

The Alternative Centre for Education

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	114678
Local Authority	Brighton and Hove
Inspection number	289996
Inspection dates	20–21 March 2007
Reporting inspector	Kay Johnson

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

Type of school	Special
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	7–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	105
School	
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Fiona Johnson
Headteacher	Mark Whitby
Date of previous school inspection	14 October 2002
School address	Queensdown School Road Brighton BN1 7LA
Telephone number	01273 604472
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

All pupils attending The Alternative Centre for Education (ACE) have social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). The centre is arranged across five sites. There is statutory provision for pupils with SEBD and also outreach provision. In addition there is the inclusion of the primary and secondary pupil referral units. Mobility of pupils is high with three-quarters of the population changing every two years.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

The quality of education and care provided by The Alternative Centre for Education (ACE) is good with many outstanding features. The leadership and management are a particular strength. The commitment and determination to reintegrate pupils into mainstream education and to reduce exclusions have been relentless. This has had a very positive impact on outcomes for pupils. The visionary leadership of the principal and the dedicated senior leadership team make this complex provision thrive and influence change within its community and further afield.

There are highly successful negotiated partnerships with other services, educational provisions and the local authority. This ensures that ACE balances meeting the needs of its pupils within its on-site provision with those who need support in mainstream schools. Exclusions in mainstream schools have been reduced as a result of the work of ACE. Strategic planning is comprehensive and detailed with incisive self-evaluation at its heart.

Even though standards are exceptionally low compared with national averages pupils' achievement is good and the achievement of some pupils is outstanding. This is because the provision supports pupils exceptionally well and makes learning extremely enjoyable and meaningful for them. Pupils feel very safe and valued across all the elements of the provision. One parent said of her son, 'Above all he felt people made time for him and he was treated as an individual.' This reflects parents' views.

Pupils' personal development is excellent because they are supported in making better choices and improving their life chances. The centre has achieved the Healthy Schools Silver Award, which reflects the outstanding personal, social and health education which is on offer. Pupils' achievements are recognised for all aspects of their development. A healthy balance is struck between developing social skills and improving standards in academic work.

Teaching is good with some outstanding elements. Teachers' planning of lessons to match work to pupils' individual needs is excellent. Teachers and teaching assistants manage behaviour with sensitivity and excellent teamwork. They are consistent and persistent in their approach and have established a calm environment which caters superbly for pupils who find being in a school environment very difficult. Teaching assistants are skilled and knowledgeable. They enhance the learning opportunities for pupils very significantly. Where teaching is excellent a wide variety of opportunities for assessing pupils' learning are used. Where teaching is satisfactory, questioning is less secure in making pupils think more deeply to move their learning on.

The good curriculum is flexible and meets the needs of the pupils. There is more choice available and a wider range of the accredited courses on offer,

which begin in Year 10. This is having an impact on improving reintegration chances as well as providing a stepping stone for college and future employment. Work experience is well matched to individual needs because the school has dedicated a part-time teacher to support the process. Pupils are able to attend other provisions to do vocational courses as part of their individual timetables. The primary and nurture group curriculum are equally well organised and responsive to the needs of pupils. There are examples of enrichment activities which have rekindled the joy of learning for pupils.

ACE fosters innovative practice such as the 'Nurture Group'. A small group of pupils are referred to this provision, which is self-contained. It operates as a family unit where staff model good

social skills linked with secure daily routines. Within this structure pupils have many opportunities for choice and decision-making. There is counselling available for pupils and they learn to work together and share positive experiences within a delightful and well organised environment.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve the quality of questioning in lessons to that of the best standard within the provision to improve achievement.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Achievement is good. Standards are exceptionally low compared with the national average but most pupils make good progress and some pupils make outstanding progress. The number of pupils who are successful in gaining at least one qualification has increased. Pupils arrive at ACE often having missed significant amounts of schooling or previously having found it difficult to concentrate on their learning. Pupils' knowledge and skills are assessed when they join the ACE and this provides a secure baseline to measure their progress. Recording is thorough and detailed, enabling staff to plan appropriate individual programmes which focus on how well pupils are doing. Pupils are involved in assessing their own performance. The success of the reintegration programme means that the improved achievements and standards reached by some of the pupils are not credited to ACE but to the mainstream schools to which they return. Nevertheless, the centre is still able to demonstrate significant improvement in pupils gaining certificates since the last inspection. ACE measures the progress of the whole child, recognising that for all of its pupils to be able to develop personal and social skills is a vital part of their learning journey. Whole school tracking of standards reached and pupils' achievement has been recognised by the school as needing attention and plans are in place to address this.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Pupils' personal development and well-being are outstanding. In spite of challenging experiences, these vulnerable pupils greatly enjoy their education, and thrive, learn and achieve successfully because of the culture of encouragement and motivation.

Pupils work hard to improve their reading, writing and mathematics. Pupils' awareness of healthy living is impressive, focusing on personal, health and social issues, including anger management, teenage pregnancy and sex education, good diet and drugs education. They enjoy physical education and exercise.

