



Heathermount

Inspection Report

Unique Reference Number 133743
LEA Windsor and Maidenhead LEA
Inspection number 282361
Inspection dates 15 June 2006 to 15 June 2006
Reporting inspector Margaret Goodchild AI

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

Type of school	Special	School address	The Learning Centre
School category	Non-maintained		Devenish Road
Age range of pupils	5 to 19		Ascot SL5 9PG
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	01344 875101
Number on roll	46	Fax number	01344 875102
Appropriate authority	The governing body	Chair of governors	Ms Sue Akester
Date of previous inspection	Not applicable	Headteacher	Ms Stephanie Lord

Age group	Inspection dates	Inspection number
5 to 19	15 June 2006 - 15 June 2006	282361

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by an Additional Inspector.

Description of the school

This is a specialised school for pupils with autistic spectrum disorders. It provides day and extended day care for pupils who have a history of failure in mainstream education, a small number of whom are weekly boarders. Pupils are almost exclusively of White British heritage and come from socially mixed backgrounds. Attainment on entry is variable but below average overall. The school was purchased in 2002 by The Disabilities Trust (a registered charity), having been run previously by the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham as its out-of-county provision for pupils with autism.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 3

Inspection findings support the senior leaders' own judgement that this is a satisfactory school. It provides satisfactory value for money.

Pupils receive good quality care and make good progress in their personal development. The school is exceptionally effective in the way it helps pupils to cope with the difficulties associated with their autism and to develop effective communication skills. Information, support and training provided to parents are also of very high quality.

The school provides extensive training for new staff, has strongly established systems for promoting effective classroom organisation and provides a wealth of specially developed materials to support teachers in working with pupils with autism. The quality of teaching is therefore satisfactory although a number of relatively inexperienced staff have recently been appointed, including some who are not yet qualified teachers. There are important weaknesses, however, in the way a number of staff use the school's good course and project plans to plan lessons. As a result, pupils' overall achievement is just satisfactory.

Since the last inspection, several highly experienced teachers have left for promotion elsewhere and the school has had difficulty in recruiting or retaining suitably qualified replacements. The budgeting arrangements made by The Disabilities Trust do not take into account the need to attract high quality teachers, and the governance role of The Trust is not yet as well developed as it should be. Leadership and management are satisfactory. The school is led by a highly experienced, long-serving principal but her role and that of a newly appointed head of centre are not clear, and a recently formed senior leadership team is at an early stage in working as an effective force for change within the school despite a strong commitment to meeting pupils' needs. The school responded satisfactorily to issues raised by the last inspection and it is satisfactorily placed to develop further.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 3

The school did not express a specific view about the quality of what it provides for students at post-16. Inspection findings show that the provision is satisfactory overall. A strongly vocational curriculum gives students considerable insight into the world of work and their achievement is satisfactory in response to satisfactory teaching. Students are well cared for and make good progress in their personal development.

Effectiveness and efficiency of boarding provision

Grade: 2

The boarding provision is of good quality and is managed effectively. Pupils are well cared for and enjoy good relationships with the staff. Weekly boarders, together with those day pupils who join them after school, have opportunities to take part in a reasonable range of evening activities. The school meets most of the National Minimum

Standards that relate to residential provision and is responding appropriately to the findings of its latest report by the Commission for Social and Care Inspections:

<http://www.csci.org.uk/registerservicesdirectory/RSSearchDetail.asp?ID=0000041351andType=>

What the school should do to improve further

- Clearly define the responsibilities of the principal and head of centre, and develop further the skills of the senior leadership team in evaluating the school's effectiveness and bringing about improvement.
- Raise pupils' achievement by improving the quality of teaching and ensuring that lessons meet the needs of individual pupils.
- Develop the governance role of The Disability Trust and improve systems for recruiting and retaining high quality teachers.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 3

