

James Rennie School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	112468
Local Authority	Cumbria
Inspection number	301947
Inspection dates	4–5 March 2008
Reporting inspector	Alastair Younger

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	3–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	142
6th form	41
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Miss Pat Byers
Headteacher	Mrs Corinna Cartwright
Date of previous school inspection	1 November 2003
School address	California Road Kingstown Carlisle Cumbria CA3 0BX
Telephone number	01228 607559
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Age group	3–19
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by one Additional Inspector.

Description of the school

This is a school for pupils with severe, profound or multiple learning difficulties and/or disabilities. A considerable number also have autistic spectrum disorders, sensory impairment or physical disabilities. The nature and range of pupils' learning difficulties and/or disabilities are becoming more complex and extreme each year. Many pupils come from homes in areas of above average social and economic deprivation and over a third are entitled to free school meals. Boys outnumber girls by about 2:1, a ratio often found in schools of this type. Most pupils are White British, which reflects the ethnic make-up of the area.

The school is a specialist Communication and Interaction College and this provides a focus for all its work. It was a Pathfinder Extended School in 2005/6 and is now a fully extended school.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

This is a good and improving school. It has many outstanding features, including the personal development of pupils and the care, guidance and support offered to them. These are reflected in the school's excellent ethos and the happy, safe environment in which pupils live and learn. Parents are almost unanimously complimentary about every aspect of the school's work, the impact it is having on their children's lives and the positive, optimistic futures it so strongly promotes. Pupils attend whenever they can because they enjoy school. This is largely because of an outstanding curriculum, which caters to their needs, extends well beyond the school day and is wonderfully enriched by many exciting events, which add fun and purpose to learning and personal development. The school is widely respected in the community and by the local authority. It has a long history of success and works exceptionally well with many other agencies and professionals to ensure that pupils' needs are met. A new leadership team has been in place for just six months but has already shown that it is well capable, not only of maintaining this situation, but building upon it, giving the school a good capacity to keep improving. The speed of this rests on more effective analysis of the progress of the different groups of pupils.

Good teaching leads to pupils making good progress in their learning. The nature of their learning difficulties means that they cannot compete academically with pupils in mainstream schools but their achievements in relation to their difficulties are every bit as good. Some individuals make outstanding progress from a very low starting point. These are often those whose very limited ability to communicate has either masked or prevented progress in other settings. The school's expertise in improving communication skills through an approach that quickly identifies barriers and sets about dismantling them is exemplary. There are differences in the effectiveness of teaching but they form no pattern so the picture of teaching and learning is broadly similar across the whole school but peaking in the sixth form. There are enough excellent practitioners to help less effective or experienced teachers to learn how to improve. Weaker teaching is often insufficiently guided by thorough planning to identify exactly what it is expected that pupils will learn. Stronger teaching does this and injects energy and enthusiasm into making sure that pupils do. Teaching is particularly good in the sixth form because teachers are particularly adept at supporting pupils in their growing independence in learning.

Pupils are proud of their school. They try very hard to contribute to its success and to bring about improvements. In this they succeed through their excellent behaviour and their optimism for the future. Their attentiveness in lessons shows how keen they are to learn and their enthusiasm to represent the school, for instance in sporting activities, demonstrates their loyalty and commitment.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 1

The exceptional provision enables students to make outstanding progress. It greatly helps them to take the enormous leap towards life after school and the implications of greater independence. A clear agenda to prepare students for leaving school has been prepared and they are helped towards securing successful futures by following courses leading to nationally recognised qualifications, which can help them secure meaningful work and contribute to the community. Teaching is exceptionally sensitive to students' needs and strongly promotes the need for them to take responsibility for themselves in the big wide world they are about to enter. The

work-based curriculum is excellent, allowing all students to gain experience of adult life. Promotion of independence includes sensitive and wise guidance about the perils and pitfalls of adult life and helps students to make prudent choices about how they choose to live it.