Pupils feel really safe at school, knowing staff will help if they are troubled. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is outstanding. Pupils are tolerant and able to work together. They make sensible independent choices. This significantly enhances confidence and the positive way they approach mainstream school reintegration and future employment options such as horticulture. Pupils rightly feel proud of their good progress and achievements. Attendance for most pupils, including pupils who have not attended school in the past, is good. Exclusions decline as pupils' social skills, relationships and behaviour improve due to clearly known boundaries.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teaching is good overall with some outstanding, innovative practice. Teamwork between teachers and teaching assistants is exemplary, based on detailed knowledge of the pupils. Seamless task sharing and precise lesson planning for individual and group work enable pupils to make good progress and develop basic skills. Teachers use their good subject knowledge to hold pupils' interest through activities that enthuse and motivate them, filling the gaps in their learning. In some lessons questioning could be better used to tease out pupils' reasoning and understanding.

The way that the teaching team manages complex and challenging behaviours which occasionally flare up is exceptional. Teachers are calm but gently firm, using highly effective strategies that provide pupils with positive choices and expectations of good behaviour. Brief 'time out' enables them to reflect and rejoin the class so that there is minimal disruption and a calm productive atmosphere is maintained. Praise is used particularly well with good practice in recording positive incidents and telling parents. Individual assessment is thorough with targets regularly reviewed. Marking of pupils' work does not always make it clear to them how they can improve their work. Teaching provides much good practice for school staff to share.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum is good with some elements that are outstanding. Personal, social and health education and citizenship are outstanding across each part of ACE. Each area of provision is constantly working towards getting pupils back into mainstream schools and, at the very least, having the skills to improve their life chances. This is evident in the curriculum organisation which balances core skills with a range of meaningful enrichment opportunities. The primary provision modifies the National Curriculum inventively to meet the needs of its pupils and planning is excellent. There are some fine examples of the development of a more flexible curriculum, particularly for pupils in Year 11.

There has been an increase in the range of externally accredited courses available which motivates pupils. This has resulted in more pupils gaining qualifications. The curriculum is enriched by a range of educational visits and by projects such as gardening where pupils join other groups in the community. Recently pupils have been involved in a project with qualified builders to make a tree house and this has been very successful.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Provision for pupils' pastoral care, guidance and support is outstanding. All staff accept only the very best for their pupils, who are supported and enabled to succeed. Strategies are developed with external multi-agency and local authority support, and utilised to ensure that any barriers to learning are overcome. As a result pupils achieve well, including those who are gifted and talented or who have had a history of exclusion from different schools. There are far more boys than girls but staff make sure that girls are not overwhelmed and have equal status. Provision for behaviour management is excellent so that pupils learn to amend their

own behaviour and settle to enjoy learning. The school's procedures for the safety of pupils are good.

Inclusion and reintegration into mainstream community schools has an impressive success rate, as does the academic guidance offered that includes preparation for a good range of externally accredited qualifications. Pupils are encouraged to self-evaluate their work and progress. They do this well. Opportunities for older pupils include work experience and attendance at college, with pupils feeling increasingly confident about their future learning and employment prospects.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Leadership and management are outstanding. All leaders across this complex provision have a clear vision which is communicated unequivocally to the whole community. There are strong partnerships with other services that radically improve outcomes for pupils. For example, as soon as a mainstream school is considering a permanent exclusion, the appropriate branch of the centre will become involved and offer a range of solutions to keep the pupil in school. Even though the superb reintegration rates detract from the centre's own attainment figures, getting pupils back into the mainstream system and keeping them there is unashamedly the centre's overriding aim. Strategic planning is visionary, thorough, and focused on accurate and robust self-evaluation. The school's excellent understanding of its strengths and weaknesses and its success in improving provision since the last inspection indicate that it has an outstanding capacity to move further forward in the future.

The governors and management committee are supportive and well informed. They are passionate about the provision and know it well but challenge is not as incisive as it could be. The training and staff development are excellent and have had a direct impact on improving the provision. The teaching assistants, for example, are exceptionally skilled and deployed to perfection. This is the case within the provision and out in the mainstream schools.

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Annex A

Inspection judgements

<i>Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate</i>	School Overall
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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?	2
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	1
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	4
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	2

Personal development and well-being

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

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1

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

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	1
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets	1
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	1
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

Thank you for making us so welcome when we came to inspect The Alternative Centre for Education. We were very impressed by the good achievements you have made in your work and the excellent progress you make in your personal skills and attitudes. We agree with your principal that the centre is good with some parts of it excellent. We very much enjoyed talking to you. The staff work very well as a team to get you back into bigger schools again if that is the right thing for you. The centre also makes sure that you are exceptionally well cared for. You are listened to by the staff and you greatly enjoy much of your learning at the centre.

Your parents are very supportive of the work at the centre. Keep trying hard and behave as well as you possibly can so that you continue to make good progress.

What your school can do to improve further:

- Arrange for teachers to share their ideas and skills to make your lessons even better.
- Check your progress to make sure that you are doing as well as you possibly can.