

Atkinson House School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	132771
Local Authority	Northumberland
Inspection number	301658
Inspection date	5 July 2007
Reporting inspector	Andrew Margerison

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

Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Boys
Number on roll	
School	40
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Councillor Elsie Harvey
Headteacher	Mr Richard McGlashan
Date of previous school inspection	1 March 2004
School address	North Terrace Seghill Cramlington Northumberland NE23 7EB
Telephone number	0191 298 0838
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one Additional Inspector.

Description of the school

Atkinson House students are brought to school from the nearby towns of Cramlington, Ashington, Newbiggin and Blyth, although a few travel further. All students have a statement of special educational needs identifying emotional, social and behavioural difficulties as their main area of special needs. In addition, many of the students have additional learning needs such as moderate learning difficulties, attention deficit disorder and related clinical diagnoses. All of the boys have had significant problems adjusting to a mainstream school setting and most have had their education interrupted by periods of exclusion and absence. Virtually all students are of White British origin. Almost half the current students joined the school at a time other than in Year 7. Students start at the school with well below average levels of skills, particularly in basic literacy and numeracy.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Atkinson House School is a good school providing good value for money. Due to good leadership and management by the headteacher, senior staff and governors, it has improved well since the last inspection.

As a result of good teaching, students achieve well relative to their starting point when they join the school. They make good progress in developing their basic literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) skills in Years 7 to 9 so that, although still below average, most are working at levels closer to that expected for their age. This good progress is maintained in Years 10 and 11 so that all students attain externally accredited qualifications, many at GCSE or NVQ level. In English, progress is satisfactory. All students gain externally accredited qualifications, but a few more able students do not always reach levels their performance at the end of Year 9 suggests they are capable of.

Students' personal development, including their spiritual, moral and social development, is good. Their cultural development is satisfactory. Those parents who responded to the inspection questionnaire almost unanimously agree that their children enjoy school. This is reflected in students' good behaviour and their enthusiasm in lessons. Considering students' learning difficulties and the previous experiences many of these students have had of school, this is of considerable credit to the school. These positive aspects of students' personal development reflect the effective procedures the school has to promote good behaviour and to encourage the students to take responsibility for their own actions. Students also have a good understanding of how to stay safe in different situations and of the importance of leading a healthy lifestyle. Together with the good range of work-related activities included in the curriculum and their secure basic skills, students are well prepared for moving on at the end of Year 11 to the next phase of their education.

The good teaching is typically characterised by teachers having clear aims for each lesson, which are shared with students. These give a coherent sense of purpose to lessons, which helps teachers and support staff to manage students well and to ensure that, for the most part, students are fully engaged in their learning. The strong teamwork between teaching and support staff is very evident. Activities are generally well matched to students' abilities, although the school has recognised that there is more scope for assessment information to be used more rigorously to improve some students' progress. The good curriculum includes a broad range of activities to enhance and enrich the experiences of students. Personal, social and health education has a high profile. The school uses visiting staff well to contribute to the curriculum and to the support and guidance it provides for students.

The school has established good procedures to evaluate the quality of its work, although at times it is too modest in its overall evaluation, particularly where students' achievement and personal development are concerned. This partly reflects the omission of success criteria that relate to the expected improvements in students' performance in the school development plan. As a result, the school is not totally secure in its capacity to evaluate the effect of new initiatives on students' learning. Nevertheless, the school knows itself well and is strongly placed to improve further.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve the progress of more able students in English in Years 10 and 11.

