

Blackmarston School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	117052
Local Authority	Herefordshire
Inspection number	312475
Inspection date	15 May 2008
Reporting inspector	Judi Bedawi

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

Type of school	Special
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	3-11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	57
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	David Davoll
Headteacher	Sian Bailey
Date of previous school inspection	9 February 2004
School address	Honddu Close Hereford HR2 7NX
Telephone number	01432 272376
Fax number	01432 272376

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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

Blackmarston School is designated for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) and severe learning difficulties. It also provides for pupils with additional complex needs, including autistic syndrome disorders (ASD) and challenging behaviours. Attainment on entry to the Foundation Stage is exceptionally low and standards achieved by all pupils remain so throughout the school owing to their significant learning difficulties and/or disabilities. All pupils have a statement of special educational need. Nearly all are White British. The school has gained the Activemark, Healthy School award, Eco-school bronze award and an international design award for its grounds. A deputy headteacher was appointed in the same week as the inspection.

Key for inspection grades

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

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 2

Blackmarston is a good school providing its pupils with a good education. Comments from parents and carers are unanimously positive; typically, '...a fantastic, enthusiastic and motivated school where our child has thrived!', 'Our son is very happy – you can tell by the smile on his face', and '... a very well run school with a total commitment to the children's needs'.

The inspirational headteacher, affectionately known as 'The Boss' by the happy pupils, is a gently determined leader. She keeps a good focus on raising pupils' outcomes, achievements and the quality of their life experiences, whilst skilfully managing significant staff turnover in recent years. As a result, pupils continue to thrive and grow in confidence. They are at the heart of the school's work. This is why pupils' personal, spiritual and multicultural development is outstanding and why they love school, behave exceptionally well and find learning fun. Attendance is good despite absences for illness or medical appointments. It is a school where there is much shared laughter and celebration of achievement.

Pupils' needs are complex and challenging, but they achieve well and make good progress, even though progress for those with regressive conditions is restricted by the nature of their disabilities. The good progress made is directly as a result of the good teaching and seamless teamwork between teachers and the fully involved teaching assistants. The results of thorough data analysis are used well to provide carefully planned individual activities that benefit pupils' learning. Assessment and academic guidance are good, and particularly so in the Foundation Stage. Most pupils know their learning targets. However, the school recognises that it does not yet make sufficiently precise assessments of the tiny steps in progress made by pupils with PMLD. Parents are delighted at their children's progress.

School staff readily take on new middle management roles, flexibly enough to meet pupils' evolving needs as the intake becomes increasingly complex. A good, new topic-related curriculum based on the six Foundation Stage areas of learning, adapted as needed for sensory learning, is leading to an increase in pupils' involvement. The excellent relationships, care and nurture that staff offer pupils and families add greatly to the vibrant learning atmosphere and to pupils' ability to communicate in the way that is easiest for them. As a result, they feel very secure from the time they enter the Foundation Stage to the time they leave, and are very well prepared for secondary school. The partnerships with external providers and agencies are exemplary, giving support that removes barriers to learning as far as possible.

Good leadership and management ensure that the school moves forward at a good pace, aided by the headteacher's clear, shared vision. The new governing body is keen, but still getting to grips with its monitoring and evaluation role. In addition, school development plan success criteria do not yet link closely enough to pupils' learning outcomes. Financial management is good and the school knows itself well. As a result, and with increased staff stability following a period of change, the school's capacity to improve further is good.

Effectiveness of the Foundation Stage

Grade: 2

Children get off to a good start, aided by good links with pre-school settings and with parents. Very warm relationships, together with clearly known routines, lead to impressive personal, social and behavioural development. They make good progress in acquiring basic communication skills like listening and signing. Higher attaining children speak using words and sentences.

This is because of good teaching, good staff support and a well-founded curriculum. Many practical activities delight the children's inquisitive natures and love of new learning, like counting. The quality of care and nurture is excellent, so children feel happy, settled, safe and ready to move on. The accommodation is secure with good provision for all areas of learning, including outdoor learning. The school is appropriately considering relocating the Nursery class into the main building to further extend learning. Leadership and management are good. The recently appointed Foundation Stage leader has developed a particularly good system for recording and assessing children's learning which is a model of good practice and keeps parents well informed.

What the school should do to improve further

- Refine assessment procedures for pupils with PMLD.
- Sharpen the school development plan so that the criteria for identifying how success is monitored are more closely linked to learning outcomes.
- Develop the monitoring role of the governing body.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 2

From their very low starting points, pupils achieve well and make good progress as they move through the school. There is no significant difference in progress at any key stage or for any pupil group, although pupils with regressive or life-limiting conditions perform slightly less well. Good development of analysis and tracking, assessment and monitoring records increasingly highlight individual achievement. This is well evidenced in pupils' individual learning journals, including photographic records of PMLD progress, all of which is carefully noted. They are not yet detailed enough to give a full picture of the small steps made. Almost all pupils, including higher attaining pupils with ASD, make good progress, with a few making outstanding progress in relation to their prior attainment and capabilities.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Pupils thoroughly enjoy school. Their parents say that children leave home with 'smiles on their faces.' Lots of laughter is heard throughout the day. Pupils' behaviour and relationships are excellent. They are extremely friendly and helpful to each other. Their attendance is good. They are very aware of keeping safe, knowing how to cross the road properly and to dial 999 should they ever get lost! They love the lunchtime physical activity clubs, especially fitball and hydrotherapy sessions. They eat well, growing and eating carrots and lettuce. They have healthy snacks at breaktime. Higher attaining pupils take their responsibilities and independence as school councillors very seriously. They are proud of their achievements, even interviewing candidates for the deputy headteacher's post, posing questions to see how candidates would help their friends with complex needs. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is excellent. In particular, the innovative multicultural fortnight when pupils plan world trips on 'Blackmarston Airlines.' They arrive at the 'airport' with passports 'ready for departure', flying high via Pluto, Saturn and the other transformed classrooms, 'landing' for a real taste of culture, perhaps visiting Morocco, Russia or the USA, learning much about their own and wider world communities, through wonderful role play, whilst developing their life skills very well.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 2

