

INSPECTION REPORT

THE VALLEY SCHOOL

Stevenage

LEA area: Hertfordshire

Unique reference number: 117669

Headteacher: Mr R Stabler

Reporting inspector: Mr M G Whitehead
21061

Dates of inspection: 27th – 29th November 2000

Inspection number: 223696

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 for pupils with moderate learning difficulties

School category: Maintained

Age range of pupils: 11-19 years

Gender of pupils: Mixed

School address: Valley Way
Stevenage
Hertfordshire

Postcode: SG2 9AB

Telephone number: 01438 747274

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Appropriate authority: The governing body

Name of chair of governors: Mr P Hudson

Date of previous inspection: June 1996

INFORMATION ABOUT THE INSPECTION TEAM

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PART A: SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL

The Valley school is a day special school that caters for boys and girls who have moderate learning difficulties. The school has 175 pupils, whose ages range from 11 to 18 years, although the number of planned places is only 170. There are two pupils of black Caribbean heritage, one Indian and three of Pakistani heritage. The catchment area extends from Hatfield to the south and Royston to the north, and includes Hitchin, Letchworth, Stevenage and surrounding villages. The majority of pupils travel to and from school by taxi or coach, and there is an increasing number of older pupils who travel independently. The site also accommodates the County Youth and Community Service, the Stevenage Music Centre and the County Young Offenders Team. Pupils' attainment on entry is well below the national average. There are four pupils for whom English is an additional language, but there are none in the early stages of language acquisition.

HOW GOOD THE SCHOOL IS

The Valley School is a good school. The quality of teaching is consistently good, often very good, and occasionally excellent. The achievements of pupils in English and mathematics are good. The sound leadership of the headteacher and key staff, along with the sound government of the school, ensures that all pupils receive a good standard education. The school is revising its management structure in order to improve its effectiveness and increase its rate of development. When account is taken of the high quality of teaching, the secure leadership and management, the good progress that pupils make and the cost per pupil per year, the school provides good value for money.

WHAT THE SCHOOL DOES WELL

- The school engenders very good attitudes and behaviour amongst pupils and promotes high levels of attendance.
- The school offers very good provision for pupils' personal development. Pupils' spiritual, moral and social development is very good, and the majority of subjects make a strong contribution to this.
- The school cares very well for its pupils.
- Pupils make very good progress in listening, and in their accuracy in reading.

WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED

- Achieve higher standards in science and information and communication technology.
- Further improve the progress that all pupils make in speaking and writing, improve the progress of the lower attaining pupils in reading, and ensure that the National Literacy Strategy is firmly established within the school.
- Improve the standards of pupils' mental calculations in mathematics and ensure that the National Numeracy Strategy is firmly established within the school.

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

The school was last inspected in June 1996. The school has addressed most of the issues that were identified in the last inspection report. Good progress has been made in planning for individual pupils, and all pupils now have up-to-date annual reviews. Satisfactory progress has been made in developing and clarifying the aims of the transition course, and the school has ensured that funding for this course is based on realistic costing. Students who attend the transition course now have suitable accommodation in terms of health and safety. The school has introduced satisfactory procedures whereby governors can monitor and review provision more effectively. However, there still remains an imbalance in the amount of time allocated to different aspects of science.

STANDARDS

The table below 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 16	by age 18	Key
speaking and listening	B	C	<i>very good</i> A
reading	A	C	<i>good</i> B
writing	C	C	<i>satisfactory</i> C
mathematics	B	C	<i>unsatisfactory</i> D
personal, social and health education	A	A	<i>poor</i> E
other personal targets set at annual reviews or in IEPs*	B	B	

** IEPs are individual education plans for pupils with special educational needs.*

Only four pupils from the Valley School transferred to the transition course last year. The school achieved targets set in literacy and mathematics. The targets were agreed with the local education authority for the academic year 1999/2000.

The school recognises that not all the targets were sufficiently challenging and has set higher targets for the future. Pupils achieve well in humanities and religious education. They achieve very well in art, design and technology, physical education, musical performance, and personal, social and health education.

PUPILS' ATTITUDES AND VALUES

Aspect	Comment
Attitudes to the school	All pupils have very positive attitudes towards school.
Behaviour, in and out of classrooms	The overall behaviour of pupils is very good. Any rare incidents of unsatisfactory behaviour are managed with sensitivity by senior staff.
Personal development and relationships	There are very positive peer group relationships. Pupils are very supportive of each other and take responsibility for their own learning and behaviour extremely well.
Attendance	Good.

