement and the curriculum; governors are very active in the management of the school.
- The curriculum is excellent.

What could be improved

- There is a shortage of space, the science room in particular is too small and there is a limited range of specialist rooms.

The areas for improvement will form the basis of the action plan prepared by the appropriate authority.

HOW THE SCHOOL HAS IMPROVED SINCE ITS LAST INSPECTION

There has been considerable improvement, from an already high standard, since the previous inspection in June 1997. Weaker areas, such as teaching and learning in information and communication technology, geography and physical education at secondary level have greatly improved. Lesson planning has greatly improved, leading to a more vigorous pace in lessons and greater challenge for higher attaining pupils. Transport arrangements have improved. Several problems with the accommodation remain.

STANDARDS

The table summarises inspectors' judgements about how well pupils achieve in relation to their individual targets by the time they leave the school.

Progress in:	by age 18	Key	
speaking and listening	A	very good	A
reading	A	good	B
writing	A	satisfactory	C
mathematics	A	unsatisfactory	D
personal, social and health education	A	poor	E
other personal targets set at annual reviews or in IEPs*	A		

In each of the past four years, an increasing number of pupils have gained passes in GCSE examinations. This year about a half of all pupils are expected to gain at least one pass. Many of those for whom GCSE is not an appropriate examination often gain good passes in Certificate of Achievement assessments and examinations. For the least able, very good achievement is evident in the monitoring of their progress though nationally recognised 'P' levels. High expectations are clearly evident in the individual targets pupils are set and high achievement is evident in pupils meeting these with a high degree of success. Extended holidays in term time, mainly by those for whom English is an additional language, reduce opportunities for these pupils to achieve as many of their targets as other pupils.

PUPILS' ATTITUDES AND VALUES

Aspect	Comment
Attitudes to the school	Excellent. Pupils arrive at school expecting to work hard. Most parents say their children look forward to coming to school. Pupils are clearly proud of the school, they treat property and resources with great respect and take delight in helping visitors.
Behaviour, in and out of classrooms	Very good. The pupils are a delight. They are invariably good humoured and very polite to one another, to staff and to visitors. This is an exceptional achievement given the very difficult behaviour exhibited by many pupils prior to their referral. Pupils experiencing problems in class usually seek help rather than misbehaving. Only a very small minority cause any problems in class.
Personal development and relationships	Excellent. Older pupils demonstrate a mature outlook on life. They take pride in their appearance and assume responsibilities that they execute conscientiously. Pupils of all ages show considerable interest in others, they are generous in their praise and often offer help to each other. Many older pupils take great pride in being able to find out information for themselves.
Attendance	The school does not meet the figure set for all schools but nearly all absence is accounted for. This is often for medical reasons but more problematically, is the result of parents taking their children out of school for extended holidays. Once pupils arrive at school, the very best use is made of time.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teaching of pupils:	aged up to 5	aged 5-11	aged 11-16	aged over 16
Lessons seen overall	Very good	Very good	Very good	Very good

Inspectors make judgements about teaching in the range: excellent; very good; good; satisfactory; unsatisfactory; poor; very poor. 'Satisfactory' means that the teaching is adequate and strengths outweigh weaknesses.

To achieve such a high degree of consistency across the school is an excellent achievement. Teachers are bringing the highest degree of professionalism to their jobs. They demonstrate an exceptional understanding of the special skills that are necessary to ensure that each pupil gains the maximum benefit from their teaching and makes the best possible progress. Particular strengths are the way they form such a strong partnership with nursery nurses to ensure that pupils in even the largest classes get very good quality individual support when they need it but are not over-helped when they are capable of working independently. Adding to the effectiveness of lessons is the fact that they are invariably enlivened through the planning of activities that stimulate the interest of pupils. They learn well because teachers take great care to ensure that pupils have remembered what they learned in previous lessons before they embark on the current one. Expectations are clearly explained and at the end of lessons teachers involve pupils particularly well in checking what they have learned. English, mathematics, science and personal, social and health education are particularly well taught. In many lessons, teachers manage to incorporate important aspects of numeracy and literacy as well as using computers frequently and ensuring that pupils' personal development is addressed in addition to academic learning.

