

Oakley School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	132148
Local Authority	Kent
Inspection number	293960
Inspection dates	25–26 April 2007
Reporting inspector	Steven Parker

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	5–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	128
6th form	64
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Karen Senior
Headteacher	Martin Absolom
Date of previous school inspection	10 March 2003
School address	Pembury Road Tunbridge Wells TN2 4NE
Telephone number	01892 823096
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by three Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Oakley School provides for pupils with a very wide range of learning difficulties. It was established in 2000, through the amalgamation of two existing special schools, and has remained operating on two sites seven miles apart. One is for primary-aged pupils and the other is for secondary and post-16 students. Around 40% of its current pupils are on the autistic spectrum and the majority of the secondary pupils have moderate learning difficulties. A recent re-designation by the local authority, means that an increasing proportion of pupils, especially in the primary department, has more profound and complex difficulties. Pupils come from a wide area and many spend a long time travelling each day. Their social backgrounds reflect the diverse nature of the catchment area, but a significant minority come from areas of social disadvantage. There are three times as many boys as girls and a small, but increasing, number of looked-after children. The vast majority of pupils are from a White British background. None of the small group of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds requires support for English as an additional language.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Oakley is a good school with many outstanding features. A significant reason for its success is that the inspirational principal has worked tirelessly with his extremely able heads of education to develop and nurture a whole-school ethos of child-centred care and clear ambition for all pupils to succeed in their studies. A notable strength is the way all staff work very effectively in partnership with each other and the many specialist agencies and individuals who support the school's work. Parents are overwhelmingly supportive, and a very large number wrote in complimentary terms about the impact the school has had on their children's and their own lives. Typical was the comment 'I love the atmosphere of the school; friendly, safe, caring and joyous'.

Staff place considerable importance on ensuring that all pupils make good progress, no matter what their difficulties. From the time they enter the school, the youngest pupils are expected to do well, and they consequently get off to a flying start. Good teaching, supported by an effective curriculum, ensures that the needs of each pupil are well met across all parts of the school. There is, however, insufficient focus in teachers' planning to ensure that the key skills of literacy and numeracy are effectively incorporated in lessons across all areas of the curriculum. Learning support assistants are used very well and strong teamwork in all lessons ensures that every pupil engages successfully in their learning. As a result, all pupils make good progress and achieve well. A number make outstanding progress, often from a very low starting point. By the time they leave, although standards remain well below average because of their particular needs, all older students have gained a wide range of passes in accredited courses, some in GCSE examinations.

Pupils make exceptional gains in their personal development because of the excellent care, support and guidance provided for them. Members of staff ensure that pupils develop a sense of confidence, self-esteem and the ability to function independently. Pupils are encouraged to influence the way the school runs, through, for example, representing their peers on school councils on both sites. Impressive enrichment of the curriculum through clubs, residential education and active involvement in the wider community means that attending school is fun. As a result, pupils really enjoy their time there. Older pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their lives because of the effective work related curriculum and strong staff commitment to helping them to develop the skills necessary to look after themselves when they leave school. All pupils show a good understanding of what leading a healthy lifestyle means and the importance of eating healthily.

There have been significant improvements since the last inspection, most especially in the provision for information and communication technology (ICT). Leadership and management are now good across the school. A number of important senior staff appointments have been made recently and leadership and management responsibilities have been distributed more widely across the school. Governors are very actively involved in the life of the school, well informed and properly supportive in strategic planning and evaluating performance. The school knows itself well, although it does not always make the best use of all the information it gathers about its workings and pupils' progress. There is strong capacity to follow through on any necessary improvements and to manage the developments required effectively to meet the changing needs of the school's population.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Provision for sixth form students is good. There was a dip in quality, particularly in the curriculum, following the last inspection, when the department was judged to be a strength of the school. Current staff worked hard during an unsettled period to maintain the strong ethos, which encourages students to be as independent and assertive as possible. The recent appointment of a new head of department is securing stable leadership and a return to the previous high quality. Now, the curriculum is relevant and challenging again, and good quality teaching ensures that students make good progress and achieve well in their studies. Students benefit from the good opportunities offered in college and work experience placements and the excellent pastoral support and guidance they receive.