The school is a caring community whose standard of care is maintained by the vigilance of the staff. The opportunities for personal development and responsibility are enhanced by the high quality of space available to staff and pupils. Pupils enjoy coming to school, and work very hard in lessons. They are caring, honest, extremely polite and welcoming. The very positive relationships between all staff and pupils are a strength of the school.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teaching of pupils:	aged 11-16	aged over 16
Lessons seen overall	Good	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.

Teachers have good knowledge of the pupils. They plan their lessons with clear learning objectives that are made known to the pupils. Teachers manage the behaviour of pupils very well. Generally, teachers have good knowledge of the subjects they teach, and in the best lessons, they use a variety of approaches in order to maintain high levels of concentration. The pace of lessons is generally brisk, and support staff are used well to give help to pupils who need it. However, not all teachers apply proper strategies for the teaching of reading and mental calculations. There is not enough knowledge amongst staff about how to teach information and communication technology skills. The setting of homework is inconsistent.

During the inspection the quality of teaching in 96 per cent of the lessons observed was satisfactory or better, in 40 per cent the teaching it was very good or better, and in 4 per cent of the lessons it was less than satisfactory. There was no poor teaching. Pupils learn well during lessons and the quality of their learning is a clear reflection of the high standard of teaching.

OTHER ASPECTS OF THE SCHOOL

Aspect	Comment
The quality and range of the curriculum	The curriculum has good breadth and is very relevant in terms of preparing pupils for life after school. However, the amount of time allocated to teaching is less than that recommended in guidelines. There is little time set aside for the direct teaching of Information and communication technology skills, and an imbalance in the time spent on different programmes of study in science. Greater emphasis is required concerning the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies throughout the school. Provision for extra-curricular activities and careers education is very good, and the community makes a very positive contribution to pupils' learning.
Provision for pupils with English as an additional language	There are four pupils for whom English is an additional language, but none of these is at the stage of early language development and none requires additional provision.
Provision for pupils' personal, including spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	Very good overall. The school's provision for the moral, social and spiritual development of pupils is very good. Nearly all subjects play a very effective roll in the spiritual, moral, social and personal development of pupils. The facilities offered by the high quality accommodation have a very positive impact upon the personal development of the pupils. Cultural development is enhanced by the high quality of display, which is linked to other cultures and to the local environment. Displays also celebrate the work of famous artists.
How well the school cares for its pupils	The school cares very well for its pupils, provides them with good personal support and guidance, and monitors them effectively as they progress through the school.

The major strength of the curriculum is that it is very relevant to the pupils, their individual special needs, their age, and their future responsibilities. The curriculum meets statutory requirements as far as content, breadth and balance are concerned. However, the number of hours that are spent in lessons falls short of recommendations.

HOW WELL THE SCHOOL IS LED AND MANAGED

Aspect	Comment
Leadership and management by the headteacher and other key staff	The school functions well under the sound management of the headteacher and the key staff. Many staff are highly motivated and contribute willingly to school development. The leadership team is clearly committed to improvement.
How well the appropriate authority fulfils its responsibilities	The governing body is very supportive of the headteacher. Reorganisation of committees has taken place in a bid to create an effective management group, but these are not yet fully established.
The school's evaluation of its performance	The school monitors the quality of its planning well which has resulted in clear improvement. There is some inconsistency in the monitoring of teaching, and the school is at an early stage of performance management
The strategic use of resources	Resources are used well throughout the school.

There are some areas of management by the governing body that are not yet securely established, although the overall management of the school is sound. The school has satisfactory procedures for applying principles of best value when spending on goods and services.

PARENTS' AND CARERS' VIEWS OF THE SCHOOL

What pleases parents most	What parents would like to see improved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The good quality of the teaching. • Parents are comfortable about approaching the school with questions or problems. • Their children like school. • Behaviour is good. • The school is well managed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistency in the setting of homework.

The inspectors agree with the views of the parents concerning most of the positive statements, and that the setting of homework is inconsistent. The government of the school has recently been reorganised and is satisfactory. The new committees are not yet fully established.

