

Inspection report
The Unicorn School
Independent special school
DfES ref no: 931/6109

Inspection under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002

Dates of inspection: 4 - 5 October 2006

Introduction

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 as part of pilot inspection arrangements 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 Unicorn School caters for primary aged pupils with specific learning difficulties associated with dyslexia. After opening in 1991 with five pupils, numbers rapidly increased and there are now 40 pupils on roll. All pupils are placed at the school by their families, including three pupils with statements of special educational need. Pupils stay at the school for between one and three years and then usually rejoin non-specialist schools in the independent or state systems. In September this year 15 new pupils joined the school. The school brochure states that: *'In addition to catering for the educational needs of the dyslexic child, the school also aims to meet emotional and social needs.'*

The school has occupied two different sites prior to moving to their current location in 2001, now within a small house leased from Abingdon School. This lease will soon expire and Unicorn will relocate within the next two years. The school was last inspected in 2000.

Overall evaluation of the school

The Unicorn School provides a good quality of education and care for its pupils. It quite rightly enjoys the overwhelming support of parents and meets the vast majority of regulations for registration. The school meets its stated aims through a clear focus on learning and care needs for each individual. This enables pupils to grow in confidence and make good progress in their academic as well as personal skills.

The quality of the curriculum is good. There is a strong emphasis on the development of skills in literacy and numeracy within the general curriculum as well as in individual sessions. A particular strength of the curriculum is the daily 30-minute one-to-one tuition provided for all pupils with their key tutor. These sessions focus on targets in their individual education plans (IEP) and are co-ordinated appropriately with pupils' class work, ensuring consistency and maximising opportunities to apply learning. Sessions are carefully planned throughout the morning so that pupils do not miss any whole class teaching. All subjects of the National Curriculum are taught, together with religious education (RE) and personal, social and health education (PSHE). In Year 6 pupils are taught French, with an appropriate emphasis on speaking and listening. Information and communications technology (ICT) is taught as a discrete subject and the school has correctly

identified the need to increase the use of ICT to support learning in other subjects. Schemes of work are in place and these provide a sound basis for individual lesson planning, although they lack sufficient information about how to assess learning through curriculum activities. The curriculum is enhanced through a range of after-school clubs including shooting, cooking, art and sports. These are very popular and over-subscribed. Within this broad, inclusive curriculum, the needs of individual pupils are identified and catered for successfully and this helps to prepare them well for their future schooling.

Good teaching enables pupils to make good progress and to enjoy learning. Staff work well together to exchange information about how well pupils are doing. This results in consistent approaches to address pupils' individual needs and informs lesson planning. Teachers are sensitive to the previous anxieties that pupils may have had with schoolwork and routines. They are well informed about the best way to support learning needs and apply a range of strategies that help new pupils to settle quickly and resume learning. Lively, sometimes exuberant, behaviour is managed well in the knowledge that pupils need to be active and experience 'hands-on' learning. In this way, behaviour does not detract from the learning experience and pupils complete tasks confidently and competently. Procedures for assessment are satisfactory and suitable steps are in place to develop practice. All pupils have individual targets but they are not always sharp enough to help staff measure how well pupils are achieving agreed goals. Pupils compose their own version of these targets, often in visual form and these are very effective in helping pupils to be actively involved in what they can do to improve their own skills. Sometimes, opportunities to use targets to help pupils to assess their own progress are missed. The school has started to offer an outreach service to local schools, working with staff to support learning for pupils who are dyslexic. This has been well received. Staff are also able to give some support to pupils during transition times either before they come to Unicorn or after they leave.

By the time they leave the school pupils attain levels of work that are above those achieved by pupils with specific learning difficulties nationally and approaching national averages for all pupils of their age for English and mathematics. For the past 5 years pupils have reached standards above national expectations in science. This represents good progress from individual starting points. Particularly good progress is evident in reading, less so in spelling but showing steady progress. A key to good progress is the way in which staff enable new pupils to settle very quickly and experience success. 'I realise that I'm not so bad at spelling' said one new pupil and another commented 'I've got better in a few weeks already'.

The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils is good. The pupils are articulate, have good attitudes to work and are sensitive to the needs of others. They have good relationships with staff and particularly value friendships with one another. They grow in confidence in their learning and clearly enjoy coming to school. Attendance is good and it has improved. Behaviour in class and at play is good and incidents of inappropriate behaviour are rare. Pupils enthusiastically take advantage of physical activities offered at break times, before school and at the end of the day. This contributes significantly to developing good coordination and

concentration, as well as awareness of healthy living. The school council take their responsibilities very seriously and classmates hold them in high regard. Members are elected and meet regularly. They are currently very keen to discuss what they would like for a new school.