- Refine the school development plan so that new initiatives are linked, where possible, to improvements in students' academic progress or personal development.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Students achieve well. From a well below average starting point, students make good progress. In Years 7 to 9, they make good gains in their basic skills in literacy, numeracy and ICT. Consequently, although standards are still below average in Year 9, the gap has narrowed and students are well prepared for embarking on externally accredited courses in a range of subjects. Very small cohorts and student mobility make comparing the school's results in Year 11 from year to year difficult. However, the proportion of students attaining external qualifications at GCSE or NVQ level, as well as the range of subjects involved, has steadily increased since the last inspection. This reflects improvements in the curriculum and the good progress students make in Years 10 and 11. This is particularly the case in mathematics, science and ICT. For example, school data show that, in mathematics, all students in the current Year 11 are working at GCSE level and have already attained an entry level pass. However, in English, progress is satisfactory. Students' speaking, listening and reading skills are secure but a few more able students do not make the progress they should based on their standards at the end of Year 9. This is because their ability to express their ideas and demonstrate their understanding through their writing is not as good. As a result, although all students in the current Year 11 have attained an Entry level GCSE, no student is working at full GCSE standard in this subject. There is no evidence of any differences in the achievement of other groups of students.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Students' personal development is good. Their spiritual and moral development is good. Since the last inspection, the school has made good progress in improving the provision for students' social and cultural development; both of which were unsatisfactory. These are now good and satisfactory respectively. The school is a calm and orderly place to learn, with good relationships evident between adults and students. Students very clearly understand and respect the sophisticated systems the school has established for managing and rewarding good behaviour. Very importantly, students feel the systems are 'fair'. As a result, behaviour is good and the number of exclusions has fallen again this year for the fourth consecutive year. Students' attendance is satisfactory. The vast majority of students really enjoy being at school so that most students attend well. Apart from a group of students whose attendance is low because of external factors out of the school's control, only a handful of students do not attend regularly enough. As students move through the school, they learn to take responsibility for themselves and make a good contribution through the School Support Group. Many of the suggestions the group has made have been implemented by the school. Students have a good appreciation of how to stay safe and of how to live a healthy lifestyle. They really enjoy the opportunities provided to learn work-related skills at college and on work placement. Overall, students are well prepared for moving on to the next phase of their lives.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Teaching and learning are good. A key factor in the good progress students make is the very consistent approach to managing students' behaviour in lessons. Given the background of the students, it is of considerable testimony to all staff that lessons are generally calm and productive learning experiences for students. The school has put a lot of time into achieving a coherent approach to teaching and learning. Typically, the aims of lessons are shared with students at the start so they understand what is expected of them and what they should do. Activities are frequently practical and use real-life scenarios that students can relate to. As a result, students are keen to take part, willingly contribute their ideas and respond well to teachers' challenging questioning. ICT is used well in many lessons as a teaching and learning tool. Subject specialists are used well to teach many lessons. As a result, activities and teaching methods are usually carefully matched to students' abilities so that they make good progress irrespective of their difficulties. For example, in mathematics, the school has successfully targeted the teaching of more able students, which is one of the factors that has contributed to the consistently good progress students make in this subject across the school. The school has recognised that there is scope to use assessment information more rigorously to extend this example of good practice to other subjects such as English.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum has improved well since the last inspection and is now good. In Years 7 to 9, students benefit from a balanced curriculum with a strong emphasis on developing their basic skills. A broad range of externally accredited courses is provided for students in Years 10 and 11 that extends their academic and work-related skills well. External providers, including local colleges, a link with a specialist physical education college and other providers such as visiting musicians, enhance the range of experiences available for students well. Personal, social and health education, including sex and drugs education, has a high priority and makes a good contribution to students' understanding of how to live a safe and healthy lifestyle. The school provides some opportunities out of lessons for additional activities such as sports and a residential trip to Scotland, and is currently exploring ways of extending these further.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

This aspect of the school's work is good. Of those parents who responded to the inspection questionnaire, virtually all had great confidence in the school in this area. The procedures for ensuring students' health and safety are very thorough and its procedures for safeguarding students meet national requirements. The school has excellent links with external organisations and other professionals. As a result, all students, including those in the care of the local authority, are well supported. There are good procedures to track students' academic and personal progress and the information is used well to set, with students, individual targets. These targets and a comment on how well students have worked towards them are sent home weekly so parents and carers are kept fully informed on how their children are getting on. Procedures for promoting good attendance are satisfactory, but the school has appointed a

member of staff for the coming year whose role will be to liaise with parents and carers, partly to improve the attendance of those few students who miss too much school.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The school's leadership and management are good. The headteacher and senior managers have succeeded in establishing a whole-school ethos of discussion and commitment to continued development. This includes students through the School Support Group and the daily whole-school meeting where successes and difficulties are shared and discussed. Teachers are taking an increasingly proactive role in developing their areas of responsibility. This is reflected in the steadily increasing range of externally accredited courses and work-related opportunities for older students. Governors are actively involved in the school and provide good support for the staff. They are regular visitors to school and have a good understanding of the strengths of the school and where it is going. The ethos of teamwork is reflected in the school development plan. All staff were involved in drawing this together and no contributions were dismissed. Consequently, it is a very detailed and extremely comprehensive document that covers all aspects of the school's work. However, its value as a guide for measuring the effect of new initiatives on students' learning is limited by the success criteria. These are too generalised and rarely refer to measurable improvements in students' progress. This is one of the main reasons why, despite having good procedures to evaluate its own work, the judgements on students' achievement and personal development were too modest.

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

Achievement and standards

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

Personal development and well-being

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

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	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.

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	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
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

5 July 2007

Dear Students

Inspection of Atkinson House School, Northumberland, NE23 7EB

Thank you for welcoming me to your school this week when I arrived to do the inspection. Overall, I think you go to a good school that has improved well recently. I was impressed by your behaviour and willingness to get on with your work in lessons. I think that you are taught well and, as a result, make good progress. This is particularly the case in mathematics, science and ICT. I enjoyed finding out about the work you have done to improve your school through the School Support Group and pleased to see how willing you are to take on responsibility for helping to introduce your ideas. You are obviously well cared for and the staff place a very high priority on making sure you get as much help as possible to make the right choices about the way you live your lives and what you might do when you leave school. I think that you are well prepared for moving on and I hope you will remember what you have learnt and the good advice you have been given in the future.

To make your school even better I have made two main recommendations. First, I have asked the school to look at ways of how the more capable learners among you might do better in English. Second, although your school has a very detailed plan for improving itself further, the plan needs to be more sharply focused on checking that new ideas are having a positive effect on your learning.

Best wishes for the future

Yours sincerely

Andy Margerison

Lead inspector