Pupils' academic achievement is satisfactory although standards are below average as a result of their learning difficulties. Pupils make exceptionally good progress in developing communication skills, coping strategies to function in social situations and in interacting with others in a learning or work environment. They make satisfactory progress in gaining literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) skills. In their NVQ courses, older pupils gain a range of practical skills that could easily be transferred to employment or further training. With staff support, pupils run the school's conference centre and maintain the extensive grounds. In some lessons, however, pupils are not challenged as much as they should be and learning does not build effectively on their existing skills. Pupils make good progress towards the personal targets in their individual education plans and satisfactory progress towards their academic targets. Through collaboration with the neighbouring secondary school, there are instances of a small minority of pupils completing GCSE courses and, in one case, reaching a high level of success at advanced level in preparation for university entrance.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Pupils make good progress in their personal development and well-being, including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. They gain a range of valuable skills to manage their autism, make sense of their experiences, interact with others and organise their thinking well. Pupils are happy, confident and have good attitudes to school. The attendance rate is high, especially given that many pupils, before joining Heathermount, had been out of school for a significant period of time and had become disaffected. Pupils generally co-operate well with the staff and behave well. They take pride in their work, especially when they are engaged in tasks that are of personal interest.

Pupils make good progress in their awareness of healthy living. They enjoy the nourishing food the school provides and older pupils regularly cook nutritious meals. All pupils take part daily in physical activities and find out about how their body works, including how physical changes – such as those brought about by breathing calmly and moving in particular ways – can reduce the symptoms of their autism. By undertaking regular work experience around the school, they make an outstanding contribution to the school community and develop a range of skills and personal qualities that should stand them in good stead in the future.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 3

Teaching is satisfactory. A number of newly appointed staff are relatively inexperienced in working with pupils with autistic spectrum disorders and some are not yet qualified teachers. All the staff benefit a great deal from the very well established systems, the readily available learning materials and from working closely with therapists and clinical psychologists. Some teachers share with pupils what they expect them to learn and review how well they have achieved at the end of the lesson. However, there are some important weaknesses in lesson planning, including in the way course plans and whole-school project plans are used. This reflects many teachers' inexperience in matching the school's own curriculum to the National Curriculum and to pupils' individual learning needs. As a result, learning opportunities are limited in some lessons and opportunities are missed to build on what pupils already know.

The school collects comprehensive assessment information on pupils' academic achievement and on the impact their autism is having on the way they function. Pupils' individual needs and learning styles are carefully diagnosed when they join the school, and appropriate targets are set for personal development and for learning in English, mathematics and science.

The school keeps parents very well informed about how well their children are doing and provides them with outstanding opportunities to take part in training to increase their understanding of their children's autism.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 3

The school provides a satisfactory range of learning experiences, with good opportunities for pupils to develop personal and social skills. It has achieved Artsmark and is working towards Sportsmark and Healthy Schools status.

The curriculum focuses on promoting well-being and world knowledge, together with work-related activities, and a satisfactory range of opportunities to go on educational visits and take part in activities beyond the school community. Pupils aged 14 to 19 follow a curriculum based on NVQ modules and attend the local college one day a week. The vocational emphasis provides a satisfactory structure for the acquisition of

practical skills in the context of 'real world learning' and prepares pupils thoroughly for future work or training. The school is, rightly, in the process of introducing ASDAN accreditation in Years 10 and 11 to provide additional opportunities for pupils to gain qualifications. Finding external work experience placements and establishing links with local business and community services are also appropriate development priorities. The topic approach, whereby the whole school focuses on a given theme each term and interprets it in different ways for different age groups, includes activities that promote learning in the basic skills of literacy, numeracy and ICT as well as meeting the guidelines of the connective education (a highly specialised approach to meeting the needs of pupils with autistic spectrum disorders) philosophy to which the school adheres.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

The school cares well for its pupils, including those who are weekly boarders. Outstanding support and guidance are provided for pupils in managing the difficulties associated with their autism. Exceptionally effective materials and practices have been developed to aid communication, to help pupils to understand what is expected of them in different situations, to raise their self-esteem and instill a sense of personal identity. Exemplary practice includes the regular use of massage, massage stories, social stories, special breathing techniques, posture, gesture, personal organisers, symbols, pictures and written reminders to aid pupils' communication and understanding. Satisfactory academic guidance is provided for pupils, including suitable careers guidance. Effective procedures are in place for child protection, risk assessment, and to ensure pupils' health and safety.

