



The Links Education Support Centre

Inspection Report

Better
education
and care

Unique Reference Number 130356
LEA HERTFORDSHIRE LEA
Inspection number 282138
Inspection dates 25 January 2006 to 25 January 2006
Reporting inspector Ms. Sue Aldridge LI

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

Type of school	Special	School address	Batchwood Site
School category	Pupil referral unit		AL3 5RP
Age range of pupils	11 to 16		
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	01727836102
Number on roll	13	Fax number	01727855002
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair of governors	Mr.Nick Daymond
Date of previous inspection	8 November 1999	Headteacher	Mrs. L Dunn

Age group	Inspection dates	Inspection number
11 to 16	25 January 2006 - 25 January 2006	282138

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one Additional Inspector.

Description of the school

The Links is a Pupil Referral Unit that caters for pupils from 11-16 who have been excluded from schools or are at risk of exclusion. There are 13 pupils currently on the roll and boys outnumber girls by three to one. The Education Support Centre (ESC) aims to return excluded pupils to mainstream within eight weeks. Most of the pupils are White British and a very small number are of Afro Caribbean or Asian origin. The centre also provides an outreach service to primary and secondary schools. This includes support for pupils re-integrating into mainstream, education for those at risk of exclusion, and support and training for mainstream staff. The ESC shares a site with a special school and has links with this school in order to provide vocational courses for older pupils at the centre. It also has links with a number of mainstream schools as part of their bids for specialist status. Although the ESC is not subject to re-organisation, the local education authority's (LEA) plans to create Key Stage 4 learning centres is intended to increase its capacity to provide intervention in schools. The ESC has experienced a period of turbulence since the last inspection. Following a review by the LEA in April 2004, the centre was designated as causing concern because the management committee was not holding the centre to account, staff were not managing behaviour effectively and self-evaluation was weak. The resulting action plan was implemented. A review in July 2005, by an independent consultant, judged leadership and management to be good. However, in November 2005, following complaints from staff, the LEA initiated an investigation. A report on the outcomes of the LEA investigation is expected shortly. The headteacher has been on sick leave since November 2005. The centre is being led by two acting headteachers.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

The Links sees its effectiveness as good. In fact, the outreach service is of good quality, and the provision at the centre is satisfactory. The difficulties experienced at the centre have not had an impact on the outreach service, which has continued to flourish. Schools, parents and pupils value the service it provides. The service is described by schools as 'of the highest quality', 'well organised and accessible' and 'helpful in preventing exclusions'. In general, the centre is effective in improving pupils' attendance and behaviour, returning excluded pupils to mainstream and intervening to ensure that pupils at risk of exclusion can continue in mainstream following a period at the centre. There has been satisfactory improvement since the last inspection. However, the accommodation has not improved enough and it remains a barrier to further improvement, particularly affecting the curriculum. Nonetheless, staff are creative in finding solutions so that pupils are not disadvantaged. Much has improved since the LEA intervened in April 2004, although teachers are still not all as skilled as they need to be in managing pupils' difficult behaviour. Teaching and learning are satisfactory, although planning and assessment are good. Overall, leadership and management are satisfactory. The two acting headteachers provide good leadership, which they demonstrated clearly in their roles as assistant headteachers. Local authority funding is supporting their appointments, but this is not sustainable in the long term. The Links has the capacity to be good, although factors outside the centre's control make its operation as a 'revolving door' difficult. Last year, 26 pupils were admitted and 23 moved on. The lack of suitable places in special schools for pupils who receive a statement whilst they are at the centre, and the shortage of vocational placements in the area both result in pupils spending long periods at the centre. Overall, the centre provides satisfactory value for money.

What the school should do to improve further

- ensure that the centre's leadership structure is affordable - strengthen the behaviour management skills of staff and ensure that pupils are managed consistently - improve the accommodation to address the weaknesses identified in this report.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

At entry, attainment in the core subjects ranges from Level 1 to Level 6, but most are below the levels expected for pupils of their age, particularly in Year 10. In the short time that they are at the centre, several make measurable gains in the levels they reach. There are examples of pupils making more than one level of improvement in less than a year. Pupils in Year 10 are entered for GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) examinations at the end of that year, and most pass at least one examination in English or mathematics. They also follow Entry level courses in English and mathematics. For all other subjects, pupils are awarded AQA (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance) Certificates of Achievement. In Year 10, pupils' examination

grades are occasionally affected by the quality of their coursework, and the centre has identified this as an area for development. Occasionally, pupils in Year 11 are admitted to the centre for short periods, followed by a period of support in mainstream as examinations approach. The support they receive enables them to obtain several GCSE passes. Each pupil has an individual education plan, amended weekly, which identifies academic targets. Most of these are achieved in the timescale set. The centre does not analyse its assessment information by gender and race, but there is no evidence to suggest that there are differences in pupils' progress. The key factor influencing pupils' progress is their attendance at the centre.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 3

