

Inspection report

The Phoenix School

Independent school

DfES ref no: 202/6393

Inspection under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002

Dates of inspection: 30 October - 2 November 2006

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by the Office for Standards in Education under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002 in order to advise the Secretary of State for Education and Skills about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

Information about the school

The Phoenix School is situated just off the Finchley Road in north London. After the retirement of the previous owners the school was acquired in 2002 by the University College School Foundation and gained charitable status in 2003. It caters for pupils aged between three and seven. Fifty-six of its 114 pupils attend part time for up to nine half-day sessions. Fifty-seven children receive nursery grant funding. This provision is registered with Ofsted's Early Years Division and was inspected at the same time. A separate report on its quality is appended. Currently, the school admits children at the start of the term in which they become three. This provision is required by the Children Act to be registered with Ofsted as care. The school employs eleven full-time and three part-time teaching staff, some of whom provide specialist subject teaching, and five teaching assistants.

The school aims to '*develop intellectual curiosity and independence of mind*'... '*to foster self-discovery and self-expression*'... and '*to encourage pupils to think creatively, explore their environment and problem-solve, enabling them to construct their own understanding of the world around them*'.

Summary of main findings

This is a good school where pupils achieve well academically and make outstanding progress in their personal development. Teaching is good. The school fulfils its aims and prepares pupils effectively for the next stage of their education. Despite the limitations of the buildings and play space, the school provides a good curriculum and a wide range of activities to stimulate pupils' curiosity and interest. Parents are very supportive of the school and speak highly of its work. They are very happy with the education provided for their children.

What the school does well:

- it promotes excellent relationships between adults and pupils;
- it provides a very effective personal, social and health education (PSHE) programme that underpins its strong ethos and contributes significantly to pupils' personal development;
- it emphasises the development of pupils' literacy, numeracy and speaking and listening skills;

- it offers good teaching, including specialist subject teaching, which enables pupils to achieve well and attain high standards;
- it makes good use of alternative and additional facilities to ensure that pupils have a broad range of learning activities; and
- it fulfils its philosophy of giving pupils an investigative and creative approach to independent learning.

What the school must do in order to comply with the regulations:

- have regard to the health, safety and welfare issues raised in sections 3 and 5 of this report.

What the school must do to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 2002:

- devise a three-year plan to improve the accessibility of the premises.

What the school must do to comply with the Children Act 1989 schedule 9A as amended by regulations in 2003

- the school should either cease to admit pupils before their third birthday or register this provision separately with Ofsted's Early Years Division.

Next Steps

Whilst not required by the regulations, the school might wish to consider the following points for development:

- share good practice in teaching, and especially in using assessment information, when planning tasks that match more precisely the different abilities of pupils; and
- develop systems for setting pupils individual targets and share these with parents and the pupils themselves.

COMPLIANCE WITH THE REGULATIONS FOR REGISTRATION

1. The quality of education provided by the school

The quality of the curriculum

The broad curriculum is of good quality. Pupils in the Nursery and Reception classes follow the Foundation Stage curriculum in the six areas of learning. In Years 1 and 2, all subjects of the National Curriculum are taught. Religious education (RE) is not offered, in line with the school's philosophy. The curriculum provides pupils with good support for their academic, physical and personal development. Those in the Foundation Stage make good progress and almost all exceed the early learning goals by the time they enter Year 1. A strong emphasis is placed on literacy and numeracy and pupils' speaking, listening, literacy and numeracy skills are very well developed in comparison to age-related expectations. The very effective programme of PSHE is taught through discrete lessons, circle time, year group assemblies and through other subjects, making a significant contribution to pupils' personal development. However, an imbalance exists in some timetabling; for example, Year 1 pupils spend a full afternoon at the sports field on the same day that they have a physical education (PE) lesson in the morning.

In order to offer a wide curriculum, the school makes good use of the facilities of its partners within the Foundation. Pupils from Reception upwards go to the senior school for swimming and sports, and Years 1 and 2 go to the junior branch for information and communication technology (ICT) and to borrow books from the library. A small range of extra-curricular activities offered before school or at lunchtime include choir, ballet and tae-kwon-do. Nearly half of the pupils in Years 1 and 2 learn a musical instrument, and all pupils in Year 2 learn the recorder. Pupils enjoy these activities and visits to places of interest. They regularly welcome visitors to the school to talk about their backgrounds, work or interests, particularly benefiting from the use of the local environment and services such as the police.