What the school should do to improve further

- Make better use of the wealth of data and information that the school collects to raise standards, improve planning and demonstrate the school's effectiveness.
- Refine the planning for and the teaching of the key skills of literacy and numeracy across all areas of the curriculum.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

While pupils' standards are well below national expectations because of the nature and extent of their learning needs, they nevertheless achieve well. All pupils make good progress towards well chosen individual targets that are suitably challenging. They are given a very good start in the primary phase and their achievements are sustained through the secondary department and into the sixth form. Different groups of pupils, including boys and girls, looked-after children and those with moderate, severe or autistic spectrum learning difficulties, all make good progress. The school has improved the range and relevance of its accreditation, but recognises there is more to do to expand further the range, and to use progress information more extensively to help ensure that the accreditation available is closely matched to pupils' earlier progress.

All pupils engage productively in the wide range of activities offered. For example, more able younger pupils greatly enjoy role play, making good progress in improving their speaking and listening skills, and older pupils respond very well to the practical activities in physical education, art and design and drama, sometimes achieving impressive results that approach national average standards.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Throughout their time at school, pupils make outstanding progress in their personal development and experience exceptional well-being. Their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is excellent, because opportunities to develop a range of sensitivities are carefully incorporated throughout the school week. Religious Studies and assemblies make a significant contribution to their spiritual and moral awareness so that conversations with pupils reveal their thoughtful

and considered responses. Appreciation of world cultures is exceptionally well promoted and pupils are very well prepared for life in a multicultural society.

Pupils clearly enjoy coming to school and this means that their attendance is good, and often a significant improvement on the levels that some experienced in their previous schools. Most pupils are profitably involved in setting their own targets to raise the standards of their work, and are generally very motivated by the thoughtful rewards system. There is a very strong sense of belonging in all parts of the school and pupils are successfully encouraged and enabled to become active and responsible members of this and the wider community. The respect and courtesy accorded them by all staff is a significant contributor to this ambition. Pupils engage in enterprise activities throughout the school, often in the form of self-help fund raising to support trips or events, but also to benefit those less fortunate than themselves. The behaviour of pupils is good overall, and sometimes exemplary, because most staff implement agreed positive behaviour management procedures consistently. Pupils are taught strategies to help them manage their own behaviour, making a significant contribution to their personal development, especially those with autistic spectrum disorders. Pupils say they feel safe and secure in the school. If they have any concerns they happily approach a chosen adult, confident that issues will be dealt with speedily and effectively.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Teaching and learning are good overall, with some examples of outstanding practice. The well trained and skilled team of learning support assistants makes a valuable contribution to raising standards and they are well deployed. Strengths of teaching are the clear records of individual pupils' progress which inform good planning of work that is well pitched at a suitable level for pupils, the teamwork of staff, the enthusiasm of pupils and their good behaviour. Imaginative materials and effective use of good ICT resources encourage pupils' engagement and enjoyment. Staff employ a wide range of strategies to meet pupils' individual needs, such as signing, symbols and visual timetables. Although the management of behaviour is generally good, the use of the points system with older pupils occasionally hinders more effective management of behaviour and does not always ensure that suitable, effective individual strategies are used.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The curriculum is good and relevant, with some outstanding practice throughout the school. Exciting extended learning activities, including sailing, competitive sports and performing arts, are greatly enjoyed and promote healthy living. These life-enriching experiences have a positive impact on the development of pupils' positive attitudes to school and learning. The primary staff team provides a rich and flexible curriculum that engages pupils' interest and curiosity and meets their individual needs very well. It is readily adaptable to the increasingly complex difficulties that pupils have, providing, for example, access to a sensory room and soft play. Provision for sixth form students has recently been enthusiastically and rapidly revitalised, so that a 'can do' attitude now prevails and students benefit from very well focused opportunities

to fulfil their further study or employment aspirations. Provision of relevant qualifications, accreditation of learning, college placements and work experience are developing well. This results in well motivated, increasingly independent students who relish new challenges.