In 2003-2004 attendance was as low as 58%, but it rose in the last academic year to 70%. Last term it was up to 81%. Almost all pupils improve their attendance significantly whilst at the centre, and several achieve 100% attendance. A small number of pupils with a history of poor attendance adversely affect the centre's statistics. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is satisfactory. Those who are on the centre's roll and pupils supported by the outreach team all improve their behaviour so that it is more socially acceptable and better supports learning. Behaviour in lessons is satisfactory. Pupils understand the centre rules, and the system of rewards and sanctions. However, they do not always choose to respect the rules. During individual tutorials, pupils reflect on their behaviour and identify suitable targets to help them achieve their goals. They generally achieve these targets, although it often takes more than a week. Progress charts show that pupils improve their independent learning skills. Self-control also improves. For example, a mainstream pupil found that outreach support 'helped me not to be so aggressive'. Pupils enjoy the range of visits and physical activities provided. Visits to museums, art galleries, places of worship and the theatre develop pupils' cultural awareness. The personal, social and health education programme gives pupils a thorough understanding of moral and social issues, as well as healthy lifestyles. Several pupils make a healthy start to the day at the breakfast club. By preparing simple meals on a limited budget, pupils develop important coping skills. Citizenship gives pupils an understanding of how society works, and through careers education and work experience, pupils develop self-awareness and career preferences. Pupils are enthusiastic fund raisers and they plan and prepare events to raise money for charities of their choice.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

There are several good features of teaching. Planning is particularly good. Teachers take individual needs into account well when they plan their lessons, and provide different activities for pupils in different year groups and those with particular needs. As a result, activities are challenging and help pupils to deepen their knowledge and

understanding. Teachers plan a variety of activities, which maintains pupils' interest. They are limited in the extent to which they can provide practical activities by the accommodation, though they make effective use of information and communication technology (ICT) which motivates pupils well. Effective use is made of the information provided by pupils' original schools, and the centre carries out an initial assessment when pupils enter. Information is used well to construct an individual plan for each pupil. Targets are set with pupils, so that they take responsibility for their learning and behaviour. Clear lesson objectives are set at the start of each lesson and reviewed at the end, so that pupils can see whether they have been successful or not. Teachers' records show clearly what the next steps should be for each pupil. Much has been done in the last eighteen months to improve staff skills in behaviour management, and pupils behave well in most lessons. However, a few staff are not yet fully confident and this results in some inconsistent management of pupils. During the inspection, this resulted in the disruption of a lesson. Plans to remove a pupil from the class were not implemented, and swearing, which is against the centre's rules, went unchecked.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

Since her arrival at the centre as an assistant headteacher, one of the acting headteachers has worked with staff to develop plans that teachers can draw upon when planning their lessons. This is good practice as it helps pupils to keep up with what they would be learning in their own schools, and supports their re-integration. The centre provides a broad and balanced curriculum that reflects the National Curriculum. The accommodation limits what the centre can provide. There are no specialist rooms, and this restricts what can safely be done in science. There is no suitable area where pupils can use resistant materials in design and technology, although a food technology area is used effectively. Outdoor facilities are not suitable for physical education. Staff work hard to overcome these limitations by looking elsewhere. For instance, pupils go off the site for physical activities. Breadth has been added by forging links with staff in mainstream schools. An art specialist has recently taught in the centre, and science resources have been borrowed from a mainstream school. Extended work experience placements are used to give pupils experience of chosen occupations, such as carpet fitting, and Year 10 pupils are about to start a taster course in construction. The extension of work related learning is a priority in the school's development plan. The centre's curriculum is well enriched with a range of visits and visitors, and staff are creative in planning appealing one-off events. For instance, a recent one-day project involved pupils in evaluating ready cooked meals and home-cooked ones. Their conclusion was that home cooking is much better!

