

Mill Ford School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	113651
Local Authority	Plymouth
Inspection number	311323
Inspection dates	11–12 June 2008
Reporting inspector	Jeffery Plumb

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	97
6th form	15
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Angela Hooper
Headteacher	Alan Reid
Date of previous school inspection	22 March 2004
School address	Rochford Crescent Ernesettle Plymouth PL5 2PY
Telephone number	01752 300270
Fax number	01752 300109

Age group	3–19
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Mill Ford School is a special school for pupils with severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties and autism. Almost all pupils have a statement of special educational needs. A few are undergoing an assessment for one. There are few minority ethnic pupils and none is at an early stage of learning to speak English. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is above that found typically in a school of this kind. The majority of pupils live in Plymouth, with 10% living in Devon and another 17% living in Cornwall. Their attainment on entry is well below the national average, reflecting the severity of pupils' needs. A few pupils are in public care. There has been a recent change to the funding arrangements for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in Plymouth. The school's provision is under review, but it will continue to provide for pupils with complex needs and funding is available for its immediate refurbishment. The headteacher has been in post for a year. The school has gained the following awards: Sportsmark, Activemark, Choose Health and Financial Management Standards in 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 school. The senior leadership team, in partnership with the governors, has created a culture whereby all staff work as a dedicated team to ensure that pupils' disabilities are not a barrier to their learning and achievement. Consequently, parents say, 'This is an awesome school for which we thank our lucky stars; the progress our children make is amazing.' Effective teamwork between health professionals and education staff ensures that pupils make rapid gains in communicating their needs with the maximum of independence. During a period of change in the local authority's funding arrangements for special educational needs and a review of its strategy to meet the needs of pupils with complex learning difficulties, the headteacher has ensured that pupils on roll receive a high quality of education. Imaginative use of off-site provision ensures that deficiencies in the school's accommodation are not a barrier to pupils' learning. The curriculum is rich, relevant and exciting. It makes a valuable contribution to the development of pupils' life and work-related skills.

Achievement against the objectives on pupils' statements of special educational needs is good. In particular, pupils make rapid gains in communication. Teaching is good and geared to meet the needs of pupils. Teachers are in tune with the important issues that face pupils with severe and complex difficulties and autism. Consequently, they plan to develop the skills these pupils require to express their needs and make independent choices. They position pupils comfortably and correctly to access learning. They use sensory resources to stimulate pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties and, as required, they provide a structured environment with visual schedules for pupils with autism. Overall, teaching assistants are effective, but occasionally they jump in too quickly to support pupils with autism. This slows learning.

Aspects of support and care are outstanding. The transition arrangements are excellent. However, the tracking of the very small steps of progress pupils make is not sufficiently refined; as a result, it impinges on the overall quality of specific next steps of learning planned for pupils with the most complex needs. Pupils' personal development is good. Creative and innovative strategies promote their health, fitness and safety well. Leadership and management are effective at all levels. Governance is effective and provides a good balance of support and challenge to the headteacher. Improvement since the last inspection has been good, as is the school's capacity for further improvement. The school provides good value for money.

Effectiveness of the sixth form

Grade: 2

Students make good progress in the sixth form. They develop as young people and achieve well in their learning. They are prepared well for the next stage of their education, which for most will be at a local college. The curriculum is effective in helping them become as independent as possible. They benefit from regular opportunities to practise their social and personal skills, for example on residential visits and visits to the local community. They manage the school tuck shop and take part in school productions. Their work-experience placements make a valuable contribution to their development of work-related skills. Teaching is good. Planning to meet students' individual needs is effective. Teaching assistants make an important contribution to the good quality of teaching and learning. The relationships between staff and students are outstanding and students feel safe and comfortable. They have good attitudes to their learning, behave well, take pride in working hard for themselves, and enjoy doing so. Leadership and management are good. The sixth form is a well-ordered place. The sixth form

leader rightly recognises the difficulties of making the sixth form an appropriate adult environment within the confines of the current accommodation and is excited about the possibilities in the new build.