The innovative use of a school-based community youth worker, who is rapidly developing an impressive range of enrichment activities outside the normal school day, enhances pupils' social, communication and community awareness. It is of particular note that she has focused her efforts especially on the needs of the minority group of girls, to good effect. The whole-school overview of curriculum change and development to meet the needs of its changing population is less well developed, for example in relation to the embedding of the core skills of literacy and numeracy across all subjects. This is because the quality of curriculum management varies, particularly across the secondary department, where key staff are settling into new posts. The school has a highly inclusive internal culture, but opportunities, especially for secondary age pupils to learn and socialise with their mainstream peers, are limited.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The school's pastoral support of pupils is exceptional and it makes every effort to safeguard their health, safety and welfare. All aspects of care are treated seriously. Risk assessments are carried out routinely and child protection procedures are secure and known to all staff. Regular training ensures that all new staff are very well briefed about all requirements, so that there is secure continuity of care. The very high quality of guidance and support provided by staff contributes significantly to the progress that pupils make, especially in their personal development. Teachers use strong assessment systems to help them plan appropriate work and ensure that learning is very well personalised for each individual pupil. Excellent multi-professional work with therapists, the Connexions service and staff from many other agencies ensures that appropriate help is well focused when needed by individual pupils and also helps the school to develop its own good practice further. The recent appointment of a Family Liaison Officer has further enhanced the school's already impressive partnership with parents and the benefits of this excellent arrangement for individual families are already apparent.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Leadership and management are good overall. The principal has provided exceptional leadership throughout the school's history, creating and sustaining a strong sense of team with all his staff and governors during a continuing process of change. A particular strength has been in the support and training provided for all staff, who are continually developing their skills as teachers and managers. Members of the expanded and reorganised senior leadership team are now more accountable for the quality of the work in their departments, so that planning for any necessary improvements is now increasingly a shared activity. The use of performance data and evaluative analysis of other information to inform improvement planning is not as effective as it could be, but planned developments should help in this process. The governing body fulfils its statutory duties fully and has played a significant role in advocating for the school in

continuing negotiations with the local authority. They also help to ensure that the school's finances and resources are exceptionally well managed. The outstanding administrative teams across both sites fulfil their many responsibilities with professionalism and calm, contributing significantly to the highly efficient running of the school day to day and presenting a welcoming and encouraging face to the outside world.

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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	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?	2	2
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	1	1
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes

Achievement and standards

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

Personal development and well-being

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

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	2	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1	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?	2	2
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	2	2
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets	2	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	1	1
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1	1
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	2	2
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes	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

27 April 2007

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Oakley School, Tunbridge Wells, TN2 4NE

Thank you for looking after us so well when we came to visit. It was good to talk to you, and see you working in lessons and playing in the lovely grounds of your school. We came to find out how well you are getting on and to find out if there is anything that could be better. We agree with you that your school is very good and has some very special things about it. You said that you enjoy being there and we could see why. Your good attendance proves that. You make good progress in your learning because of the good teaching and support you are given. We were very impressed with how polite and confident you are.

These are the things we liked best:

- You are growing into mature young people who will be well prepared for your lives when you leave school.
- The school helps you to be as independent as possible and to do lots of things to help yourselves and others.
- Your principal is very good at his job and helps all the staff to do their best for you.
- Members of staff give you the very best support to help you grow, learn and be healthy and safe.
- You have lots of good opportunities to learn new and interesting things.
- You behave well and are kind to each other.

We found two things that we thought the school could do even better:

- There is a lot of information about how well everyone does their work and we would like it to be used better to plan your learning.
- We think you could be given more help with reading, writing and number work across all the subjects that you study.

We wish you all the best for the future and hope that the members of the school councils continue to do their work well on your behalf to make sure the school listens to and takes notice of your ideas.

Yours faithfully

Steven Parker Lead inspector