Effectiveness of the Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

Children get off to a good start in the Foundation Stage. They usually enter at the very earliest stages of learning and development but effective teaching and exceptional support from many other professionals and agencies help them to make good progress, especially in their ability to communicate their needs and wants to adults. The increasingly extreme and complex nature of children's learning difficulties and/or disabilities means that they require a vast amount of attention and support. This is usually well managed but does occasionally lead to the things that children can do for themselves being overlooked.

What the school should do to improve further

- Ensure that all lessons benefit more from the organisation, enthusiasm and energy seen in the best teaching.
- Make more use of the information already available to establish how well different groups of pupils achieve.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 1

Pupils achieve well. The nature of their learning difficulties and/or disabilities renders comparison with national averages or expectations for all pupils inappropriate but parents recognise that their children are making good progress, often exceeding their own expectations. Pupils nearly always join the school at the very earliest stages of learning and development. Because of the nature of their difficulties and disabilities a few cannot demonstrate progress beyond this point in national tests or assessments but can be seen to be making good progress against the expectations of the school and their parents. Others go on to leave school with qualifications, which accurately reflect the good progress they have made. Last year, five pupils achieved success in GCSE Drama, a supreme success in a subject that embodies communication, the focus of much of the school's work. Several pupils also gained Entry Level accreditation in life skills, art and food studies. More common is a good degree of success in meeting Accreditation and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) or Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) and 'Towards Independence' requirements.

Progress is measured against targets set at reviews, which involve the contribution of parents. Pupils meet these targets with a high degree of success. The pattern is very similar for pupils of all ages. The most notable improvements are often from the lowest starting points, where pupils make rapid progress in acquiring basic learning and developmental skills assessed by adults. Progress appears to slow somewhat at the point where pupils become more responsible for demonstrating it through their own recording.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The school meets with outstanding success in promoting the personal development and well-being of pupils. This is a hugely important part of the school's work and is at the forefront of most parents' thoughts and aspirations. Excellent spiritual, moral, social and cultural development can be seen throughout the school in the way pupils relate to one another, behave exceptionally well, live life to the full and learn the importance of understanding people whose beliefs and cultures differ from their own. A joyous assembly incorporating the 'Sing Up' song and dance routine summed up the sense of joy and celebration found in school. Sensible and considerate behaviour helps to minimise the chance of accidents and also demonstrates pupils' awareness of the fact that others may have greater difficulties than themselves. Many incidents termed 'misbehaviour' are on record but nearly all are typical of the difficulties and disabilities that characterise the lives of a small minority of pupils. Complex medical and social conditions occasionally result in extended absences, but pupils attend whenever they can because they enjoy coming to school. Pupils fully understand the importance of adopting healthy habits and many participate wholeheartedly in physical activity, sometimes against formidable odds. A democratically elected school council is influential in making sure that pupils' views are carefully considered, but they need not worry because staff listen intently to every pupil's views as to how the community of the school can be improved. Excellent attention is paid to preparing pupils for that day when they leave school and lose some of the support systems that they have become used to. The impact of this is amply demonstrated by pupils rapidly growing in maturity and independence, especially in the sixth form.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 1