PART B: COMMENTARY

WHAT THE SCHOOL DOES WELL

The school engenders very good attitudes and behaviour amongst pupils and promotes high levels of attendance

1. All teachers and support staff work extremely well together in helping pupils to develop very positive attitudes towards school. There are high levels of supervision at break times and at lunchtimes. The relationships between pupils and staff are very good, and all adults provide excellent role models for the pupils. The good behaviour of the pupils is a strong feature of the school and extends across the whole school day. There is no evidence of any incidents of bullying or racism within the school.
2. The behaviour of pupils at lunchtime is good and all pupils enjoy this very positive social event. During the morning break time pupils run the school tuck shop. Pupils who are waiting to buy from the tuck shop display exemplary behaviour as they queue sensibly, choose what they want and then pay. As a result of the very calm management of pupils by the staff, the pupils are confident in approaching adults and asking questions, as well as engaging in general discussion. At the end of break times and lunchtimes pupils return to their classes promptly, ready and willing to start work.
3. The good relationships between staff and pupils continue in lessons, and pupils are confident about asking teachers and teaching assistants for help and advice when they need it. Several pupils in the school have roles of responsibility. Some pupils are library assistants and take their work very seriously, others have specific responsibilities as register monitors, and all behave very responsibly. Pupils clear away materials and equipment when they are asked to do so. They are also very polite to visitors, and senior pupils have the opportunity to work at the front desk as receptionists. They take this work very seriously and present themselves as very professional young adults. The work they do in this area forms part of their careers education and work experience.
4. Throughout the school, in all lessons, teachers value the contributions of all pupils highly. Teachers and teaching assistants insist that pupils listen carefully when they are being spoken to and also when they are speaking to each other. This raises pupils' self-esteem and promotes very positive relationships among staff and pupils.
5. The school offers a wide variety of residential trips and day visits to different places of interest. These are highly subscribed and very popular amongst pupils. There have been visits to northern France, Wales and, nearer home, the Millennium Dome in Greenwich. Another group of pupils enjoyed a trip along the Grand Union Canal as part of their life and living course. In addition to these extra special visits, there is also the opportunity for pupils to join in the school choir or the keyboard club. These activities take place after school and are well attended. For the more sports-minded pupils there is the junior rounders club. All these residential and day visits play an extremely important part in the personal development of all pupils. The opportunities the pupils are given enable them to live and work together outside school, and they have a very positive impact on the pupils' social development.

Spiritual, moral and social development of the pupils

6. Music plays a very important part in the personal development of pupils. The school gives them the experience and enjoyment of music from different parts of the world. They also enjoy a wide variety of music from different cultures, for example, jazz, blues, traditional sea shanties, and classical overtures. There is also music from France, the American Wild West, and Africa.

7. Teaching assistants work very well to support pupils in their moral and social development, using non-confrontational methods. They pick out any incidents of inappropriate behaviour and work sensitively with the pupils to ensure that they are back to work as quickly as possible. When behaviour falls short of what is expected, staff talk gently but firmly with the pupils. Throughout the school all pupils have a very clear understanding of the difference between right and wrong. Pupils work extremely well and are very co-operative.

8. This is particularly true in design and technology, where they make a variety of biscuits and then proceed to market them. The marketing process involves co-operative working amongst the whole group, and pupils work together to produce posters to advertise the goods. They work hard to explain that they are being sold to raise money for the well-known 'Children in Need' appeal. Pupils learn to work well together, unselfishly and as a team, for the benefit of other people.

9. The work of the speech and language therapists plays a very important part in helping pupils' personal development. The improvement in the pupils' language ability helps them to enjoy a greater sense of self-worth. School assemblies also play a very important role in the spiritual, moral and the social development of the pupils. For example, a visiting woman police officer talked with pupils about keeping safe, being careful when crossing the road, being honest, and not talking to strangers. Teachers are very skilful in the way in which they talk with pupils without making them nervous or withdrawn. Teachers also ensure that pupils have time to sit and reflect upon issues or events that have happened in class, at break times, or at home. In assemblies, music is played to create an atmosphere of calm.

10. The assembly gave pupils the opportunity to think and to reflect upon the building of bridges between themselves and other people. The spiritual development of pupils is also addressed through the religious education programme they experience.

11. Social issues are addressed in many subjects and in particular through food technology. Pupils are allowed to choose fruits, spices and other ingredients that are appropriate to their own family customs and traditions. In this way all pupils learn a little of the variety of different cultures that are to be found in the school. Many lessons give pupils opportunities to work in pairs or small groups. This helps them to develop good social skills and take responsibility for helping other people.

