



Alternative Centre for Education

Inspection Report

Unique Reference Number 131629
Local Authority Darlington
Inspection number 293798
Inspection dates 3–4 October 2006
Reporting inspector Noreen Buckingham

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

Type of school	Pupil referral unit	School address	McMullen House
School category	Community		Yarm Road, Darlington
Age range of pupils	11–16		County Durham, DL1 1ED
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Telephone number	01325 468395
Number on roll (school)	82	Fax number	01325 381608
Appropriate authority	The local authority	Headteacher	Mrs Carole Akam
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected		

Age group	Inspection dates	Inspection number
11–16	3–4 October 2006	293798

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one Additional Inspector.

Description of the school

The Alternative Centre for Education admits pupils from a wide range of settings and circumstances. All have been excluded from secondary education or are there either as a result of a planned respite programme or because their parents are appealing against an exclusion decision. Accommodation is on two sites approximately a mile and half apart but the centre is moving to a new single site next year. Four pupils are looked-after children. Four pupils have a statement of special educational need.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 4

In accordance with section 13(3) of the Education Act 2005, HMCI is of the opinion that the centre requires special measures because it is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the persons responsible for leading and managing the centre are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the centre.

The leadership and management of the centre are inadequate for a number of reasons. Management has tended to be reactive rather than proactive and had no real long-term plan for future development until recently, when plans for a move to a new building were confirmed. A change in the role of the teacher in charge of Key Stage 4, coupled with difficulties in recruiting permanent staff, has affected the working of the leadership team. The advisory and steering group (ASG) has begun to monitor the centre's work but fails to follow up its advice to managers rigorously enough. The centre provides inadequate value for money.

Most pupils are not reaching their full potential because teaching is inadequate. Underlying this are pupils' disruptive behaviour and the lack of accurate assessment information so that work is not always matched to pupils' abilities. Pupils' progress is consequently too slow and results in their inadequate achievement. Low expectations of what pupils can do add to this underachievement. However, a small number of pupils are successful in gaining externally accredited examinations. The curriculum is inadequate and fails to meet pupils' academic and personal needs. Poor accommodation places limitations on what can be covered successfully in the curriculum.

The major barriers to improving pupils' achievements are their negative attitudes towards education, poor attendance and their disruptive behaviour, which frequently lead to exclusion. While the centre tries very hard to minimise the effect of these by providing a wide range of support within the centre and from a variety of external agencies, the impact is generally ineffective, because the systems for the pupils' care, guidance and support are inadequate. Staff are good role models and, even under very trying circumstances, always treat the pupils with respect and act calmly. All staff are very committed to helping the pupils, who often come from difficult circumstances.

Pupils understand the centre's procedures for managing behaviour, including the sanctions and rewards, but they push the boundaries as far as they can before either trying to negotiate or abscond from lessons. The centre is orderly and secure for most of the time on both sites but abusive verbal language is present for much of the time.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that the centre has the effective leadership and management to make the improvements necessary to raise pupils' achievements and the overall quality of education.
- Eliminate weaknesses in teaching, by introducing an accurate assessment system and raising teachers' low expectations of pupils' achievement.

- Take action to improve attendance so that pupils can take advantage of the learning opportunities available.
- Take action to manage pupils' behaviour more effectively so that exclusions are reduced.
- Develop an appropriate curriculum.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 4

Pupils' achievement overall is inadequate. Standards on entry to the centre are variable, with some pupils reaching national averages. Comparing past data with current achievement shows that most pupils are underachieving and standards are lower than they should be. All have been excluded from school and have a pattern of disruption. Most are reluctant learners and remain disaffected by education.

While achievement at Key Stage 4 is inadequate, a small proportion of pupils do have some success in externally accredited courses. These include entry-level GCSE in mathematics and personal, health and social education (PHSE), a range of Assessment and Qualifications Authority units and Prince's Trust Award. Those pupils attending the Skills+ course at Darlington College gain a range of accreditation, such as National Vocational Qualification Level 1.

Although still inadequate, achievement is better at Key Stage 3, where the progress of a small proportion of pupils is satisfactory. This is because teaching is often satisfactory, pupils' behaviour is not as disruptive and their attendance is marginally better than that of the older pupils.

In both key stages, pupils are prevented from reaching their potential because of their poor attendance, disruptive behaviour and teachers' low expectations. Weak assessment also contributes to their overall underachievement. Target-setting is in its infancy and, because the centre does not analyse the little data it has, further action for improvement is lacking.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 4

Pupils' personal development and well-being are inadequate. This is mainly because of pupils' negative attitudes, low attendance, a high rate of exclusions, regular verbal abuse and disruptive behaviour. These are also the main causes of the inadequate achievement of the great majority of pupils. Some pupils say they like coming to the centre, especially the youngest ones, but some of the older ones are switched off education generally. However, because pupils enjoy the Skills+ course at Darlington College, their attendance improves, some to 100% and exclusions are dramatically reduced. Targets aimed at improving behaviour are set but have yet to have any significant impact.

