

The Meadows School

Inspection report

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| Unique Reference Number | 131905 |
| Local Authority | Durham |
| Inspection number | 301660 |
| Inspection dates | 18–19 April 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 category | Community special |
| Age range of pupils | 11–16 |
| Gender of pupils | Mixed |
| Number on roll | |
| School | 63 |
| Appropriate authority | The governing body |
| Chair | Mrs Lynn Laird |
| Headteacher | Mr George Harris |
| Date of previous school inspection | 1 June 2003 |
| School address | Whitworth Lane Spennymoor County Durham DL16 7QW |
| Telephone number | 01388 811178 |
| Fax number | 01388 814050 |

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|--------------------------|------------------|
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by an Additional Inspector.

Description of the school

The Meadows is a school for students with statements of special educational need, reflecting their significant social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Students are drawn from a wide area, most of which experiences considerable social and economic disadvantage. All students are White British; 13 are looked after by the local authority. Many students are admitted other than at the start of each year and it is not uncommon for students to join the school other than in Year 7. Boys significantly outnumber girls. Attainment on entry is often very low, with many students having experienced considerable disruption to their education prior to being admitted. Many students stay on at school for three hours of after-school activities which extend the school day.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

The Meadows is a good school. Most parents agree and many students confirm the fact. The school is highly thought of by the many professionals with whom it works very closely to ensure good outcomes for students, setting them on the way to brighter futures than they could have expected were it not for the education and support they receive. Accurate self-evaluation by leaders and managers ensures that students are well aware of the school's relative strengths and weaknesses. This puts them in a good position to bring about continuing improvement and has resulted in good improvement since the previous inspection. The school is giving good value for money.

The headteacher and deputy headteacher monitor teaching closely and are fully aware that whilst most teaching is good it is also variable in quality. A particularly strong commitment to the professional development of all staff is helping to address this. Nevertheless, good teaching leads to students achieving well. They do not meet national expectations in standards because their social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, often combined with above average learning difficulties and/or disabilities, prevent them from doing so. Most students are admitted performing at a level more usually found in the middle reaches of primary schools but many leave with qualifications, which include GCSE and Entry Level. This represents good progress. The best progress is in English, helped by a strong emphasis on promoting literacy in every possible situation. Progress is slower in mathematics and science, especially in Key Stage 4. In Key Stage 3, less able students tend to make better progress than the very small minority of more able ones.

Students' personal development and well-being are good. Prior to admission, nearly all students have exhibited very poor behaviour. With good care, support and guidance most make good progress in improving their conduct and although there are frequent outbursts, they are usually the impulsive and often irrational actions of individuals who are experiencing personal crises. These incidents are well managed by skilled staff to ensure the safety of all students. There is a good emphasis on promoting personal, social, health and citizenship education (PSHCE) at every opportunity throughout the school day. In contrast, the formal curriculum for teaching this aspect is less well developed. A strong programme of physical activity, coupled with the promotion of healthy eating and the encouragement of good personal habits, contributes well to helping students understand the importance of living healthily. The school's leaders fully recognise that most students have led very narrow lives, with little access to life's better experiences. In response to this they have developed an extensive programme of adventure activities and trips, frequently abroad, which enriches the curriculum outstandingly well and contributes enormously to students' enjoyment of school. Students know that their views are listened to and that sensible suggestions are taken heed of. In this way they come to recognise themselves as part of a happy and supportive community.

What the school should do to improve further

- Raise progress in mathematics and science to match that in English.
- Ensure that higher attaining students in Key Stage 3 make similar progress to other students.
- Improve the quality of the taught PSHCE curriculum to match the good contribution being made informally by all staff in all settings.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Students achieve well. Most parents are happy with the progress their children make and students are proud of their achievements. During the inspection most students made good progress in most lessons. Students' achievement and rate of progress put the school in the top 25% of all schools nationally. Students do not meet national averages because they are nearly always well behind in their education when they are admitted and their social, emotional and behavioural difficulties often slow their learning. Girls achieve equally to boys and there is no evidence to suggest that looked-after children perform any differently.

On entry, students' attainment in English is nearly always much lower than in mathematics or science, the average attainment in English being about Level 2 of the National Curriculum. By the end of Key Stage 3, most students have gained a level and many exceed predictions made three years earlier. Last year, 12 students exceeded predictions and none failed to reach them. This is partly because there is a strong emphasis on promoting literacy across all activities and subjects and because the subject is particularly well managed and taught. In mathematics and science most students meet expectations but fewer students exceed them. Improvements in mathematics are being noticed by the school, following the appointment of a new subject leader. In recent years higher attaining students have usually met their personal targets but have had less success than other students in exceeding them. It is often the case that these higher attaining students join the school in Years 8 and 9 and with more pronounced personal difficulties than other students.

By the end of Key Stage 4, many students are in a position to take nationally accredited exams. These include Entry Level and GCSE short courses. A good range of passes is achieved by almost all students, usually at the lower end of GCSE or the higher end of Entry Level.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Students' personal development and well-being are good. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development are good. Most students show interest, enthusiasm and enjoyment in lessons. Staff vary tasks well and present work in an interesting manner, with the result that behaviour in lessons is usually good. When individuals cannot cope they receive support to work out of the classroom, allowing others to carry on learning without interruption and ensuring the safety of all. Occasional serious misbehaviour results in the need to exclude students for short periods, but it is reducing in terms of the number of students involved and in the number of days lost. On school trips and activities out of school, students usually behave very well. Attendance is broadly in line with similar schools. A half of all absence is accounted for by six students; six other students recorded over 98% attendance last term. Most students revel in physical activity, there is a thriving and successful football team and several students completed the arduous 'Coast-to-Coast' cycle trek last year. A healthy snack breakfast on arrival gets the day off to a good start and adds significantly to students' social development as they mix freely amongst themselves and staff. Students' ideas for improving the school are sought regularly and good ideas are acted upon. These help generate a good community spirit and a sense of ownership and pride in the school. Involvement in the local community is limited. The good progress students make, especially in improving essential basic skills, stands them in good stead for a brighter future.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