12. All teachers expect high standards of behaviour from the pupils, and they also expect pupils to display high standards of honesty, courtesy and consideration. As a result of these high expectations pupils rise to the challenge and do not disappoint the staff.

The school cares very well for its pupils

13. The school's procedures for assessing and recording the work of pupils are very good. For example, in mathematics each pupil has a five-year plan which includes individual targets. As the pupils reach these targets their achievements are carefully recorded.

14. This results in a very clear picture of each individual pupil's achievement and levels of attainment. The same is true of some other subjects, including design and technology, where there is not only a clear record of skills, knowledge and understanding, but also a comprehensive photographic record of the items that pupils have made over the years.

15. The way in which the school monitors pupils' personal development is also very good. Their personal development is guided and monitored through their individual education plans. These plans include individual behaviour targets, which are also displayed on the classroom walls. Each lesson concludes with a recount of the events and a discussion about each pupil's behaviour. In this way, pupils are encouraged to take a greater responsibility for their own actions and also to discuss honestly their own performance against the targets they have been set. As a direct result of this good practice, all pupils make good progress, improve their behaviour, and develop very positive attitudes towards school and one another.

Pupils make very good progress in listening and in their accuracy in reading

16. Teachers have had training in how to teach reading, and they also get support from the speech and language therapists. The information they receive is used very effectively to help to group the pupils. Material appropriate to the age of the pupils is carefully selected and assorted to form a structured reading scheme. Very good use is also made of a commercially produced reading scheme. Pupils have much greater confidence in reading that they do in writing.

17. Pupils are tested regularly, and the work that each one is given is carefully matched to his or her attainment levels. This is very effective in helping pupils to increase their vocabulary and gain in accuracy as they develop their reading skills. Some pupils are supportive and help each other with their reading. Most pupils are very positive about their reading and want to improve.

18. For the pupils who have most difficulty, special groups are formed. Pupils in these groups receive intensive work which helps to improve their comprehension skills.

19. The records kept by staff enable the progress of each pupil to be tracked clearly, from the time that he or she enters the school up to the present day. Records show that pupils are clearly making very good progress in reading and in listening. The high profile that reading enjoys in the school has a very positive impact upon pupils' progress.

WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED

Achievements in science and information and communication technology

20. The school has exceptionally good facilities for the teaching of science. The laboratories are spacious and well equipped, and are enjoyed and appreciated by staff and pupils alike. Pupils work hard during lessons and make good progress. However, the amount of time available for the teaching of science during the week is insufficient to allow all the national curriculum programmes of study to be taught.

21. The school has an excellent information and communication technology suite which has been refurbished very recently and is equipped with machines of very high quality. However, at the time of the inspection there were very little direct teaching of information technology. The subject appears on the timetable only once, and for only one class. Throughout the school, not enough use is being made of information technology to support and extend the work in many subjects. The school acknowledges these short comings, and has plans to address them.

Further improve the progress that all pupils make in speaking and writing

22. The national literacy strategy is not embedded within the school, and consequently there is not enough emphasis on developing the writing skills of pupils. There is no clearly defined policy or scheme of work concerning handwriting.

23. Opportunities for pupils to take part in play reading or dramatic work are insufficient. There is not enough rigorous assessment of pupils' written work, and consequently there is very little evaluation and very little comparative data available from within the school.

Increase the standards of pupils' mental calculations in mathematics

24. The school has not truly adopted the national numeracy strategy and not enough time is spent in developing pupils' mental mathematical ability. Mathematics does not enjoyed a sufficiently high profile within the school and there is need for more rigorous structuring of some lessons.

WHAT SHOULD THE SCHOOL DO TO IMPROVE FURTHER?

25. To improve the quality of education provided and to raise the levels of attainment of pupils, the headteacher, governors and staff should:

- Ensure that there is sufficient time for the teaching of science and information and communication technology to enable pupils to make better progress, by:
 - * reallocating time to science to enable all programmes of study to be completed;
 - * making good use of the excellent resources that are available for the teaching of information and communication technology, and promoting the use of ICT across the curriculum.