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is also inadequate because there are too few opportunities to promote them. All pupils are involved in the weekly school council which celebrates good work and behaviour. Pupils understand the points system well, but some pupils can manipulate it by strong verbal negotiation, resulting in inconsistent implementation. Although the centre has the Healthy Schools Award, pupils choose to eat 'junk food' when they are allowed out at break and lunchtimes. They have adequate understanding of the need for exercise and of the skills needed in the wider community through work and training placements and vocational college courses.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 4

Teaching and learning are inadequate and leads to pupils' continual disruptions, abusive language and a general lack of interest. Assessment is in the embryonic stage so teachers do not have an accurate understanding of pupils' abilities. Some pupils say, 'this work is too easy', others, 'I have done this before'. This often results in a lack of challenge and low expectations of the amount of work expected of them during a lesson. Tasks are mostly worksheet-based and, because pupils are reluctant writers, little written work is expected of them. Little is achieved and so improvement is limited. Although work is usually marked pupils are not given helpful advice about how to improve.

In lessons where teaching is satisfactory, pupils are relaxed, join in discussions, listen attentively and show interest in the tasks. This was particularly evident in a lesson with young pupils who responded positively in a discussion about 'feelings'. All teaching assistants work well with staff and are committed to providing the best they can for the pupils.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 4

The curriculum is inadequate and the poor accommodation on both sites further restricts its scope for practical work. Despite having an appropriate focus on literacy and numeracy, it fails to meet the needs of the pupils or to promote successfully either their academic or personal development. The introduction of emotional literacy and the PHSE curriculum encourage pupils to consider their lifestyles and how to find acceptable ways to deal with negative feelings.

An adequate range of work placements, alternative training and college courses gives pupils options and prepares them for life beyond school. The Skills+ programme at Darlington College is a popular choice and attendance and behaviour improve in this environment. Other programmes, such as Firebreak and the Bike project, extend pupils' experiences and also encourage attendance. Links with the community via the Prince's Trust, and using local sports facilities, enhance what the centre offers. Links with other

schools are developed through the centre's outreach provision and the centre has had some success in reintegrating pupils into mainstream schools.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 4

The care and support given to pupils are inadequate and ineffective. However, all adults treat pupils with respect and are good role models. They persevere to maintain good relationships with pupils, regardless of the regular rudeness, and endeavour to give them positive support. The centre calls on every appropriate external agency it can to give pupils advice, for example, about healthy lifestyles and the misuse of drugs. Connexions personnel give guidance about work and training opportunities. Despite this wealth of support, including a part-time learning mentor and school counsellor, pupils persist in being disruptive and disaffected with education. Parents, in their answers to questionnaires, show support but also some concerns about the behaviour in the centre.

All statutory requirements for child protection and risk assessment are secure and all available checks on adults are in place. Pupils can voice their opinions at the weekly school council and the centre has recently canvassed pupils' views via a questionnaire. Monitoring of the pupils' academic progress is not sufficiently systematic, so the teachers lack an accurate view of how well pupils can achieve. A system to track their progress in personal development has only just been introduced. The education welfare service and the centre work together to chase up absences, but with little effect.

Leadership and management

Grade: 4

The leadership and management of the centre are inadequate. The centre is led by the manager responsible for 'pupils educated other than in school' and recent staffing difficulties have led to her taking on the role of teacher-in-charge of Key Stage 4. This means that time available for the centre can be eroded by other matters. Management is further complicated by the teacher-in-charge of Key Stage 3 being on another site. The centre does receive advice from the ASG, but this has not always been acted upon. However, monitoring by the ASG has been minimal and little action appears to have been taken following reports from the centre about targets for improvement.

A strategic long-term vision for the future of the centre has only recently been devised and management has been reactive to daily problems which have clouded longer-term thinking. Overall procedures for monitoring and self-evaluation lack rigour. Performance management systems have slipped and professional development for staff is infrequent and has no accurate link with personal or centre development. Difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff have resulted in a series of supply staff and an over-reliance on teaching assistants to deliver the curriculum. Currently, the management of the centre does not have a realistic understanding of what needs to be done to eliminate the weaknesses. Because of this, the capacity to improve is inadequate.

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Inspection judgements

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

Achievement and standards

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

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	4
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	4
The behaviour of learners	4
The attendance of learners	4
How well learners enjoy their education	4
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	4
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	4
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	4
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	4

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	4
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	4
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	4

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.

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	4
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	4
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets	4
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	4
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	4
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	4
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	Yes
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

Alternative Centre for Education

McMullen House

Yarm Road

Darlington

County Durham

DL1 1ED

3 October 2006

Dear Pupils

Thank you for welcoming me in to the centre last week. I found it interesting talking to you and listening to your views. I was pleased to hear how much most of you enjoyed coming to the centre and how much you wanted to do well. Some of you realised that you needed to work harder.

Over the two days I was with you I found some things that were alright but some things that were worrying. I understand that you have had bad experiences in mainstream school but the centre is giving you a second chance to work hard and be successful in some examinations. All the staff want you to do well and they support you as much as they can. I have asked Mrs Akam and Ms Kelly to take a closer look at what happens in the centre as a whole, including your work, and find ways to improve things. I think you can help by coming to school more regularly, being more positive about learning and by trying to be less disruptive in lessons. This will give you more opportunities to extend your education when you leave the centre and want to work or go to college.

I have recommended that the centre is made subject to special measures. This means it will receive extra help and inspectors will return to check that things are improving.

Yours sincerely

Noreen Buckingham

Lead inspector