Effectiveness of the Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

Children make a good start in the Foundation Stage. Good teamwork and sensitive support enable children to settle quickly and well. They make good progress in each of the areas of learning because teaching is effective. Planning is good. Children have accepted the expectations of them as learners. The outstanding relationships they quickly develop with staff help them feel safe and comfortable, which helps them become increasingly confident and independent. Children benefit especially from the skills and expertise of staff communicating with them using many different strategies, including signing and the exchange of pictures. Leadership and management are good and, as a first step to raising individual achievement, the newly appointed Foundation Stage leader has correctly recognised the need to sharpen the assessment system so that learning tasks are always relevant to children. Parents value the Foundation Stage. They say, 'We are thrilled our children are in this school.' Their children happily prepare for school each morning. Parents enjoy and benefit from reading the home–school books they receive at the end of each day. These books tell them about what their children have done and how they can help continue their learning at home.

What the school should do to improve further

- Improve the system for tracking the very small steps of progress pupils make and use this information to improve planning to raise achievement.
- Work with the local authority to improve the accommodation to enhance pupils' learning and raise their achievement.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Achievement is good. Pupils make good progress in English, mathematics and science. Gains in communication skills are rapid. Using switches and pointing with their eyes, pupils with the most complex needs respond to questions and express what they want. Pupils with autism communicate choices independently and successfully using pictures. Progress in reading is good. Pupils with the most complex needs show anticipation of sequencing events during sensory story time; others read pictures and symbols, whilst the highest attainers read texts appropriate for their age, which are modified to match their needs. Because many of the students have such poor hand control, writing is difficult for them. However, the highest attainers write interesting stories using symbols, assisted well by computer programs. Pupils develop practical mathematical skills. The highest attainers know that £1 will buy them some groceries, but not an iPod and some are able to weigh and measure ingredients needed for cooking. In science, the highest attainers begin to sequence information and ask deep questions. Pupils' physical development is outstanding because of the high quality and diverse physical education programme they experience. Good opportunities exist for pupils to work alongside their able-bodied peers in mainstream schools and at college. The skills that pupils in Key Stage 4 accrue at college and on work placements are accredited, but those with the most severe needs do not experience the life of work.

Good positioning enables many pupils to feed independently and with dignity, as they progress from puree to soft chopped food. Pupils with severe hearing impairment make rapid gains with letter sounds because of the high quality speech therapy support they receive. Pupils with severe medical conditions, including those in regression, are included in almost all learning experiences.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Pupils say, 'We enjoy school because learning is fun.' Their excitement in learning is evident in the glow in their eyes and by the gorgeous smiles on their faces in lessons. Bubbling to have their say through the school council, pupils make a valuable contribution, with advocacy support, to improving school dinners. The school successfully promotes pupils' interest in healthy eating through a mini- enterprise healthy tuck shop managed by sixth form students. An all-inclusive physical education programme, which includes dancing in wheelchairs and horse riding, contributes well to pupils' physical fitness. Through all activities, pupils are encouraged to adopt safe practices. Behaviour is good. As pupils develop communication skills, they become less frustrated and their behaviour improves. Attendance is good. Authorised absence reflects treatment in hospital for pupils with severe medical conditions. The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils is good and lies at the heart of this successful school.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Teaching is good and so pupils learn well. Much teaching sparkles as it is well planned, and the sensory resources used cause pupils to be stimulated, attend with their eyes and communicate responses. A particular strength is the way in which pupils respond using signs, switches, pictures, electronic devices and words. There is a lively total communication environment in each classroom. Excellent relationships between teachers and pupils ensure that they treat them with dignity, and, consequently, as pupils gain in confidence they become confident to answer questions in a manner in which they feel comfortable. Challenge and high expectations result in pupils making exciting breakthroughs in communication and independence. Teaching assistants are skilful in managing pupils' behaviour, but on rare occasions when working with pupils with autism, they move in too quickly and do not give pupils sufficient time to communicate an independent choice. Overall, though, the structured approach used to teach pupils with autism is fit for purpose and leads to them making good progress. A range of innovative assessments find out what pupils know and can do. However, the use of these assessments to inform individual targets for pupils to raise their achievement is inconsistent.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