OTHER ASPECTS OF THE SCHOOL

Aspect	Comment
The quality and range of the curriculum	Excellent. Great attention is paid to ensuring that pupils are taught all the subjects of the National Curriculum, personal, social and health education and religious education to a degree that reflects their importance. Individual needs and interests are carefully taken into account to ensure that all work is very carefully matched to pupils' ability. The post 16 curriculum prepares pupils well for leaving school.
Provision for pupils with English as an additional language	Excellent. A bilingual graduate is employed to help pupils and their parents. The support offered is extremely thorough and well organised.
Provision for pupils' personal, including spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	Excellent in every respect. Pupils are regularly given opportunities to explore their feelings and understand those of others. They are helped to understand why they should develop tolerance and the importance of honesty in forming trusting relationships. There is a tremendous sense of community in which equality is relentlessly promoted. The contribution of other cultures to our own is very well recognised and promoted.
How well the school cares for its pupils	Excellent. The monitoring and promotion of pupils' progress and personal development is amazingly good. Correct child protection procedures are rigorously followed and health and safety is given a very high priority. This is a safe and happy place, rightly trusted by parents in the care of their children.

HOW WELL THE SCHOOL IS LED AND MANAGED

Aspect	Comment
Leadership and management by the headteacher and other key staff	Excellent. An exceptionally dedicated headteacher is loyally, and very effectively, supported by senior staff in the pursuit of the highest possible standards for pupils and staff alike. Everyone is expected to work hard but also to enjoy and celebrate their successes. Deputies set other teachers an excellent example through their own practice in classrooms.
How well the appropriate authority fulfils its responsibilities	Very good. A very active governing body makes a strong contribution to the management of the school. Many members bring specific expertise from other walks of life, helping significantly, for example, with health and safety, finance and the law. There is a very strong, productive, relationship between the governing body and the headteacher.
The school's evaluation of its performance	Excellent. This is one of the main reasons why this is such a successful school. Virtually every aspect of performance is rigorously monitored and wherever an opportunity for improvement is spotted it is pursued with vigour. All teachers are set targets very closely linked to promoting higher achievement in pupils. There is frequent and thorough observation of all teachers by senior staff and the outcomes of this lead to carefully targeted advice, support and training
The strategic use of resources	Excellent. Without compromising standards, the school has accumulated a surplus in its budget, sufficient to fund carefully planned, new developments. Money has been well spent on good quality resources which are being used to very good effect by teachers. Grants are carefully used and accounted for. Additional funds attracted by the school's Beacon status and the Stoke Education Action Zone have been particularly well used.

The accommodation is a problem. The school has run out of space. Several classrooms, particularly the science laboratory and music room are much too small. There is enough land in the school grounds to build on, the plans have been drawn up and the money is there. What is needed is the nod to proceed that can only be given by the local authority.

PARENTS' AND CARERS' VIEWS OF THE SCHOOL

What pleases parents most	What parents would like to see improved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High quality teaching • Happy children • Their children becoming more mature and independent • The information they receive about the school and their children's progress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are no areas where a significant number of parents voice criticism

PART B: COMMENTARY

WHAT THE SCHOOL DOES WELL

Pupils achieve very well; they meet and often exceed their personal targets in numeracy and literacy and most leave school with impressive qualifications

1. The most impressive thing about pupils' achievement is its consistency across almost every subject and for pupils of all ages and abilities. There are many different groups of pupils, demonstrating varying degrees of special educational need, and nearly all are making much better than expected progress. This is happening because of the meticulous attention teachers pay to providing relevant work and the support pupils receive to tackle it. The result is clearly evident in the rapidly rising success rate in examinations such as General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) for higher attaining pupils and the regularity with which other pupils achieve individual targets that reflect the high expectations of the school. The only group of pupils who are not making the progress expected of them are those who have had extended visits to their parents' or grandparents' birthplaces, usually Pakistan. The school does everything it can to discourage these visits in term-time, but they do nevertheless contribute to the fact that achievement overall is graded not quite as good as teaching. The other main factor contributing to this discrepancy is the errant behaviour of a very small minority of pupils.