The attention that staff and governors give to welfare, health and safety is good. High quality care is matched with a clear focus on learning and achievement, effectively supporting good progress in academic and personal development. Pupils and their families speak very positively about the support that they get from staff. They are particularly appreciative of the relaxed and purposeful atmosphere, acknowledging that this enables learning to take place. Pupils benefit from the sessions with their one-to-one tutor, not only for the teaching input but also because they can talk about how well they are doing and things that might be worrying them. Good relationships, together with aspects of the PSHE curriculum raise awareness of how to keep one another safe. Pupils are encouraged to eat healthily, particularly at lunchtime when they are prompted and expected to make healthy choices. The school is able to offer art therapy for identified pupils and is developing good relationships with support services. All staff and governors are mindful of the particular health and safety considerations in relation to the needs of their pupils and in respect of limitations of the current site. For example, pupils are supervised closely when outside the main building and when walking off-site to use facilities at Abingdon School. Health and safety policies are reviewed annually and are supported by risk assessments to cover a range of situations. Not all health and safety aspects are covered in guidelines for off-site activities and trips. Designated staff for child protection and first aid have the required training and others have had relevant training for safeguarding pupils. All staff have appropriate clearance from the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) and governors are currently completing required documentation.

Staff work very hard to provide a purposeful learning environment within the limitations of the accommodation. Classrooms are an adequate size for the number of pupils but room for storage and use of additional resources is very limited. Access to two classrooms and to the one-to-one rooms is outside the main building. There are insufficient toilets for the number of boys. The school office also serves as the headteacher's office, staffroom and medical room. This does not meet the requirement for a room for children when they are ill. Outside areas are good places for pupils to play and for physical education (PE) when the weather is good. The school uses facilities at Abingdon School, a short walk away, for school lunches and indoor sports. The school has looked into how the building might be more accessible to those with a disability and has devised a plan in accordance with requirements. Governors are very aware of the limitations of the current accommodation and arrangements and plans to relocate the school to purpose-built premises are well advanced.

A major strength of the school is the good relationships with pupils' families. Families receive good information prior to the pupil's admission and throughout the year in formal reports and at meetings. The speed at which individual plans are put in place and the regularity with which they are reviewed is very useful to parents in knowing

how well their child is doing and how to support their learning at home. Parents contact the school on a regular basis to exchange information and, should the need arise for making a complaint, the school policy is clear.

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 the welfare, health and safety of the pupils (standard 3) and must:

- prepare and implement a written policy relating to the health and safety of pupils on activities outside the school which has regard to DfES guidance (reference HSPV2): "Health and Safety of Pupils on Educational Visits" (paragraph 3(2)(c)).

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

- ensure that members of the governing body are subject to a check with the Criminal Records Bureau to confirm their suitability to work with children (paragraph 4(b)).

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of the suitability of the premises and accommodation (standard 5) and must:

- provide sufficient washrooms for pupils, which take account of the Education (School Premises) Regulations 1999 (paragraph 5(k)); and
- provide appropriate facilities for pupils who are ill in accordance with the Education (School Premises) Regulations 1999 (paragraph 5(l)).

What the school could do to improve further

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

- to use assessment information more effectively to inform targets and evaluate rates of pupil progress, and
- to increase opportunities to develop pupils' skills in ICT throughout the curriculum.

School details

Name of school:	The Unicorn School		
DfES Number:	931/6109		
Type of school:	Independent		
Status:	Special		
Date school opened:	1991		
Age range of pupils:	7-12		
Gender of pupils:	Mixed		
Number on roll :	Boys: 37	Girls: 3	Total: 40
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational need:	Boys: 2	Girls: 1	Total: 3
Annual fees (day pupils):	£12,300		
Address of school:	Whitefield 18 Park Crescent Abingdon Oxfordshire OX14 1DD		
Telephone number:	01235 530222		
Fax number:	01235 530222		
Email address:	unicorndyslexia@hotmail.com		
Headteacher:	Jacqueline Vaux		
Proprietor:	The Unicorn School for the Dyslexic Child		
Reporting Inspector:	Heather Yaxley HMI		
Dates of inspection:	4 - 5 October 2006		

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