Teaching and learning are good. There is no inadequate teaching and some is outstanding. Where teaching is strongest, it is characterised by energy, enthusiasm and humour. These engage and excite pupils, who join in equally enthusiastically with well planned and varied activities, which combine new learning opportunities alongside frequent checking and reinforcement of past learning. When teaching is weaker it is more hesitant, lessons proceed more slowly and staff do too much for the pupils rather than encouraging them to do more for themselves. Planning is usually good, identifying clearly what it is expected that pupils will learn during a lesson and also showing how teachers will check what pupils have learned and remembered. Some planning is weaker, with very general learning objectives and tenuous reference to how progress will be checked. Teachers usually manage behaviour well with the result that little time is lost through pupils misbehaving. Support for individual pupils is sensitive and unobtrusive, helping even those with the greatest communication difficulties to contribute to lessons.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Pupils benefit enormously from the outstandingly rich and varied curriculum that is presented to them. The range of learning and developmental opportunities that this opens up to them is exceptionally well matched to their needs and meets all statutory requirements. The strong focus on promoting communication is extremely well considered and linked tightly to pupils' capabilities. Many professionals and agencies from outside the school contribute enormously to the curriculum through therapy and care initiatives. Learning and developmental experiences extend well beyond lessons, through a huge range of well attended clubs and after school activities. Pupils enjoy many valuable opportunities to learn alongside others in mainstream schools, thus broadening their learning experiences. The work-related curriculum for older pupils is extensive and plays an invaluable role in preparing them exceptionally well for life after school. Many additional activities, often related to sport, have given pupils tremendous incentive to work hard and behave well. The success of the curriculum is clearly evident in pupils' enjoyment of school and their enthusiasm for attending whenever possible.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Parents express considerable, and well merited, confidence in the excellence of the care, guidance and support offered to their children. Pupils in this school are very vulnerable and this is reflected in the meticulous attention paid to ensuring their safety and protection. Freed of unnecessary worries pupils are able, within the confines of the school, to get on with enjoying life and making the best of the opportunities available to them. Attendance is very closely monitored and absences are promptly followed up. Behaviour is also very closely monitored to ensure that the highest possible standards are maintained.

Perceptive and accurate assessment of pupils' progress means that staff are quick to spot when pupils are not doing as well as they should be and to offer a different degree or type of support to help them. The exemplary way in which the school works with other professionals from health, therapy and social care contributes enormously to this.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 1

The headteacher has provided excellent leadership through a time of some staffing changes. There is total commitment and a strong vision for an even better future based upon a clear understanding of perceived strengths and weaknesses. Management and governance are good. Both the head and deputy headteachers are new to their posts this school year. They bring enthusiasm and optimism with them and have rapidly identified where changes need to be made to bring about further improvement. These include a much welcomed sharing of responsibilities. Planning for the future is perceptive and realistic. It is well supported by

governance, which brings a wealth of experience and skills to support the school and check up on its effectiveness.

In the main, self-evaluation is good. Managers have a good understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses and have produced good plans to direct further improvement. There is a tendency, though, to overestimate the effectiveness of the school and this impacts on the accuracy of self-evaluation, particularly with regard to teaching, learning and pupils' progress. This is mainly because the wealth of accurate and perceptive information about pupils' progress is not always best used to analyse the progress of different groups of pupils. Self-evaluation of the quality of teaching is somewhat compromised by the school's remoteness and the lack of opportunities for leaders to visit other schools from which to draw helpful comparisons.

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Annex A

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall	16-19
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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	1
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	1	1
The effectiveness of the Foundation Stage	2	
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2	2

Achievement and standards

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

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1	1
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1	1
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1	1
How well learners enjoy their education	1	1
The attendance of learners	2	2
The behaviour of learners	1	1
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1	1
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1	1

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	2	1
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1	1

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	1
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 leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	2	
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	2	2
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	1	
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	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

6 March 2008

Dear Pupils

Inspection of James Rennie School, Cumbria, CA3 OBX

A few of you may remember me calling in the other day to look at your school. You made me very welcome and it was wonderful to be introduced to so many of you and to have the chance to talk to some of you.

I thoroughly enjoyed my visit and left with quite a lot of thoughts. At the top of my list was how well you behaved and how polite you were. I think that goes a long way to explaining why most of you enjoy school so much. I also saw a lot of good teaching, which explains why you are making such good progress. Some of the teaching I saw was fabulous and I'm hoping that more and more lessons will be like those in future. Your days seem very full, with lots of great activities. It was good to see so many of you joining in with different clubs and activities. It was a shame I didn't get to see you play football.

Your school is clearly a good one, especially the sixth form. It all seems to run very smoothly, which is always a good sign that it is well led and managed. Everyone is working very hard to keep making the school better. I have asked the school to keep a closer eye on your progress so that you all succeed.

Keep up the good work. Well done.

All the best

Alastair Younger

Lead inspector