2. For the school year 2000-2001, the school set a target for 44 per cent of eligible pupils to achieve at least one GCSE pass within grades A to G. This target was greatly exceeded. Of twelve pupils who sat these examinations, two gained five passes, one achieved four and three achieved two. The remaining six achieved their target of one pass. These are exceptional results for a school where most pupils have moderate learning difficulties. Furthermore, most of the passes were in English (five passes), mathematics (eight passes) and science (six passes). The strength of art was reflected in five passes.

3. A total of 34 pupils also gained at least one pass in Certificate of Achievement (C of A) examinations in subjects including English, mathematics, science, information and communication technology and physical education. Eight pupils passed the ASDAN Transition Challenge by gaining credits for their ongoing work. Sixteen of the oldest pupils gained further ASDAN accreditation, building on their previous success in the Transition Challenge.

4. Improvements in pupils' achievement are clearly evident in the school's own monitoring. Detailed records for the past five years show a steady rise in the percentage of pupils achieving each successive National Curriculum level. For instance, in 1997, 14 per cent of pupils in years 1 and 2 achieved National Curriculum Level 1 in reading; in 2001 the equivalent figure was 42 per cent. In mathematics there has been a less dramatic improvement, but from a higher starting point. Precise targets are also set for all pupils, using QCA Small Steps assessment. A high percentage of these targets are met, demonstrating the relative success of virtually all pupils, irrespective of their special educational need.

5. Achievement in lessons during the inspection bore these results out. In virtually every instance, pupils were achieving well and meeting their individual targets. The success they have seen in previous pupils' examination results is reinforcing their desire to remember what they have learned in previous lessons and apply it to current ones, knowing that in this way they are building up a strong body of work and understanding to stand them in good stead when their turn comes.

Teachers make lessons interesting and tasks achievable; teachers and support assistants work well as a team.

6. There is an exceptional degree of very high quality teaching. During the inspection one lesson in four was taught to an excellent standard and three out of every four were very well taught. Unusually for a short inspection, nearly every teacher was observed. One of the most significant things to come out of this was the great strength in depth of the teaching team. For instance, of eighteen teachers seen, fifteen different ones shared the excellent and very good teaching. It should be very reassuring to parents knowing that, whichever class their child is in, he or she is almost certainly being particularly well taught and making the best possible progress. In addition to this, it also results in pupils behaving particularly well in nearly every lesson.

7. Teachers recognise pupils' limitations and are particularly adept at designing lessons that provide a high degree of challenge without ever discouraging them from learning. They can do this because they set out with a particularly clear sense of what they expect each pupil to learn by the end of the lesson and how they will achieve this end. In an excellent English lesson with the youngest pupils, the teacher shared individual targets with each pupil at the start of the lesson, ensuring that each fully understood the scale of their task, then moved quickly on, introducing fresh activities to maintain pupils' involvement whilst keeping a broad eye on the planned outcome. In this way, pupils achieved great success as they identified the sounds at the beginnings of words and used this knowledge to identify words in a simple dictionary. They wrote short sentences using capital letters and full stops, participated in simple role-play and, at the end of the lesson, discussed what they had learned and whether their targets needed changing for the next lesson.

8. A feature of most lessons is the quality of support given to teachers and pupils by nursery nurses. It is refreshing to see nursery nurses working with different groups of pupils within a lesson, rather than just lower attaining ones. It is also good to see them involved in supporting learning rather than behaviour. In a years 2 and 3 mathematics lesson, the contribution of different staff was described by an inspector as *effortless team work*, not a description of them making no effort but a glowing testament to the way they worked, in a class of 16 pupils, to ensure that each pupil got the attention he or she needed but no more. This had the effect of encouraging pupils to take more responsibility for their own learning and giving them the satisfaction that much of the work completed was their own.

9. Nearly every lesson begins with a review of previous lessons in that subject. Pupils know that this is going to happen and this reinforces their desire to concentrate hard in the hope that they will be able to answer questions at the start of subsequent lessons. It also creates the important link which emphasises to pupils that what they have previously learned is going to come in useful in future. Thus, at the start of a Year 10 science lesson, pupils talked knowledgeably about the five senses, the fact that sound could be measured in *Hertz* and that bats have to have good hearing because they hunt at night. This set the scene very well for developing the theme of hearing and the functioning of the human ear and contributed to the likelihood of pupils remembering what they learned by ensuring that plenty of links were formed with things they already knew.

