



# Mark College

Independent Special School

Inspection report

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DfES Registration Number	933/6185
Unique Reference Number	123933
Inspection number	296846
Inspection dates	23-24 January 2007
Reporting inspector	Mr Andrew Redpath HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 162A of the Education Act 2002 (as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005).

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Age group 10-17	Published 16 February 2007	Reference no. 296846
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## Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by Ofsted under section 162A of the Education Act 2002, as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005, 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

Mark College is a residential special school which provides education for pupils with specific learning difficulties (SpLD), such as dyslexia and dyspraxia. It was established in 1986 and is approved by the Department of Education and Skills (DfES) to admit up to 88 pupils. Currently 80 pupils are on roll aged between 10 and 17 years; almost half have a statement of special educational needs (SEN) and a small number attend as day pupils. They come from homes throughout the United Kingdom and several are from overseas. Most places are privately funded with just under half being funded by pupils' local authorities. The school has recently begun admitting girls although their current number is very small. Provision is being extended to include education for post-16 students from September 2007. The school is in the ownership of The Priory Group, which owns several other establishments providing education for children with special educational needs. The school was last inspected in 2001.

The school seeks to raise pupils' self-esteem through promoting their academic and sporting achievement. Staff employ structured approaches specifically designed for helping pupils with dyslexia to overcome their learning difficulties and to experience success.

## Evaluation of the school

Mark College provides a good quality of education which meets all but a few of the regulations. Good teaching and the use of specialised programmes which focus on pupils' SpLD ensure they make good academic progress. The provision for sport is outstanding and plays a major part in promoting pupils' self-esteem and developing their positive attitudes and behaviour. The personal care of pupils is of high quality due to the interest and concern shown by staff. The school has continued to maintain the high standard of education described in the last inspection report.

## Quality of education

The quality of the curriculum is good overall and provision for physical education (PE) and sport is outstanding. Pupils are offered a busy and productive day which includes a wide range of academic and sporting challenges and culminates in evening 'prep' or homework. The curriculum takes close account of the National Curriculum and planning is thorough for the

subjects provided. The school does not feel it is appropriate to teach a modern foreign language to pupils with SpLD and currently music is not provided regularly due to staffing difficulties. There is an appropriate balance between subjects which includes a strong emphasis on developing pupils' literacy skills. Carefully designed individual programmes to tackle pupils' SpLD are in place. Additional support from a speech and language therapist and an occupational therapist ensures that the requirements of pupils' statements of SEN are met in full. A good range of subjects is offered up to GCSE level and older pupils are given appropriate careers guidance and work experience. A personal, social and health education (PSHE) programme is in place, although this has not yet been extended to include specific arrangements to meet the needs of girls. The school is aware of this as an area for further development. The school is extremely successful in providing a wide range of sporting activities which includes football, rugby, cricket, cross country running, swimming and athletics. Many of these events take place after school and are enhanced by the boarding provision. In recognition of its success in this area the school achieved the Sportsmark Award with distinction in 2003.

The quality of teaching and learning is good across the school and as a result pupils make good and sometimes outstanding progress. Teachers have good subject knowledge which leads to confident presentation in lessons and high expectations. Teachers have enthusiasm for their subject which captures pupils' interest and motivates them to work hard. There is a positive climate for learning where any slight misdemeanour is quickly checked, usually with good humour. As a result, pupils respect teachers, have positive attitudes and their behaviour is good. In the best lessons pupils are encouraged to work collaboratively and develop their own ideas, such as in PE when they assess each other's work, or in English when they discuss Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*. Information and communication technology is used well, for example to support pupils' creative writing, enabling them to dictate stories which are transposed into script. In a few lessons, the teacher directs activities too closely and there is insufficient opportunity for pupils to devise their own solutions to problems. Also, planning in some lessons is too brief and does not take sufficient account of pupils' individual needs. This, occasionally, results in pupils with different skills being set similar work and some not being appropriately challenged.

The school is recognised widely for its expertise in teaching pupils with SpLD. Most teachers have specialist knowledge in the field and half have gained higher qualifications. This knowledge is used very effectively to assess pupils' learning on entry to the school and to diagnose their specific area of difficulty. Individual programmes are then drawn up and systematically followed, supported by a good range of resources to help pupils with SpLD. Evidence shows that this approach is successfully raising the achievement of pupils, many of whom have failed to thrive in their previous schools. Pupils make considerable progress in reading, writing and mathematics given their starting points. Pupils are consistently successful in achieving good grades in GCSE

examinations. In 2006, passes were extremely high with 82% of pupils achieving five A\* - C grades. Successes in team and individual sporting events are outstanding, especially in view of the relatively small number attending the school. Pupils are well-prepared for leaving and most progress successfully to courses of further study.

## Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the pupils

Provision for pupils' spiritual, moral and social development is good and for their cultural development it is satisfactory. Pupils settle quickly and successfully to their life and work in school. They learn to value what it has to offer them and express very positive views about the support they receive. In particular, pupils enjoy the sporting activities and recognise how these boost their self-confidence. Pupils also describe how they have been helped to overcome their learning difficulties. In the words of one: 'I knew I was capable of learning and unlike anywhere else I have been, people here understand me and because of this they can really teach me.' This is most pupils' experience and it gives them confidence and boosts their self-esteem. As a result, pupils enjoy coming to school and their behaviour is good. The camaraderie from sharing similar learning difficulties produces strong bonds and leads to positive relationships between pupils throughout the school. This informs clear values about supporting each other and respecting the school and staff. All join in, including girls and those who have English as an additional language. Pupils contribute in school by being helpful and by taking part in activities. Some become prefects, dining room monitors, captains of sports teams or serve on the school council. Beyond school, they join in local drama activities and occasionally raise money for good causes. Young people learn about public institutions and services through the citizenship course and by taking part in the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme. Cultural knowledge is developed through a range of visits, for example to historical sites in Belgium, local field trips to Exmoor and a biennial trip to the United States. Although pupils do discuss cultural traditions other than their own, this is not accomplished in depth.