Leadership and management

Grade: 3

The school is led and managed satisfactorily. The long-serving principal is highly experienced, provides strong direction and has a sound knowledge of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Inspection findings reflect the school's own evaluation of its effectiveness. The school has made satisfactory improvement since the last inspection and is satisfactorily placed to improve further. The school has Investor in People status, and staff listen to the views of parents and pupils. The vast majority of parents are very satisfied with the quality of education the school provides. They particularly appreciate the dedication of the staff and the way their children are being helped to cope with the difficulties associated with their autism.

Members of the newly formed senior leadership team do not yet have all the necessary skills to contribute fully to school improvement. A number come from a therapeutic background or are overseas trained teachers whose qualifications are not recognised in this country. A new post of head of centre was established very recently, but the responsibilities of the principal and head of centre have not been clearly defined. This is leading to some confusion, especially in lines of communication between The Trust

and the school. Extensive training opportunities for staff and very well established systems for supporting pupils' personal development are enabling the school to function at a satisfactory level in spite of the loss of a number of experienced staff. Procedures for improving teaching and raising pupils' achievement are less well developed. The school is just beginning to analyse data to identify patterns in performance across the school.

The extensive school grounds enrich pupils' learning although the buildings place some restrictions on learning opportunities. There are currently weaknesses in the way that the school is staffed because budgetary planning by The Disabilities Trust does not take into sufficient account the need to recruit and retain qualified and experienced teachers. The governance role of The Trust in contributing to school self-evaluation and improvement is under-developed.

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	3
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	2	2
The quality and standards in foundation stage	NA	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	3	3
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	Yes	Yes
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes

Achievement and standards

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

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	2	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2	
The behaviour of learners	2	
The attendance of learners	1	
How well learners enjoy their education	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	2	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	2	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	3	3
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	3	3
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	2

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	3
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	3	
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets, through quality assurance and self-review	3	
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	3	
How effectively and efficiently resources are deployed to achieve value for money	3	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	4	
The adequacy and suitability of staff to ensure that learners are protected	Yes	Yes

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

Pupils

After my visit earlier this week, I am writing to thank you for the contribution you made to the inspection and to let you know what I thought about Heathermount. I found that it is a satisfactory school with some outstanding features but some other aspects that need to be improved.

I was pleased to see that you are well cared for and the school is doing a lot to help you to be happy and confident. It supports you extremely well in coping with your autism. There are many activities that help you with this, such as massage, breathing exercises, social stories and the props that help you to communicate, organise your thinking and make sense of what is going on around you. I liked all these aspects of the school very much. It is also really good at providing training and information to help your parents understand autism. The school provides a lot of training for new staff and the way classrooms are organised, together with all the communication aids, helps the staff as well as helping you. The fact that staff get this help and work closely with therapists and psychologists means that teaching is satisfactory, although several new staff joined the school recently. The school plans its courses and topics well, but a number of the teachers are not as good as they should be in turning the ideas in these plans into lessons for you. I have asked the school to improve the way it does this to make sure you achieve as well as you could. At the moment, you are making satisfactory progress.

The school is led and managed satisfactorily. The principal is highly experienced and understands your difficulties well because she has worked at the school for a long time. The senior leadership team has been put together very recently, however, and the roles of the new head of centre and that of the principal are not clear enough. This and the work of the senior team need to be improved. The way that The Disability Trust acts as governors to the school also needs improvement, and more needs to be done to attract high quality teachers to take the school's work forward.

Yours faithfully

M J Goodchild

Lead Inspector