Good policies and schemes of work underpin teachers' planning for all subjects. Where appropriate, teachers make good links between various aspects of the curriculum; for instance, in an ICT lesson, Year 2 pupils were composing questions to ask their new 'buddies' in Reception in January. Many opportunities are given for investigative and creative work, such as a class project undertaken on 'A day in the life of a sphere', in line with the school's philosophy.

Good provision is made for those pupils with learning difficulties, and for those for whom English is an additional language. Individual education plans (IEPs) for these pupils contain targets relevant to their needs. Parents are involved in termly reviews of their children's progress. There are no pupils with a statement of special educational need.

The quality of teaching and assessment

The quality of teaching is good, enabling pupils to make good progress and to attain high standards by the time they leave at the age of seven. Very positive relationships underpin the calm, purposeful learning environment.

The atmosphere in classes is disciplined, but in a relaxed way that encourages pupils to ask questions and make suggestions. Teachers have high expectations of pupils' behaviour and work. As a result, pupils work hard, take pride in what they do and behave well to please their teachers. Good learning habits, such as completing homework regularly, are established from an early age.

All lessons have a clear structure. Teachers frequently start by telling pupils what they will be learning and end by reviewing what they have achieved. This sometimes includes pupils themselves reflecting on what they have learned and where they need more help. Some lesson planning is very detailed but this is not consistent. At its best, planning identifies how tasks may be adapted for pupils who learn at different rates but, at times, all pupils start by doing the same tasks. In mathematics, pupils have plenty of investigative work that challenges them but some tasks need further simplification for lower ability groups. Teachers know the pupils well and understand their strengths and weaknesses, so that during lessons they offer good individual attention and support to improve their work. Teaching assistants are deployed effectively to support some individuals and groups of pupils. Some teachers, but not all, evaluate their planning to show how well pupils coped with tasks and use this information to adapt tasks in future.

Teachers' subject knowledge is good. They are confident and give good demonstrations of skills that pupils emulate. This is particularly the case in art, music and PE where the school makes good use of specialist subject teaching. Some stunning art work, for instance, shows that pupils have been carefully taught specific skills. In music, a strong emphasis on developing pupils' aural skills contributes much to their ability to listen.

Many lessons have a strong focus on pupils answering questions and this contributes much to the development of their good speaking and listening skills and to the high levels of participation in most lessons. In mathematics, teachers encourage pupils to explain how they worked out their answers. Paired work is used effectively to help pupils explore ideas and learn from each other, making a good contribution to their personal development. Open-ended tasks offer a good level of challenge for pupils who, for example, are encouraged to persevere in solving problems.

Procedures for assessing what pupils know and can do are thorough. Pockets of exemplary practice are not shared to ensure that it is consistent. Teachers use regular tests in spelling, reading and mathematics to identify the levels at which pupils are working; pupils' writing is assessed regularly using National Curriculum levels. In Year 2, teachers set targets in literacy and mathematics but do not share these with the pupils or with parents. In Nursery and Reception, teachers collect samples of work and use these to build portfolios of pupils' progress through the Foundation Stage. Some teachers make regular observations of pupils' progress in lessons to build into a comprehensive picture of their development. Despite all this good practice, there is scope to make more effective use of this information to target the specific skills that pupils need to learn next and to develop target-setting.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

2. The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils is outstanding and is very successfully promoted through the excellent relationships shared with staff as well as with each other. Many opportunities are taken daily to promote the self-confidence, self-knowledge and self-esteem of pupils. In lessons, praise is continually offered to encourage them to build success upon success in their work. All pupils have the opportunity to be involved in school productions and concerts, giving a boost to their self-confidence. Whilst the school philosophy is that religion is a matter for the home and the family, festivals of some of the major world faiths are celebrated and discussed through visits from parents. Moments of wonder occur when the unexpected happens, for example when Nursery children made a print on paper from a painted leaf.