- Further improve the progress that pupils make in speaking and writing, and that of the lower attaining pupils in reading, by:
 - * providing more opportunities for drama work;
 - * implementing the national literacy strategy;
 - * providing more time for pupils to focus on achieving targets in writing;
 - * ensuring that all teachers and teaching assistants use suitable strategies when teaching pupils to read;
 - * providing a clear policy and scheme of work for handwriting.

- Increase the standards of pupils' mental calculations in mathematics by:
 - * structuring lessons according to the National Numeracy Strategy;
 - * grasping every opportunity in the school to raise the profile of mathematics;
 - * taking time to practice mental mathematical calculations each day in order to raise skills but also confidence.

PART C: SCHOOL DATA AND INDICATORS

Summary of the sources of evidence for the inspection

Number of lessons observed	52
Number of discussions with staff, governors, other adults and pupils	27

Summary of teaching observed during the inspection

Excellent	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory	Poor	Very Poor
6	30	44	16	4	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	No of pupils
Number of pupils on the school's roll	162
Number of full-time pupils eligible for free school meals	30

English as an additional language	No of pupils
Number of pupils with English as an additional language	4

Pupil mobility in the last school year	No of pupils
Pupils who joined the school other than at the usual time of first admission	3
Pupils who left the school other than at the usual time of leaving	0

Attendance

Authorised absence		Unauthorised absence	
	%		%
School data	5.8	School data	2.6

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

Attainment at the end of Key Stage 3

Number of registered pupils in final year of Key Stage 3 for the latest reporting year:	Year	Boys	Girls	Total
		1999/2000	20	15

<i>National Curriculum Test/Task Results</i>	
English	
23 pupils	- below the level of the test
12 pupils	- took paper 1 only
Mathematics	
1 pupil	- absent
7 pupils	- no level awarded
8 pupils	- working towards Level 1
1 pupil	- achieved Level 2
15 pupils	- achieved Level 3
3 pupils	- achieved Level 4
Science	
2 pupils	- absent
4 pupils	- no level awarded
14 pupils	- working towards Level 1
4 pupils	- achieved Level 2
9 pupils	- achieved Level 3
2 pupils	- achieved Level 4

GCSE Certificates awarded at the end of Key Stage 4

Year 2000

Mathematics	
1 pupil awarded grade D	
4 pupils awarded grade F	
7 pupils awarded grade G	
8 pupils awarded grade U	
Art	
2 pupils awarded grade C	
2 pupils awarded grade D	
1 pupil awarded grade E	
2 pupils awarded grade F	
1 pupil absent	

Ethnic background of pupils

	No of pupils
Black – Caribbean heritage	2
Black – African heritage	0
Black – other	0
Indian	1
Pakistani	3
Bangladeshi	0
Chinese	0
White	156
Any other minority ethnic group	0

Exclusions in the last school year

	Fixed period	Permanent
Black – Caribbean heritage	3	0
Black – African heritage	0	0
Black – other	0	0
Indian	0	0
Pakistani	0	0
Bangladeshi	0	0
Chinese	0	0
White	4	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 Y6 – Y13

Total number of qualified teachers (FTE)	24.6
Number of pupils per qualified teacher	6.6
Average class size	10

FTE means full-time equivalent.

Education support staff: Y6 – Y13

Total number of education support staff	16
Total aggregate hours worked per week	373

Financial information

Financial year	1999/2000
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	£
Total income	1298617.00
Total expenditure	1255890.00
Expenditure per pupil	6752.00
Balance brought forward from previous year	-37819.00
Balance carried forward to next year	4907.00

Results of the survey of parents and carers

Questionnaire return rate

Number of questionnaires sent out	175
Number of questionnaires returned	44

Percentage of responses in each category

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
My child likes school.	51	41	8	0	0
My child is making good progress in school.	40	51	5	2	2
Behaviour in the school is good.	29	57	5	0	10
My child gets the right amount of work to do at home.	10	36	33	21	0
The teaching is good.	51	47	0	0	2
I am kept well informed about how my child is getting on.	37	40	19	5	0
I would feel comfortable about approaching the school with questions or a problem.	65	33	2	0	0
The school expects my child to work hard and achieve his or her best.	56	35	9	0	0
The school works closely with parents.	43	40	17	0	0
The school is well led and managed.	53	42	2	0	2
The school is helping my child become mature and responsible.	47	44	9	0	0
The school provides an interesting range of activities outside lessons.	38	45	7	2	7