## Welfare, health and safety of the pupils

The provision for pupils' welfare, health and safety is satisfactory. The personal care of pupils is of high quality because of the interest and concern shown by staff and the effective co-operation that exists between the school and the boarding houses. There is a good rapport between staff and behaviour is managed effectively. Pupils report they do not feel at risk of threats or intimidation and that they can discuss any concerns with an adult. The few incidents of bullying have been handled sensitively but firmly. The provision of healthy meals and wide range of sporting activities successfully promote pupils' healthy lifestyles. Pupils are happy as boarders and enjoy all that living at

school offers. The atmosphere in the boarding houses is friendly and calm and pupils are given appropriate levels of freedom and independence which they use well. Boarding provision works closely with the day school in promoting pupils' academic progress and their personal development.

The school has much that is effective in its provision for ensuring pupils stay safe. Staff are kept up-to-date on safeguarding pupils through regular training and they carry out frequent health and safety checks and regular fire drills. The planning of trips away from school includes an assessment of the possible risks. Much systematic risk assessment is undertaken and this is audited to ensure it meets requirements. However, some procedures need strengthening. A number of key features of safety in the design and technology workshop are not in place. The school's ability to respond promptly with minor repairs to light fittings, showers and the fabric of the buildings is too limited and some of these defects give rise to safety risks. The school is aware of this issue and is currently seeking to appoint a member of staff with a clearer health and safety brief. The attendance register is completed twice daily, but is not marked during the afternoon session as required. The school has begun to improve access for disabled users and meets the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act.

### Suitability of the proprietor and staff

All staff have been subject to satisfactory clearance at an enhanced level with the Criminal Records Bureau. For all new appointments, the school follows up references, checks their identity and confirms the validity of qualifications. To date, information regarding the medical fitness of applicants has not been sought, although the school has recently amended its procedures to ensure this happens in future.

### School's premises and accommodation

The school provides a good standard of accommodation. It occupies a former Georgian farmhouse and converted stables and is set in spacious grounds. In recent years new buildings have been added to increase the number of classrooms and to extend the residential accommodation. Classrooms are generally small but of adequate size for the numbers of pupils using them. There are specialist rooms for teaching all subjects and withdrawal rooms for therapy and individual study. There is impressive provision for PE and sport which includes a large gym, weight training room, and several outdoor areas where pupils can play tennis, basketball, football and rugby. This supports very effectively the school's priority to encourage physical exercise and healthy outdoor recreation.

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## Provision of information for parents, carers and others

The school provides all the necessary information for parents and others to comply with the regulations. All new pupils receive a '*Welcome to our new students*' booklet which contains useful information, such as a list of the clubs on offer and advice on what to do should there be any worries or concerns. Parents receive detailed reports regarding their child's progress and a termly newsletter helps to keep them informed of wider school activities and events. Returns from the parental questionnaires sent out prior to the inspection show that parents feel well-informed about their child's progress and they are very happy with the work of the school.

## Procedures for handling complaints

The school has a clear policy which sets out how informal and formal complaints can be made to the school. The school logs any concerns that parents may have and deals with them promptly.

## Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school meets all of the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2003 as amended January 2005, with the exception of those listed below.

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of provision for pupils' welfare, health and safety (standard 3) and must:

- have regard to the DfES guidance *Health and safety: responsibilities and powers* (DfES 0803/2001), (paragraph 3(4))
- maintain an attendance register in accordance with the Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006 (paragraph 3(9)).

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of suitability of proprietor and staff (standard 4) and must:

- prior to the confirmation of the appointment of all staff ensure appropriate checks are carried out to confirm their medical fitness (paragraph 4(c))
- in the case of staff who care for, train, supervise or are in charge of children in boarding accommodation, comply with Standard 27 of the National Minimum Standards for Residential Special Schools, regarding checks to confirm the medical fitness of staff (paragraph 4(d)).

## What the school could do to improve further

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

- ensure that all lesson planning takes close account of pupils' individual needs
- increase opportunities for pupils to acquire an appreciation of and respect for different cultural traditions.



## School details

Name of school	Mark College		
DfES number	933/6185		
Unique reference number	123933		
Type of school	Special boarding school		
Status	Independent		
Date school opened	1986		
Age range of pupils	10-17		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 79	Girls: 1	Total: 80
Number of boarders	Boys: 70	Girls: 0	Total: 70
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational need	Boys: 33	Girls: 0	Total: 33
Number of pupils who are looked after	Boys: 0	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Annual fees (day pupils)	£14,640 - £21,150		
Annual fees (boarders)	£20,448 - £28,134		
Address of school	Mark College		
	Highbridge		
	Somerset		
	TA9 4NP		
Telephone number	01278641632		
Fax number	01278641426		
Email address	markcollege@priorygroup.com		
Headteacher	Mrs Julie Kay		
Proprietor	Mr Stephen Bradshaw, Priory Education Services		
Reporting inspector	Mr Andrew Redpath HMI		
Dates of inspection	23-24 January 2007		