Seamless teamwork between skilled teachers and experienced teaching assistants, who often work one to one with pupils, impacts well on learning and enjoyment. In a lesson on fish, younger pupils bravely touched a 'hidden' dead fish, with some delight and a modicum of fear. One pupil finally joined in, to a huge whole-class whoop of delight, praise and applause. Good practice includes short practical activities that hold pupils' interest, a lively pace and clear repeated communication, so pupils can retain new facts or sensory experiences. Teachers use good planning strategies to meet pupils' diverse needs, with enough time to respond to a question or to think of an answer. They make learning fun, motivating well through praise. Mutual respect between teachers and pupils is strong. Subject knowledge is good. However, the use of assessment does not yet fully support better learning for all pupils, particularly those with PMLD.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 2

The new, very broad and fully inclusive Foundation Stage based curriculum is already meeting the complexity of pupils' capabilities and needs well, although it is not yet securely embedded in Key Stages 1 and 2. The flexible, topic based and personalised curriculum ensures that pupils are consistently challenged and involved well in their learning. The needs of pupils with PMLD are met well through focussed sensory sessions and 'in class' sensory activities linked to the topic work. Different therapies, including physiotherapy and rebound, aid pupils' ability to learn. Higher attainers enjoy topic work at National Curriculum levels. Pupils from the Foundation Stage upwards really enjoy hydrotherapy in the small school pool. Enrichment and the extended day activities are excellent with a strong impact on pupils' well-being. Activities include breakfast club, horse riding, many trips and visits, summer activity school and the well regarded 'sibshops' for siblings on Saturdays, held jointly with the Acorns Hospice. The beautiful school grounds include a calm, serene garden built in tribute to the lives of former pupils. The local community is used as a good resource for learning and developing practical life skills.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Pupils make excellent progress in their personal and social development owing to the outstanding pastoral care, guidance and support that they and their families receive. Each pupil is cherished, with the staff working very well with many therapists and agencies to ensure that pupils receive high quality support. Parents are considered equal partners, saying that the school is really developing their children's confidence and self-esteem. The learning mentor provides invaluable support for attendance issues. Procedures for safeguarding and ensuring pupils' safety are robust. Parents receive detailed progress reports and the newly introduced 'learning journals' are developing as an effective means of tracking progress. The school knows that procedures to monitor the progress of PMLD pupils are not yet fully developed. Higher attaining pupils are involved in their annual reviews and clearly know in simple terms how well they are doing.

Leadership and management

Grade: 2

The very hardworking headteacher leads by shining example, earning the total respect and commitment of her staff, who without exception want the best for each child in their high calibre care. She has piloted her school through difficult times, never losing sight of the need to raise pupils' achievement and progress by giving them really enjoyable experiences. She readily adopts new initiatives to bring about even more improvements. Her vision is shared, realistic and moving forward well, aided by good middle managers who eagerly take on new roles. Teamwork at all levels, including that of the teaching assistants, is good. The new governing body is enthusiastic and supportive, but governors are still growing into their monitoring and evaluation role so their current performance is satisfactory. The school's evaluation of its own performance is good, including analysis and use of its achievement data and identification of areas for improvement. The school development plan, whilst identifying the right key priorities, does not monitor pupils' learning outcomes closely enough through clear and measured success criteria. Opportunities for staff professional development are good, benefiting the pupils. Partnerships with a very wide range of external providers and agencies are outstanding, with a positive impact on the school's inclusive outreach work and on pupils' learning by reducing significant barriers. Finance is carefully managed with money spent well to secure ongoing improvement. The school does all it can with the accommodation it has.

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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
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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
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	1
The effectiveness of the Foundation Stage	2
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	2

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

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?	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
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
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	3
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

16 May 2008

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Blackmarston School, Hereford, HR2 7NX

You made us very welcome when we visited your lovely, friendly school recently. We enjoyed meeting you all. Thank you for telling us so much about what you do. We really enjoyed sharing some of your lessons and seeing how well you work.

We think that your school is good and provides you with a good education. We think that 'The Boss' is a really good headteacher and we know you have wonderful relationships with everyone who helps and cares for you so exceptionally well. We also think that your behaviour and personal development are excellent – well done! We know that your teachers are good at making learning fun so that you make good progress and laugh a lot. We also know you enjoy many exciting activities provided for you like fitball and horse riding, and that you like going out on trips locally and finding out about other countries. You say that you love coming to school and we believe you. There are three things we have asked your school to improve.

- Your teachers need to find out even more about how well your friends with many learning difficulties and disabilities are doing.
- The school development plan needs to look at your learning needs more closely so that you can do even better.
- The governors have to make sure that they know that the school is doing its very best for you. You can help by continuing to work hard and having fun learning about lots of new things. We know you will be happy and enjoy your time at school.

My best wishes

Judi Bedawi Lead inspector



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Judi Bedawi
Lead inspector