The curriculum is good. Innovative and creative models ensure that the sensory needs of pupils with profound difficulties are met, whilst a structured approach meets the needs of pupils with

autism. Each pupil has a tailor-made, personal curriculum programme matched to need. Therapy is integral to the curriculum, reducing the amount of time pupils are removed from the class to support their medical needs. The curriculum meets requirements and the National Numeracy and Literacy Strategies are relevant to pupils' needs. They focus on developing functional communication and practical numeracy skills to promote independent living. Provision for personal, social, health and citizenship education is good and contributes effectively to supporting pupils in adopting a healthy and safe lifestyle. Pupils in Key Stage 4 attend college and the majority experience valuable vocational experiences in the work place. These experiences equip them well to become, as far as possible, independent citizens in the community as well as providing them with good accreditation opportunities. Creative use of off-site provision compensates for deficiencies in the school's accommodation and enables pupils of all ages to be included in a primary school and in a college with able-bodied pupils. Although teachers do everything they can to overcome deficiencies in the accommodation, provision is not as effective as it might otherwise be. Good use is made of visits and visitors to enrich pupils' learning. Older pupils participate in Ten Tors on Dartmoor and a residential trip, both of which enhance the development of their social and physical skills.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Aspects of care and support are outstanding, but the system for tracking the very small steps of progress pupils make requires refinement. The school meets pupils' needs, including their medical needs, exceptionally well. Staff know what triggers distress in the pupils and plan to keep them stress free whilst successfully challenging them. Health professionals work in an effective partnership with education staff to ensure that some very sick pupils are able to access a good curriculum. The speech therapist writes feeding programmes to promote independence in feeding and to keep pupils free from choking. Parents are full of praise for all that, as they describe it, 'this amazing school' does for their children. Transition arrangements for students when they leave school are outstanding. Robust child protection procedures are in place and meet government regulations. Risk assessments are detailed and thorough. There are clear procedures and protocols in place for the administration of medicines. Monitoring of the chemical balance of the hydrotherapy pool takes place daily. The school inspects slings and hoists regularly. Training on manual handling is up to date and clinical waste is disposed of correctly.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

Grade for sixth form: 2

Leadership and management are good. The headteacher provides a clear vision, which focuses on developing pupils' life skills. A dedicated and committed staff team shares this vision, and works with determination to remove barriers to learning for very fragile and vulnerable pupils. A joy and vibrant life pervade throughout this school. There is a 'can do' culture and an ambitious target is set to maximise communication and independence for each pupil. Self-evaluation is good. The school has a good understanding of its strengths and weaknesses. Monitoring of teaching and learning is good and leads to significant improvements in practice. Strategic

planning is under review. However, the priorities on the existing plan are clear and focus on improving teaching and raising achievement. Governance is an asset and makes a valuable contribution to the successes of the school.

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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	2
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?	2	2
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	2
The standards ¹ reached by learners	4	4
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	2	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	2
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	2	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	2	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	2	
How well learners enjoy their education	2	
The attendance of learners	2	
The behaviour of learners	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	2
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	2	2
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	2	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	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 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	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	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

13 June 2008

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Mill Ford School, Plymouth, PL5 2PY

The inspectors greatly enjoyed visiting your school and seeing all of the exciting and interesting work you do. It was a joy to talk with so many of you and your teachers, teaching assistants and care staff.

We think your school is good. You are cared for exceptionally well and make good progress in expressing your needs. You gain confidence in a school where learning is challenging and enjoyable. You gain in independence and develop important life skills. As you learn to make your needs known, your frustration disappears and you behave well. Your school helps you to keep fit, healthy and safe and to express your own points of view about how school can be better for you. Your headteacher and governors ensure that your school is well led and managed.

We have asked the headteacher to improve a few things so that your school becomes even better. We would like him to improve ways of gathering information about the small steps of progress you make and use it to plan to improve your learning. In addition, we would like him to work with the local authority to improve the school's accommodation to make it a nicer place for you to learn.

Thank you for all of your hard work. Please support your headteacher in making your good school an even better school.

Yours sincerely

Jeffery Plumb Lead inspector



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