The school pays very good attention to promoting high standards of behaviour, and eliminating any forms of bullying, prejudice and harassment. Pupils are very keen on their 'achievement ladders' and look forward to arriving at step ten, when they visit the headteacher for a special 'headteacher's award'. The very effective PSHE programme provides lessons in moral issues, such as selfishness, truthfulness and rights and responsibilities. Circle time gives staff the opportunity to raise any issues that need explaining or resolving. Pupils say that they really enjoy school.

The school makes excellent provision for pupils' social development. Teachers provide very good role models in demonstrating courtesy, manners and care for others. Pupils treat each other with respect and kindness. In the 'Star of the Week' award in Year 1, pupils write a sentence about why they think the chosen pupil is a star, and sentences such as *'I like you because you are fun'* or *'I like you because you read with me'* exemplify the fact that they always look for the best in each other and appreciate each other's company. Pupils generally work and play very well together; they are polite to adults and each other, making new pupils feel at home very quickly. In Years 1 and 2, they enjoy taking on small responsibilities and tasks that serve the common good, and, particularly for Year 2 pupils, the task of acting as 'buddies' to the pupils in Reception.

Pupils show their concern for those less fortunate than themselves by supporting various charities, such as raising money in a 'Jeans for Genes' day, giving Christmas presents to children in hospital and buying goats for families in Africa. The development of their cultural awareness is strong. They learn about how other people around the world live and the food they eat. Cultural visits to places of interest such as museums occur regularly, and the school welcomes visitors and parents to talk about their interests, backgrounds and cultural differences. In this way, pupils learn about the diversity of traditions, and how to live in tolerance and harmony among their friends. Music, art, design and technology and literacy all play a very important part in developing pupils' understanding about cultures other than their own.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

3. The welfare, health and safety of the pupils

The general day-to-day care of pupils is good and is underpinned by excellent relationships. Parents are right to be confident that staff treat pupils fairly and with respect. The school has a range of policies that have been updated recently and many of its procedures in this area are good. However, the school does not meet requirements fully in some important areas.

The anti-bullying policy has a clear definition of bullying and sets out effectively the roles and responsibilities of staff and parents. Together with the behaviour policy it establishes a positive approach to discipline which involves parents when necessary. It emphasises the use of praise and rewards to build pupils' confidence and self-esteem but also contains a very clear set of responses with levels of sanctions appropriate to the behaviour of the pupils. In practice, this works well and overt behaviour management is rarely required, except when pupils get excited by what they are learning. Pupils are able to learn in a calm atmosphere where they feel secure and confident that they know who to turn to with a problem. The school has made arrangements to keep records of any incidents of poor behaviour that might incur sanctions of a serious nature but has not needed to use these. Arrangements for First Aid are good and accidents are recorded carefully. The school's policy and procedures for administering medicines conform to current guidelines.

The school completes regular and thorough risk assessments on the building, events, curricular activities and visits to places of interest. Staff are alert to potential hazards in the lessons they plan. Fire equipment is checked regularly and the school undertakes its own fire risk assessments. A visit from the local fire officer earlier this term noted several contraventions that require urgent action and a revisit has been arranged for the end of November. The school is working to fulfil the required changes.

The admission register contains the necessary information on pupils but staff do not always complete attendance registers promptly at the start of the day, in contravention of requirements.

The school's policy for child protection, based on that of the local authority, is comprehensive and gives staff clear guidance. It meets the latest requirements. However, not all staff have had basic training and more importantly, the person designated to take the lead responsibility for dealing with child protection issues has not had the full training for this role. The school has acted promptly to secure appropriate training for a member of staff in the very near future.

The school has undertaken an audit of the site to identify areas that might be modified to improve accessibility for pupils with disabilities but has not yet devised a three-year plan of action for making any such changes to the building or to the curriculum.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

No.

What does the school need to do to comply with the regulations?

In order to comply with the Independent Schools Standards Regulations 2003 the school should:

- ensure that all staff, but especially the designated child protection officer, receives appropriate training in compliance with Department for Education and Skills guidance: 'Safeguarding Children in Education' (paragraph 3(2)(b)); and*
- complete registers promptly at the start of the day in accordance with the Education (Pupil Registration) Regulations 1995 (paragraph 3(9)).*

What does the school need to do to comply with the DDA?