The results of surveys, including the parental questionnaire for the inspection, show that parents feel that their children are making good progress because they are well taught. This is also the finding of the inspection. Teaching is best when teachers are working to their specialisms. This is not always possible with a small staff but good training opportunities and well directed support help to compensate. No inadequate teaching was seen during the inspection. Lessons are well planned and offer students a good range of practical and theoretical activities well suited to their specific needs. Skilled support staff play a vital and effective role. Staff are constantly checking what students have learned and remembered and use this to move lessons on at a good pace. A strong characteristic of teaching is the commitment to promoting literacy across the whole timetable. Great emphasis is put on involving students in discussion and in writing about what they do. Students are rarely without pen and paper to hand, unusual in schools such as this. Students recognise that when they are stuck, help will be at hand, but only when they have made a decent effort to sort things out for themselves. This promotes a growing degree of independence and adds to students' satisfaction and enjoyment of learning. Misbehaviour is managed well, with staff recognising signs of unrest and eliminating causes quickly before they escalate. When students have to leave the class, their work goes with them. Expectations are usually appropriate but results in recent years point to the fact that more should be expected of a few more able students in Key Stage 3. The best teaching is seen in English and basic skills (as a separate subject), which are consistently well-taught. In lessons where teaching is weaker it is usually the result of a lack of preparation and organisation which result in opportunities for students to lose concentration and interest and a resultant slowing of progress.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The curriculum is good. It is greatly enriched by an outstanding programme of enrichment opportunities. Statutory requirements are met. There is a good focus on English, mathematics, science and information and communication technology. Additional lessons in basic skills, focusing largely on literacy, numeracy and personal development, are a strong feature of the timetable. A modern foreign language is not routinely taught but this term students are learning a bit of Spanish, leading up to the possibility of a short trip to Barcelona at the end of term. This has been the pattern for several terms, with visits to France and Hungary amongst others. This approach is innovative in that it contributes enormously to students' cultural and social development and gives them experiences of travel that most might never otherwise have. Students have limited opportunities to work constructively with metal, wood and plastic because of a lack of specialist staff expertise but provision for food technology is good, and close links with the art and design curriculum contribute well to work with textiles. The formal PSHCE curriculum is not as well developed as the informal one, which is very well promoted throughout the rest of the school day, especially in tutor sessions and school meetings at the start and end of each day. The school day is successfully extended through the provision of many after-school activities, often involving physical activity. These are popular and add considerably to students' enjoyment of school and the promotion of healthy lifestyles.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Students are offered good care, support and guidance. Considerable vigilance is exercised in making sure that students are kept safe, healthy and well protected with safeguarding procedures in place. Many other professionals from agencies and support organisations contribute to the care and welfare of students. They speak highly of the school's contribution and value the fact that the work of staff complements that of their own and adds value to their input. The recent appointment of a 'transition worker' and the redeployment of a learning support assistant have been very successful moves to support extended care and support and closer links with parents, carers and agencies. Part of this support has been successful in helping reluctant students to improve their commitment to learning through improving their attendance. The school monitors students' progress exceptionally closely. The well developed assessment systems greatly help staff to set students appropriate individual targets.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Leadership, management and governance are good. The senior leadership team is well-established. The headteacher and deputy headteacher demonstrate a thorough understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses and have an exceptionally clear view of how they want it to develop in the future. Students' performance is very closely monitored and there is a strong drive to raise standards by improving teaching through a comprehensive programme of continuing staff development. This is based on the monitoring of teaching, which is regular and accurate but which tends to give an overall view rather than focusing clearly on issues for improvement identified in the school improvement plan. There has been good improvement since the previous inspection and the school has a good capacity to keep improving, helped by a healthy budget and the desire to improve accommodation as well as teaching and the curriculum. All learners are fully included, those unable to cope for parts of lessons are well supported out of class by skilled support staff who help them keep learning. The contribution of many other agencies and professionals is exceptionally well managed to ensure that their input is productive in helping to raise standards. In every case, these professionals speak very highly of the school. Great care is taken to ensure that only suitable adults are appointed to work in the school. The school works increasingly well with parents, helped enormously by the recent appointment of a transition worker, who acts as a home-school liaison teacher. English is particularly well led and managed and there are many signs that the leadership of mathematics is improving. Leadership and management of design and technology and PHSCE are less effective but still satisfactory.

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Annex A

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 |
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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? | 1 |
| 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 | 3 |
| The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles | 2 |
| The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community | 3 |
| 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

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| 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 | 1 |
| 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

20 April 2007

Dear Students

Inspection of The Meadows School, Spennymoor, DL16 7QW

I had a very pleasant couple of days in your school a while ago. It was good to see you trying so hard to show the school off at its best. Thank you for making me feel welcome.

I saw most of you in lessons and was impressed by how hard you worked and how well most of you behaved. Your teachers were doing a good job and that's the main reason you are making good progress, especially in English and basic skills lessons. You seem to do better in English than in mathematics or science so I'm asking the school to look at this to see why. It was also noticeable that some of you cleverer students in Key Stage 3 don't seem to make as much progress as other students. I hope you'll work extra hard to do something about this. It was great to see your enthusiasm for the activities put on for you after school. I was particularly impressed by your involvement in meetings at the start and end of each day. It was good to see you listening so closely as staff reported how well you had got on during the day and the way you tucked into your healthy breakfast snacks.

Good luck for the future.

All the best

Alastair Younger

Lead Inspector