The headteacher and deputies ensure that high expectations of staff and pupils are fulfilled; there is extensive and rigorous monitoring of teaching, achievement and the curriculum; governors are very active in the management of the school

10. The leadership and management of the school are of the highest quality. Taking a lead from the headteacher, who works tirelessly, precisely and with a crystal clear vision of

the strengths and weaknesses of the school, staff and governors execute their differing management responsibilities with the utmost professionalism.

11. The headteacher is exceptional. In a steady, systematic manner she brings about change which inevitably focuses very strongly on improving achievement. The school improvement plan is of epic proportions and immensely ambitious. Its strength however is in the fact that its targets are achievable and it has the backing of staff and governors. Monitoring is of a standard rarely seen, detailed in every respect and then, most importantly, thoroughly analysed. For instance, following scrutiny of the percentage of targets achieved by each class group over the past year the headteacher has gone on to suggest reasons for discrepancies, such as pupils' extended absence, change of teacher or introduction of a homework club. Teaching has also been carefully monitored. Interestingly, by the end of the second day of the inspection, when 20 lessons had been seen, the percentages of grades awarded by inspectors almost perfectly matched the grades adjudged by the headteacher over the past year. This was mutually reassuring. Added to this is the third opinion of an external assessor for teachers' threshold applications, who reported: *'It was a genuine pleasure to spend time at Abbey Hill. Reading the applications and the supporting evidence, studying the school's systems which support them and visiting the school was inspirational.'*

12. The deputies set the highest possible example to other teachers. Four out of the five lessons observed being taught by them were graded excellent and the fifth very good. Newer teachers know exactly where to look to observe best practice and to learn. English (including literacy), mathematics (including numeracy) and science are particularly well managed.

13. There is a very active governing body. It takes a particularly keen interest in standards being achieved and uses individual's own respective skills and experience to help promote the school and raise standards. Governors meet regularly and meetings are well attended and carefully minuted. In a simple, yet very necessary initiative, governors maintained a programme of monitoring of school transport, criticised by the previous inspection. This meant that staff could concentrate on pupils at the start of each day, rather than worry about transport, it provided evidence to bring about improvement and it meant that governors met pupils.

The curriculum is excellent

14. A huge amount of attention has been given to ensuring that pupils have access to a rich diet of learning experiences. All subjects of the National Curriculum are taught in a proportion that reflects their importance. This means that there is a particularly strong focus on English and mathematics. The basic skills of numeracy and literacy are, furthermore, particularly well promoted in other subjects. In addition to this, religious education has a high prominence throughout the school. The excellent curriculum makes a major contribution to the overall achievement of pupils because it is meticulously planned to ensure that whatever is being taught is well suited to pupils individual needs and has plenty of reinforcement opportunities but little repetition.

15. Pupils' personal development is very much at the forefront of curriculum planning. There is a very strong personal, social and health education programme and teachers are particularly adept at maintaining a careful balance between academic learning and personal development in every lesson. This is evident in the way pupils are encouraged to develop their awareness of others and think about the results of their actions. Pupils are regularly given opportunities to explain how they feel and to compare their own feelings with other people's. This is helping them to form constructive and productive relationships. This emphasis is particularly important in the autism curriculum, where there is a greater focus on behaviour and social and personal aspects than in the rest of the school. As the deputy in

charge of the unit commented, *'It is not just the information that has to be taught, but the skills to assimilate that information.'* The outcome of the strong provision for pupils' personal development is that by the time they leave, pupils are generally much more socially aware, thoughtful and conscientious than could otherwise be expected. Added to this, is the experience they have gained through opportunities to prepare them for possible employment, such as work experience and visits to college to sample different courses.

WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED

There is a shortage of space; the science room in particular is too small and there is a limited range of specialist rooms

16. The accommodation was criticised by the previous inspection and several of its shortcomings remain. The school was optimistic that new developments would have started before the current inspection but a last minute hitch, at local authority level, meant that these have once again been delayed. There is no doubt that these developments will eventually happen, and probably sooner than later. The necessary funding is in place and planning permission has been granted. What has delayed the final sanctioning of development is that further funding has become available to be spent on yet a further development and the authority did not want to proceed until it could all be done at once. This makes sound sense but in the meantime, the science room is so small that classes have to be divided to be taught the subject and the music room is so small that none but the smallest groups can be taught in it.

WHAT SHOULD THE SCHOOL DO TO IMPROVE FURTHER?

17. Although the current accommodation has weaknesses, these are not significantly impacting on standards, with science and music both being strong areas of the curriculum. The problem is one of organisation, with time having to be spent reorganising class groupings and moving equipment. Whilst not meriting a statutory key issue for improvement, the inspection team would like to convey a sense of urgency to the local education authority to ensure that building work starts as soon as possible.

PART C: SCHOOL DATA AND INDICATORS

Summary of the sources of evidence for the inspection

Number of lessons observed	28
Number of discussions with staff, governors, other adults and pupils	25

Summary of teaching observed during the inspection

Excellent	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Poor	Very Poor
25	61	7	7	0	0	0

The table gives the percentage of teaching observed in each of the seven categories used to make judgements about lessons.

Information about the school's pupils

Pupils on the school's roll	Nursery	YR – Y13
Number of pupils on the school's roll (FTE for part-time pupils)	5	216
Number of full-time pupils known to be eligible for free school meals		100

FTE means full-time equivalent.

Special educational needs	Nursery	YR – Y13
Number of pupils with statements of special educational needs	4	217
Number of pupils on the school's special educational needs register	5	216

English as an additional language	No of pupils
Number of pupils with English as an additional language	16

Pupil mobility in the last school year	No of pupils
Pupils who joined the school other than at the usual time of first admission	N/A
Pupils who left the school other than at the usual time of leaving	N/A

Attendance

Authorised absence

	%
School data	8.07
National comparative data	N/A

Unauthorised absence

	%
School data	0.65
National comparative data	N/A

Both tables give the percentage of half days (sessions) missed through absence for the latest complete reporting year.

Ethnic background of pupils

	No of pupils
Black – Caribbean heritage	1
Black – African heritage	0
Black – other	0
Indian	0
Pakistani	16
Bangladeshi	1
Chinese	0
White	203
Any other minority ethnic group	0

Exclusions in the last school year

	Fixed period	Permanent
Black – Caribbean heritage	0	0
Black – African heritage	0	0
Black – other	0	0
Indian	0	0
Pakistani	1	0
Bangladeshi	0	0
Chinese	0	0
White	10	0
Other minority ethnic groups	0	0

This table gives the number of exclusions, which may be different from the number of pupils excluded.

Teachers and classes

Qualified teachers and classes: Nursery – Y13

Total number of qualified teachers (FTE)	24
Number of pupils per qualified teacher	9
Average class size	14

Education support staff: Nursery – Y13

Total number of education support staff	30
Total aggregate hours worked per week	908

FTE means full-time equivalent.

Financial information

Financial year	2000/2001
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	£
Total income	1283230
Total expenditure	1367645
Expenditure per pupil	6216
Balance brought forward from previous year	100430
Balance carried forward to next year	183143*

*allocated for new building work

Results of the survey of parents and carers

Questionnaire return rate

Number of questionnaires sent out	221
Number of questionnaires returned	87

Percentage of responses in each category

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
My child likes school.	76	23	1	0	0
My child is making good progress in school.	73	25	1	1	0
Behaviour in the school is good.	68	31	0	0	1
My child gets the right amount of work to do at home.	52	31	8	2	7
The teaching is good.	86	10	1	1	2
I am kept well informed about how my child is getting on.	76	21	2	1	0
I would feel comfortable about approaching the school with questions or a problem.	83	13	1	1	2
The school expects my child to work hard and achieve his or her best.	77	22	1	0	0
The school works closely with parents.	79	16	3	1	1
The school is well led and managed.	78	19	1	0	2
The school is helping my child become mature and responsible.	72	25	2	0	1
The school provides an interesting range of activities outside lessons.	48	34	3	1	14