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 3

There are suitable arrangements for keeping pupils safe. All staff have an annual update in child protection and the co-ordinator is well trained. A designated member of staff takes responsibility for pupils in public care. Risks are carefully assessed, and

supervision of pupils is good. Staff go the extra mile to assure the well-being of pupils. For instance, there are no facilities for preparing a mid-day meal for pupils, but staff ensure that healthy snacks are available. Pupils entitled to free school meals can go to a neighbouring school for these, but they rarely choose to do so. There is a simple system of rewards and sanctions, which is well understood by the pupils, and generally consistently applied. Although pupils are involved in setting and reviewing their behaviour targets, targets are not always achievable in a week. There are no behaviour management plans for individual pupils to guide staff in handling difficult behaviour, and this contributes to inconsistency. A few pupils undergo an assessment for a statement of special educational needs whilst at the centre. However, if a resulting statement specifies provision in a school for pupils with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties, they are often unable to move on from the centre because of a shortage of places. This often results in pupils becoming disaffected. The outreach service provides good support to pupils in mainstream who are at risk of exclusion. There is good involvement of parents, including a home-school book through which they communicate with staff. Schools value the support they receive, and so do parents and pupils. There is such a demand for the materials developed by the service to support transition from Year 6 to Year 7 that these have been published.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

The two acting headteachers provide good leadership. In their roles as assistant headteachers they have demonstrated their ability to lead staff and secure improvements. Since they took on the roles of acting headteachers they have raised staff morale, improved links with external agencies, revised the school improvement plan, and strengthened school self-evaluation. There is a clear, shared understanding of what needs to be done to improve provision and staff performance management objectives are linked well to the improvement plan. Staff are hard working and committed to the pupils. They work well as a team and are mutually supportive. Recently, staff have taken on subject responsibilities, and they have approached this with enthusiasm. However, this is at an early stage of development and the centre does not yet have enough data on pupils' achievements for subject leaders to evaluate these in all areas. The management committee has now developed a more strategic role. The chair has recently been closely involved in staff restructuring and the committee is now holding the school to account by asking probing questions. The LEA continues to provide support whilst the investigation proceeds. Financial management is sound. Developments are costed and the budget is monitored. The report of a full audit undertaken as part of the investigation was not available for the inspection. The outreach service is well led and managed. Staff form a well trained team with expertise across the age-range. Stakeholders are involved well in evaluating its effectiveness, and good account is taken of any areas for possible improvement.

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Inspection judgements

<i>Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate</i>	School Overall	16-19
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Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	3	NA
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	3	NA
The quality and standards in foundation stage	NA	NA
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3	NA
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	Yes	NA
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	NA

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	3	NA
The standards ¹ reached by learners	4	NA
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	3	NA
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	3	NA

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	3	NA
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	3	NA
The behaviour of learners	3	NA
The attendance of learners	3	NA
How well learners enjoy their education	3	NA
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	3	NA
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	3	NA
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	3	NA
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3	NA

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	3	NA
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	3	NA
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	3	NA

¹ Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	3	NA
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3	NA
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets, through quality assurance and self-review	3	NA
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	3	NA
How effectively and efficiently resources are deployed to achieve value for money	3	NA
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	3	NA
The adequacy and suitability of staff to ensure that learners are protected	Yes	NA

The extent to which schools enable learners to be healthy	
Learners are encouraged and enabled to eat and drink healthily	Yes
Learners are encouraged and enabled to take regular exercise	Yes
Learners are discouraged from smoking and substance abuse	Yes
Learners are educated about sexual health	Yes
The extent to which providers ensure that learners stay safe	
Procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements	Yes
Risk assessment procedures and related staff training are in place	Yes
Action is taken to reduce anti-social behaviour, such as bullying and racism	Yes
Learners are taught about key risks and how to deal with them	Yes
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution	
Learners are helped to develop stable, positive relationships	Yes
Learners, individually and collectively, participate in making decisions that affect them	Yes
Learners are encouraged to initiate, participate in and manage activities in school and the wider community	Yes
The extent to which schools enable learners to achieve economic well-being	
There is provision to promote learners' basic skills	Yes
Learners have opportunities to develop enterprise skills and work in teams	Yes
Careers education and guidance is provided to all learners in key stage 3 and 4 and the sixth form	Yes
Education for all learners aged 14–19 provides an understanding of employment and the economy	Yes

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

I visited The Links Centre to find out how well you are all getting on and to see whether there are things that could be done better. I enjoyed my day and thank those of you who talked to me about your work. This is what I found. The main things that are done well are: - the teachers who go out to primary and secondary schools are doing a good job helping pupils to improve their behaviour. Their work is appreciated by the schools, parents, and the pupils themselves - teachers in the centre plan their lessons really well so that you can all make progress - teachers are good at involving you in setting targets for the week and in lessons, and their marking helps you to improve your work - the two acting headteachers are doing a good job. The things that need to be improved are: - teachers need to be able to teach their lessons without pupils disrupting them - you can help by adhering to the centre's rules - the centre does not have the required facilities for pupils of your age, so the building needs to be improved. I hope that you will do all you can to improve the centre for yourselves and others.