In order to comply with the requirements of the DDA the school should:

- devise a three-year plan to improve the accessibility of the premises.*

4. The suitability of the proprietor and staff

The school has thorough procedures for checking the identity, employment history and qualifications of staff before confirming their appointment. References are taken up from previous employers. Staff are required to confirm their medical fitness as part of the application process. All staff are checked through the Criminal Records Bureau to ensure their suitability to work with children.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

5. The suitability of the premises and accommodation

Overall, accommodation is of an adequate standard. It is provided on two levels with several groups of internal steps between classrooms. Although one is rather small, the classrooms are appropriate in size for the activities which take place in them. Specialist areas for art and music, a library area and a small gymnasium for PE and ballet, have a positive impact on the curriculum provided. However, the school does not have a suitable room available where pupils may be looked after if they fall ill during the school day. All rooms are safe, hygienic, well lit, heated and ventilated. The premises are very well maintained and in very good decorative order. Furniture and fittings are modern, attractive and appropriately designed for the age and needs of the pupils. High quality displays of pupils' work adorn the walls around the school, creating an attractive learning environment and celebrating their efforts. Whilst the site includes only a very small hard play area, the school makes best use of this by staggering playtimes. In addition, pupils from Reception and Years 1 and 2 use the senior school sports field and the junior school playground to supplement opportunities for exercise and play activities.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

The school complies with all but one of the requirements.

What does the school need to do to comply with the regulations?

In order to comply fully with the Independent Schools Standards Regulations 2003 the school should:

- *provide appropriate facilities for pupils who are ill (paragraph 5(l)).*

6. The quality of information for parents and other partners

Responses to the parents' questionnaire indicate that almost all parents consider that they are well informed about their children's progress at school and feel welcome to contact the school if they wish to discuss any matter. The school enjoys a strong partnership with parents.

The school makes a wide range of information available to parents. The attractive printed prospectus is part of the introductory information to the University College School Foundation group of schools, and this outlines the philosophy of the school and its curricular provision. It is supplemented by additional documents in which staff lists and particulars of pertinent policies are provided. Parents also receive a full and detailed handbook as their children begin their education at the school. Weekly newsletters keep them up-to-date about school information and events, and they also receive school magazines from the Foundation.

Very informative reports are provided for parents in December, which concentrate on the core subjects of English and mathematics, and at the end of the academic year, which give information on all subjects taught. These cover pupils' progress in all aspects of the curriculum as well as their personal development. However, they do not set targets for pupils' future learning. Parents have good opportunities to attend parents' evenings to receive school information or to discuss their children's progress. Parents of pupils with learning difficulties or disabilities, or of those pupils with English as an additional language, are invited to regular reviews of the targets set in their children's IEPs. A parents' guild encourages them to be involved in the life of the school, and several parents support the curriculum by visiting to talk about their interest and backgrounds. Fund-raising events raise considerable sums that are shared between the school and charities.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

7. The effectiveness of the school's procedures for handling complaints

The school's comprehensive procedures for handling complaints are published in the parents' handbook. Despite this, over a quarter of parents who responded to the pre-inspection questionnaire indicated that they did not understand them. Parents are encouraged to raise matters informally and so, to date, the formal stages of the procedures have not been required.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?
Yes.

SCHOOL DETAILS

Name of school:	The Phoenix School
DfES Number:	202/6393
Type of school:	Pre-preparatory
Status:	Independent
Age range of pupils:	3 - 7 years
Gender of pupils:	Mixed
Number on roll (full-time pupils):	Boys: 38 Girls: 20 Total: 58
Number on roll (part-time pupils):	Boys: 29 Girls: 27 Total: 56
Annual fees (day pupils):	£6,990 - £10,275
Address of school:	36 College Crescent London NW3 5LF
Telephone number:	020 7722 4433
Fax number:	020 7722 4601
Email address:	info@ucsphoenix.org.uk
Headteacher:	Miss Jane Humble
Proprietor:	The Phoenix School Limited
Reporting Inspector:	Mrs Jane Wotherspoon HMI
Date of inspection:	30 October - 2 November 2006

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