



The Oaks Secondary School

Inspection Report

Unique Reference Number 134662
Local Authority Durham
Inspection number 294143
Inspection dates 23–24 January 2007
Reporting inspector Alastair Younger

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

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|---|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Type of school | Special | School address | Rock Road |
| School category | Community special | | Spennymoor, Durham |
| Age range of pupils | 11–19 | | DL16 7DB |
| Gender of pupils | Mixed | Telephone number | 01388 827380 |
| Number on roll (school) | 196 | Fax number | 01388 827314 |
| Number on roll (6th form) | 23 | | |
| Appropriate authority | The governing body | Chair | Mr Clive Hubery |
| | | Headteacher | Mrs Andrea English |
| Date of previous school inspection | Not previously inspected | | |

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|------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Age group | Inspection dates | Inspection number |
| 11–19 | 23–24 January 2007 | 294143 |

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

This is a much larger than average special school. It was formed through the amalgamation of four smaller schools and opened on newly built premises 15 months ago. About a half of the students have moderate learning difficulties. There are significant groups of students with severe learning difficulties (SLD) or profound and multiple (PMLD) learning difficulties, autistic spectrum disorders and social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Many students display a combination of these difficulties and/or disabilities. Standards on entry are well below average. Students come from all over the county and from a very wide range of home circumstances. About 50% are entitled to free school meals. Boys outnumber girls by about two to one. Virtually all students are White British. Eight students are looked after by the local authority. Sixth form provision is for SLD and PMLD students only.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

This is a good and rapidly improving school. Through good leadership and management many good links have been built up with parents and a huge range of support agencies. The quality of teaching and learning and the curriculum is good. These strengths all ensure good progress in students' academic and personal development.

The nature of students' learning difficulties and/or disabilities means that attainment on entry is always low and that it is unrealistic to compare standards with national averages or expectations. Students achieve well. Progress is measured against individual targets and is usually good. Most parents are very happy with the progress their children make. Several of last year's leavers gained passes in GCSE examinations, many did so in entry level assessments and a half gained the ASDAN Bronze Award. The school has made a good start in assessing students' progress but has yet to analyse or evaluate this information to check whether there is any difference in the progress being made by different groups of students. The inspection did not identify any differences but it is too early to make a secure judgement.

Students' personal development and well-being are good. Students show their enjoyment by attending whenever they can. They join wholeheartedly in the wide range of activities that the school offers. Many students have conditions characterised by impulsive and irrational behaviour. Together with the difficulties many students experienced in adapting to a much bigger school this resulted in a significant amount of misbehaviour when the school opened. About 5% of parents still express concern over misbehaviour but the frequency of serious incidents is quickly reducing and behaviour is satisfactory. However, the number of exclusions remains high. The health and safety of students is considered of the utmost importance. Adults' backgrounds are checked before they are allowed to work in the school. The Healthy School Award has just been granted. Good steps have been taken to build up links with the community, including participation in last year's town fete and the contribution of sixth form students to the Spennymoor Community Garden. The progress made in learning basic skills and the development of very good social and moral skills contributes well to securing brighter futures for all students.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 2

This is a good sixth form. It is well led and managed. This has resulted in the speedy development of a good curriculum, which includes a growing range of valuable opportunities to promote increased independence and responsibility in preparation for adult life. Learners are well taught and make good progress. Their basic skills improve and they are given good advice about the range of opportunities they will have when they leave. Learners are offered good opportunities to attend a local college and to learn practical skills through work experience. They learn the importance of keeping themselves healthy and safe and are offered good support and guidance which helps them to make sensible choices about their futures.

What the school should do to improve further

- Reduce the number of exclusions by developing alternative strategies for managing the most extreme behaviour.
- Use assessment data to monitor and evaluate the progress of different groups of students.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Achievement is good. Standards are not comparable with national averages or expectations because of the nature of students' learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Attainment on entry to Year 7 varies from the most basic level of learning and development to the standard expected of a seven-year-old. Students make good progress and by the end of Year 11, although the least able students remain at the basic level, the most able are gaining passes in GCSE examinations at the lower end of the scale. Despite the short time that students had been in the school last year, students achieved well in Year 11 across a range of different examinations. The 36 Year 11 students gained a total of 21 GCSE passes in up to four subjects. In GCSE English, all five students entered achieved expectations but in mathematics only half did so. There were also 90 passes in entry level assessments in up to eight subjects. A half of all students gained the ASDAN Bronze award. It is not possible to report reliably on any difference in the achievements of different groups of students because, whilst individual progress has been accurately assessed, the school has yet to evaluate the relative progress of different groups. The evidence of inspection points to the fact that there is very little difference and that nearly all students make good progress towards their individual targets because they are well taught, work hard and enjoy learning.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Students' personal development and well-being are good. Their spiritual, moral social and cultural development is also good. Students enjoy coming to school because teachers make lessons interesting and there are lots of exciting activities. Attendance rates are good and the school exceeded the targets set for last year. Students learn how to recognise situations that could be dangerous and how not to draw attention towards themselves in situations where they could be vulnerable. Healthy living is encouraged. Students learn about the importance of avoiding unhealthy habits and most participate energetically in physical activities. Students have been fully involved in the school's early initiatives, such as devising whole school rules. Older and more confident students frequently support or 'buddy' younger or more vulnerable ones. There is a thriving student council. Links with the local community have been

developed: last year's carol service was held in the local church and some students have taken part in the Kielder challenge with members of Sedgefield Community College. The progress students make in improving their academic, personal and social skills makes a good contribution to their future economic well-being. Behaviour is satisfactory. Many students have conditions which predispose them to irrational and impulsive behaviour. When the school first opened many students experienced considerable difficulty in adapting to the new environment and this was reflected in a lot of misbehaviour. Each term since has seen improvements in most students' behaviour but some serious misbehaviour remains. Far fewer students are involved now. The rate of exclusion remains high and has not fallen in line with improvements in behaviour.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Teaching and learning are good. As a result, students make good progress. Teachers make learning interesting by including a wide range of activities in each lesson. Most lessons include regular opportunities for students to engage in discussions, to answer questions and to use a wide variety of good resources to help make learning memorable. Planning is thorough. Teachers make a brisk start to lessons and sustain a good pace that holds students' interests well. There is a strong culture of encouraging students to write about or record what they have learned. Work is varied well to meet individual needs and learning support assistants offer invaluable and skilled help to individuals or small groups. Teachers are skilled at recognising potential problems and taking prompt action to prevent them from escalating. Teachers show a good awareness of the importance of encouraging independence. Students are not over-helped nor are they allowed to flounder. Occasionally, teachers are too intent on pushing the pace of lessons and do not give students enough time or encouragement to talk about what they have learned previously and how it relates to what they are learning now.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The curriculum has developed well. It is good and contains many exciting activities, which enrich students' learning experiences and add to their enjoyment of school. All the requirements of the National Curriculum are met and good account is taken of the allocation of time to each subject. This ensures that there is plenty of time for students to develop the basic skills of numeracy and literacy but not at the expense of subjects that promote practical and physical skills or those that encourage a love of the arts and humanities. Generous provision for personal, social and health education is well justified, as many of these students are very vulnerable. Religious education and

information and communication technology (ICT) got off to a slower start than other subjects and the curriculum in these subjects is not as far advanced as other subjects. Throughout the school, students are encouraged to plan for the future and develop independence. This intensifies as students approach leaving school and become increasingly involved in a good programme of work-related learning and careers guidance.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Students are well cared for, guided and supported. Staff demonstrate a good awareness of the difficulties students face in their learning and in their personal lives. Care is taken only to appoint suitable staff and the safeguarding and protection of students are thorough. Potential risk in activities is carefully assessed so that accidents can be avoided. Many students are assessed to protect them from putting themselves or others at risk. Effective strategies for managing these students are clearly identified and understood by all staff. A good reward and sanction system has been developed to encourage better behaviour. The school identified the need to extend their behaviour support to reduce exclusions of students with extreme conduct disorders. It has introduced some new systems but it is too early to judge their effectiveness. Assessment of individual progress is good. It is used well by teachers to ensure that work is set at the right level for each pupil. In recognition of the fact that existing assessment does not sufficiently highlight the tiniest steps made by lower ability students, new systems are being introduced to make sure that every sign of progress is recognised. Governors have made a good contribution to making sure that the school is a healthy and safe place.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Leadership, management and governance are good. As a result, the school has rapidly established a good reputation, morale is high, achievement is good, provision is improving and there is a good capacity for further improvement. The headteacher, aided by a good senior management team, has successfully blended the skills and ideals of staff from four different schools into a single, dedicated workforce with the shared desire to make students' lives better. The school provides good value for money.

Leaders and managers have a good understanding of relative strengths and weaknesses. They are modest in their self-evaluation, reflecting their high expectations. Monitoring of teaching is good. In the short time the school has been open, there has been greater emphasis on gathering information about students' progress than using it constructively to raise standards. The time is ripe to start doing this.

The school was shaken in its early days by the difficulties experienced by many students in adapting to a much larger school than they had previously attended. The mix of extremely vulnerable students and those with impulsive and irrational behaviour caused many problems and required hugely sensitive handling. Good management has identified appropriate training opportunities to help staff develop advanced skills to help students and keep them safe. Staff are sharing their expertise well and becoming increasingly confident and effective in teaching students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities that they had never previously encountered.

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Inspection judgements

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

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? | 2 | 2 |
| 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 | NA | NA |

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? | 2 | 2 |
| The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development | 2 | |
| The behaviour of learners | 3 | 3 |
| The attendance of learners | 2 | 2 |
| How well learners enjoy their education | 2 | 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 | 2 |
| How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being | 2 | 2 |

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? | 2 | 2 |

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? | 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 | |
| How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets | 2 | |
| How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can | 2 | |
| How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money | 2 | |
| The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities | 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

The Oaks Secondary School

Rock Road

Spennymoor

Durham

DL16 7DB

25 January 2007

Dear Students

I had a lovely visit to your school the other day. If you remember, I called in with Mr McCabe. We came to check the school out. This is what we found.

We think you're getting on well because:

- you work hard and listen to your teachers, so you learn a lot
- you enjoy coming to school because lessons are interesting and there's plenty to do
- you are safe and well looked after.

On top of this, your headteacher is determined to make the school even better. We've offered our help by:

- suggesting that fewer of you get excluded: I know that bad things sometimes happen to some of you but please try to think before you act
- asking the school to use what they know about how well you are doing to make sure that all of you are getting a good deal.

Good luck for the future

Yours sincerely

Alastair Younger

Lead inspector